



# PRAYER

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Lesson</i>	<i>Page</i>
I. Basic Considerations .....	3
II. Prayer and Conversion .....	9
III. The Efficacy of Prayer (1) .....	15
IV. The Efficacy of Prayer (2) .....	21
V. Conditions of Acceptable Prayer (1) .....	27
VI. Conditions of Acceptable Prayer (2) .....	33
VII. Prayer as Communion .....	39
VIII. Prayer as Petition .....	45
IX. Prayer as Intercession .....	51
X. When and Where to Pray .....	57
XI. Hindrances to Prayer .....	63
XII. Prayer in the Life of Jesus (1) .....	69
XIII. Prayer in the Life of Jesus (2) .....	75

# BASIC CONSIDERATIONS

### *Universality of Prayer*

Prayer is a free, and thus a moral act. It is the act by which we turn our will upon God. In prayer, man follows an impulse or tendency which he has power to crush; he renders a definite act of homage to God which he has power to withhold. Although prayer is an expression of man's free will, something he can choose to do or not do, the tendency of mankind in general to pray is ineradicable.

When one of the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), he uttered the deepest and most universal desire of the human heart: the desire of finite man to make real, personal contact with the Power that transcends time, space, and matter. Men everywhere from the beginning have prayed. They often pray blindly, uncertainly, and erratically—but they pray! They may vainly attempt to avoid the reality of the Supreme Being, and thus their need of supernatural help, by escaping into atheism or agnosticism; but when great danger or death threatens, they readily exercise their power of free choice to pray by frantically crying out for divine assistance.

Man's tendency to pray is as universal as his tendency to be religious, and it is axiomatic that the one common element in every form of religion the world has known, both past and present, is prayer. Prayer has been described as "the distilled essence of religion." Indeed, a history of prayer would be a history of the religious life of mankind.

### *Divine Authority for Prayer*

Those who accept the Bible as the inspired revelation of the true God to mankind believe that in its sacred pages is given the valid answer to the question: What is prayer? They believe that prayer truly and fully answers the universal need of mankind for the continual presence and help of God only as it is understood and realized in keeping with the teaching of divine writ, centered in the supreme authority of Christ. "Seeing that his divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that called us by his own glory and virtue" (2 Peter 1:3). See John 16:13; 2 Timothy, 3:16,17; Jude 3.

### *Assumptions in Prayer*

In considering the valid meaning of prayer, it is necessary that we understand the basic assumptions in prayer as revealed in the Bible. Any discussion of prayer would be meaningless without due consideration being given to the following assumptions:

1. *The Reality of God.* The revelation of the Bible involves a God-man relationship: God speaking to man. Prayer also involves a God-

man relationship: man speaking to God. Both prayer and the Bible assume the existence of a thinking, personal Supreme Being, not merely "the bright Essence of Life," or "the Power that makes for righteousness." In the Bible are communicated the thoughts of the personal God to the finite mind of man, and in prayer are communicated the thoughts of man to the infinite mind of God. Prayer is the conscious intercourse between two self-conscious, rational beings. Men do not actually pray to a "Principle of Concretion" or to an "Integrating Factor in Experience." Every prayer mentioned in the Bible was offered to the personal God of heaven, the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Creator in whose image man is made, never to a divine abstraction.

Prayer, which William James described as "intercourse with an Ideal Companion," is either the primary fact in the religious life of man or the worst self-delusion. If a personal God does not exist, and the life of man is devoid of any possible communion with divinity, then prayer is the worst kind of self-deceit.

Hebrews 11:6 affirms belief in the personal God as the primary assumption in man's approach to Deity for help. No one will approach God in any expression of worship who does not believe in His existence. How can a man possibly pray to a God whom he does not believe exists? If one does not believe in the reality of God, it would never enter into his mind to pray. And if he professes to believe that there is no God, yet prays, he is self-deceived. He does indeed believe in God. Men deceive themselves by using abstract terms, such as force, law, fate, to describe the objects of their prayers, but in so praying to these things, they make them God! Try as men will to deny the personality of God, they unconsciously give personality to the things to which they pray. The reality of prayer and the reality of the personal God are inseparable.

If a simple definition of prayer might be ventured upon, it could be said to consist of the reach of man after the Absolute Reality, the personal God, and his conscious connection with that Reality.

The divine Christ, whose earthly sojourn was unceasingly lived in communion with Deity in prayer, never argued the fact of the personality of God. To Him it was the self-evident reality of realities which He insisted upon when He used the intimate and personal term "Father" in addressing His prayers to God, teaching His disciples to do the same. See Matthew 11:25 and Luke 11:2.

2. *Man's Need of God.* The beginning point of a life of prayer is man's desire for God, borne out of his sense of human weakness and divine strength, and thus his need of God. Prayer, then, assumes the frailty of man and the unlimited strength of God. No matter how extensively one may engage in doing good, no matter how diligently he may study God's word, no matter how energetic and intelligent he may be in the pursuit of the physical necessities of life, he stands continually in need of the Father's providential care, which he overtly, consciously relies on in prayer.

Jesus emphasized man's inability to live fruitfully and victoriously without reliance on divine strength and care when He declared, "Apart from me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Whether one prays for himself or others, he assumes man's never ending need of God. Agnostics may gibe at prayer as an escape from reality, but the gibe absurdly assumes that men are self-sufficient. When, however, we contemplate a world where microbes are often stronger than men, where the reality of pain, sorrow and death is ever present, to deny man's need of God is consummate folly. Then, too, when we consider the horrible mess men have gotten the world into through their own power and wisdom, with the possibility of a cosmic cataclysm through nuclear war constantly threatening civilization, we can readily see the fallacy of man's self-sufficiency and feel most keenly the valid assumption in prayer that mankind's supreme need is the safety, wisdom, and strength found only in God. This assumption is effectively expressed in the beautiful song "Abide With Me."

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide!  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away,  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me!

When one recognizes his desperate, urgent, constant need of God's providential protection and care, his desire for God represses every other desire, and prayer becomes a leading activity in his life. But the person whose life is devoid of prayer is one whose life is devoid of the sense of need of and desire for God's help.

3. God Hears Prayer. It is necessarily assumed in prayer that man's need of the personal God cannot possibly be realized unless God hears his utterances to Him. If God is not omnipresent, and thus unable to hear man's prayers, then prayer is a tragic delusion.

The fact of God's ability and willingness to hear man's worthy prayers is directly affirmed in James 4:8, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." Prayer is not an individual act, not futile utterances to an unheeding God. It is something in which two are engaged—man and God. The two have reciprocal relations. Neither is passive; both seek to establish communion with one another. It is man speaking to God, and God hearing man. In prayer, man moves upward to God, and the God who hears him moves downward to man. "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." Every movement of man toward God in worthy prayer is met by a more eager movement on His part toward man. God would not draw nigh to men were He not able and willing to hear their prayers to Him. Herrmann has said that prayer "must have direct

relation to the fact that God turns to us, and not away from us.”

The conception of God drawing near to man is, of course, accommodative usage. The omnipresent God is never remote. But while He does not have to come to us from a distance, He does draw near in the sense that He hears and responds to our prayers.

The fact that God hears prayer is also affirmed in 1 Peter 3:12, “For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears unto their supplication.” In these words which Peter freely quotes from Psalm 34:15, the divine side of prayer is stressed. The all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-hearing God takes note of all the movements of righteous men who pray unto Him, considering all their needs, and whose ears are open to their supplications, eagerly bending to catch the faintest whisper directed to Him. The eternal God is never too busy to attend to the prayers of those who sincerely seek audience with Him. The affairs of the vast universe are not so absorbing of His attention that He cannot give heed to the affairs of the individual soul. “O thou who hearest prayer” (Psalm 65:2).

4. *God Answers Prayer.* In the lessons on the efficacy of prayer we shall give special attention and stress to the fact that prayer assumes a God who answers man’s acceptable utterances to Him. Suffice it to say here, how futile prayer would be if the personal God heard our prayers but made no response to them at all. The quotation above from Psalm 65:2, as the context indicates, affirms that God’s hearing of prayer is not only His knowledge of it but also the answer He gives to it. Our God is a God who heeds our righteous prayers in giving them the answers they need, for He is “a rewarder of them that seek after him” (Hebrews 11:6).

But why does God answer our prayers? What is the basis for the assumption that God hears prayers? Note well the following section.

5. *God’s Love for Man.* The personal God of heaven hears and answers prayer because of his concern and love for man. Prayer, then, in the valid Biblical sense, assumes that God is interested in the welfare of men, loving and cherishing them, and thus desiring that their worthy needs be filled.

How can we possibly deny God’s love for us in hearing and answering our worthy prayers when we believe He so loved us that He gave His only begotten Son to die for our sins, to procure our salvation? See John 3:16.

Prayer not only assumes the power of God to help us, but also his willingness and readiness to help. Yes, God wants to answer our prayers because He loves us. It is His earnest desire to bestow on us what we need. He is not a selfish tyrant. It is not His pleasure to torment men first with a desire to seek His help in prayer and then fail to answer. God is wise, loving, and beneficent. That is why men pray to Him with the confidence that their prayers will not be in vain.

Even nature itself speaks of the benevolent God who loves man and

wants to provide for his needs. Indeed, Psalm 65, which utters the following words of praise to God, "O thou that hearest prayer," goes from the subject of answered prayer to the theme of the bounty of God in His physical creation: "Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it, thou greatly enrichest it; the river of God is full of water: thou providest them grain, when thou hast so prepared the earth. Thou waterest its furrows abundantly; thou settlest the ridges thereof: thou makest it soft with showers; thou blessest the springing thereof. Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness. They drop upon the pastures of the wilderness; and the hills are girded with joy. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with grain; they shout for joy, they also sing" (Psalm 65:9-13).

Men draw near to the God who is revealed in the Bible as the absolute essence of love (1 John 4:8) because they accept the reality of His personal love for them, because they believe in the reliability of His word, and because they have the assurance that He is ready, willing, and able at any and every time to answer their prayers.

### *Some Definitions of Prayer*

"Prayer is the desire, opportunity and privilege of talking with God" (Herbert Lockyer).

"Prayer is a correspondence fixed with heaven" (Robert Burns).

"Prayer is helplessness casting itself upon power; it is misery seeking peace; it is unholiness embracing purity; it is hatred longing for love; prayer is corruption panting for immortality; it is the dove returning home; it is the eagle soaring heavenward; it is the prisoner pleading for release; it is the mariner steering for the haven amid the dangerous storm; it is the soul oppressed by the world escaping to the empyrean, bathing its ruffled plumage in the ethereal and the divine" (Anon.).

"Prayer is the voice of faith" (Thomas Horne).

"A prayer, in its simplest definition, is a wish turned heavenward" (Phillips Brooks).

"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire  
Uttered or unexpressed,  
The motion of a hidden fire,  
That trembles in the breast."

"Prayer is the spirit speaking truth to Truth" (Philip Bailey).

"Prayer is an act of virtue of religion which consists in asking proper gifts or graces from God. In a more general sense it is the application of the mind to divine things, not merely to acquire a knowledge of them but to make use of such knowledge as a means of union with God" (John J. Wynne).

"Prayer is the spiritual sacrifice which has superseded the sacrifices of the old covenant . . . It averts God's anger; it watches for its enemies; it intercedes for the persecutors; it obtains the forgiveness of sins; it



dispels temptations; it comforts the feeble-minded; it refreshes the strong. Prayer is the bulwark of faith" (Tertullian).

"Prayer, if I may speak so boldly, is intercourse with God" (Clement of Alexandria).

"Prayer is opening the channels of our emptiness to God's fulness, from our defeat to his victory" (E. Stanley Jones).

### Questions

1. Discuss prayer as the one common element in all religions.
2. Discuss the Bible as the supreme authority concerning prayer, giving special attention to 2 Peter 1:3; John 16:13; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; Jude 3.
3. Why are the reality of prayer and the reality of the personal God inseparable? Discuss the absurdity of praying to a thing, a principle, or an abstraction.
4. Discuss the assumption in prayer that man's supreme need is the presence and strength of God in his life. How does John 15:5 stress this assumption?
5. Discuss James 4:8; 1 Peter 3:12; Psalm 65:2 in connection with the assumption that God hears prayer.
6. Why does God answer prayer?
7. Discuss the definitions of prayer by uninspired men in the last section of the lesson. Do you disagree with any of these definitions?

## PRAYER AND CONVERSION

As we discussed in the previous lesson, prayer involves a God-man relationship. We now observe that more specifically, prayer involves a God-Christian relationship. This observation is not meant to deny the fact that the omniscient and omnipresent God is constantly aware of all the utterances made to Him by men everywhere. Nothing that any human being does escapes the attention of the all-knowing God. Furthermore, the fact that prayer essentially involves a God-Christian relationship does not deny that God recognizes the prayers of sinners who truly seek to know His will and to accept Him as their spiritual Father.

In this connection, consider the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-19). After reading this story, we conclude that Saul was not commanded to pray to God before his sins were washed away, but we must well realize also that he needed no such command since he was under an inescapable compulsion to pray. His prayers to God were the natural, inevitable expression of a soul longing for truth, light, and salvation. He could no more refrain from praying in his believing, penitent state during the three days he spent in the room in Damascus than he could keep from breathing. We know of a certainty that the Lord heard his prayers, for He said to Ananias concerning him, "Behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11).

Cornelius, the devout Roman centurion, was another non-Christian who could not refrain from praying in his search for the mind and will of God, and whose prayers were heard by God. See Acts 10:1-4.

In both the case of Saul and Cornelius, prayer was not the means of direct access to salvation in Christ, nor did it bring to them the manifold blessings of God received only by Christians. To them, prayer was the normal expression of spiritually hungry and thirsty souls seeking after God and His will. When the divine will was revealed to them by messengers of the Lord, they immediately surrendered themselves to Christ by being baptized into Him, thus to truly trust in Him for salvation and to have their sins washed away by His blood. See Acts 10:30-48; 22:16. Then as Christians, God's children, they would find full access to the providential blessings and care of God in prayer.

In thinking of prayer as being a God-Christian relationship, we must view it as a Father-child relationship. As God is the only true spiritual Father, so the Christian is His only true spiritual child. Admittedly, all men are God's offspring in the sense that they have been created by Him. See Acts 17:28,29. But the New Testament further reveals that only those who have accepted Christ as their Saviour are children of God in the fullest, truly spiritual sense, and therefore privileged to call on Him as their heavenly Father. See Galatians 3:26,27; Romans 8:14-17; 2 Corinthians 6:17,18.

## *The Surrendered Life*

We cannot too strongly emphasize the fact that the only kind of prayer life having access to the manifold blessings of God is to be found in those who occupy a proper relation to Christ. This is made possible only by unreserved, unconditional surrender to Him. How can one possibly seek the daily blessings and gifts of God through prayer who rejects the greatest of all gifts, God's only begotten Son (John 3:16), and the greatest of all blessings, salvation in Christ? (Ephesians 1:7; Acts 4:12). Yea, what mockery are prayers offered to the Father by those who reject Christ and His salvation. And to reject the Son is to reject the Father. Jesus Himself said, "He that rejecteth me rejecteth him that sent me" (Luke 10:16).

In genuine conversion to Christ, men are born again (John 3:5), to become new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4), to have Christ dwell in them (Galatians 2:20), and thus to enjoy the privilege of calling on God without reservation as their heavenly Father.

When we realize that Christ is man's only access to the throne of divine grace, we can easily understand that only Christians, those who have given themselves to God in Christ and enjoy His presence in their lives, have full access to God's blessings in prayer. Jesus declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Christ is portrayed in the scriptures as the mediator, or high priest, between God and man. "For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus . . . and having a great priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in fulness of faith" (Hebrews 10:19,21,22).

The New Testament reveals that God bestows His spiritual blessings only through Christ. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). "For in him [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:9). In light of these passages, how can God bless men in answer to their prayers if they are not in Christ?

Since prayer is primarily and fundamentally surrender—the surrender of one's purposes, plans, and will into the hands of God to work them out with Him—it necessarily follows that only the surrendered life in Christ makes possible a successful prayer life.

The person who has surrendered himself to God in Christ has removed himself from his human frailty and weakness to rely on divine strength for a fruitful, godly life. Prayer is the natural, normal expression of this dependence on God's strength.

The converted soul knows that as he has been saved by divine *grace*, so by this same *grace* will he be granted power to live fruitfully in God's service. See Ephesians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 8:1,2; 9:8; 12:9; 2 Timothy 2:1; Hebrews 13:9. Thus the surrendered life is a life of continually seeking after the grace and power of God in trusting submission to the divine will and in prayer, of reliance on divine strength rather than on human strength.

It is the converted soul who truly understands the import of Christ's words, "Apart from me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), who truly realizes his need of God's providential care every moment of his life. He knows that this need can only be supplied through prayer.

### ***Attitude Toward God***

One's attitude toward prayer must necessarily be determined by his attitude toward God, by his concept of the nature of Deity. As we discussed in the previous lesson, worthy prayer assumes the love God has for men. Surely no one who hates and dreads the heavenly Father will reverently and willingly pray to Him, except as a means of appeasing His wrath. A child in an earthly family is not willing to speak to a father whom he fears, dreads, and hates, no matter how much he may stand in need of and desire his father's help. That child, however, who has learned of his father's love for him will tend to reciprocate this love. So to truly know the heavenly Father is to know of His love. "For love is of God . . . for God is love" (1 John 4:7,8). Furthermore, to know of the love of God is to love God. "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). To love God, needing and desiring His divine guidance and succor, is to seek Him through prayer.

Note well that no one really and fully knows of the love of God who does not know of the love of Christ. Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). The converted soul has truly seen Christ and His love, and thus he has truly seen the Father and His love. He has seen the love of Christ expressed in His dealings with men during His earthly sojourn and in the willing sacrifice of Himself on the cross, recorded in the New Testament. His knowledge of Christ's love, however, is not just academic; it is personal and practical in the appropriation he has made of the power of the cross in salvation from his sins. Knowing of the love of God in Christ, he thus can willingly and gladly pray to the Father.

One who has been reconciled to God through the mediatorship of Christ knows that his prayers are not just the address of the creature to the Creator, not just the appeal of the subject to the King, but the cry of the child to the Father, and that the essential thing in true prayer is not creature dependence but filial dependence, not creature confidence but filial confidence. See Matthew 6:9.

This conception of God as a loving, wise, and tender Father, which the converted person realizes emotionally as well as intellectually, is

creative of prayer itself. Concerning such a conception of God, J. M. Campbell effectively wrote, "It generates the spirit of prayer, it awakens the desire to pray; it provides a new incentive to pray; it affords a new ground for confidence in prayer; it determines the very nature of man's approach to God and of his intercourse with him, for what is more natural than that a child should go to his father in his trouble and need? A true father will delight to give; and he will give without a grudge; and, if he is wise as well as kind, he will give only what is for his children's good. In the hands of such a father the praying soul can confidently rest his case."

Verily, the Christian, knowing of the love of God in Christ, has a valid incentive for praying to his heavenly Father. He does not consider prayer a burdensome duty but a privilege of rare delight and joy. He does not pray under compulsion of law but of grace and love. He does not pray because he *has to* but because he *wants to*. And how very much the heavenly Father yearns for the Christian's fellowship with Him in prayer, even as any loving Father delights in his children talking to him.

Let us uncompromisingly stress the truth that only one who has accepted Christ as his loving, compassionate high priest, who knows of and is grateful for the forgiveness of his sins by the grace of God through the blood of Christ, can approach the throne of divine grace with unreserved confidence and assurance that his prayers will receive the full approbation of the Father. Most meaningful to such a one are the words of Hebrews 4:14-16, "Having then a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need."

### ***Praying in the Holy Spirit***

Only in converted souls, God's children, does the Holy Spirit dwell (Acts 2:38; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:13,14), and it is a distinct and definite promise of inspired revelation that the Holy Spirit is to be a power in the Christian's prayer life. "But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 20). "And in like manner the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity: for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered; and he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26,27).

Christians are to pray in the Holy Spirit, that is, in the sphere of His influence and operation, as standing within the circle of His power. In the word of God, the New Testament, every utterance on the subject of

prayer is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit; thus to pray under the guidance and influence of the divine word is to pray as directed by the Holy Spirit. But even after the Christian has earnestly applied himself to the study of New Testament teaching concerning prayer, his moral, spiritual, and mental limitations keep him from knowing perfectly how he should pray; and in his *infirmity* he must rely on the indwelling Spirit, who makes *intercession* for him. When the Christian is too weak to pray as he ought because of infirmity of will, or heart, or mind, the Holy Spirit prays for him in sighs and groans supercharged with feelings which our poor human words are powerless to express.

The intercession of the Holy Spirit does not set aside the intercession of the Christian's high priest, Jesus Christ. Romans 8:27, quoted above, refers to the intercession of Jesus, for it is He who "knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit" and "maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." In order that the Christian's prayers may be complete when they are taken by Jesus to the divine Father, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for him by expressing in his prayers what he, because of the limitation of his understanding, cannot express for himself.

The certainty of the genuinely converted soul having full access to the blessings of God in prayer is the certainty that he can call on God as his Father, that his mediator and intercessor Jesus Christ will take all his worthy prayers to the throne of divine grace, and that the Holy Spirit will express for him in his prayers what he is unable to say for himself. The aid of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through prayer is indeed the special prerogative of God's children.

### ***The Unconverted Soul***

Why the impotent and futile prayer lives of so many professed Christians who have never sensed any genuinely verbal intercourse with the loving Father? The answer is quite obvious. The prayers of the nominal Christian or churchgoer, are just long, boresome yawns because he is not converted to Christ and thus has not truly seen the loving Father. He may be converted to a doctrinal system, but his life is yet to be surrendered to the Lord. He senses no great need of God in prayer, except in times of distress or in the face of death, because he still depends on human rather than divine strength, because he still walks by sight and not by faith. To him, Christianity is a cold intellectual concept, a set of rules and regulations to be obeyed out of a hard-bitten sense of duty. It is not a sense of loving loyalty to God in Christ, of unselfish devotion to Him, that causes him to pray, but rather a warped infatuation with Christianity as a doctrinal system. He prays because he *has to*, not because he *wants to*.

He does not have any valid idea of what it means to have Christ and the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, without whom no worthy prayer life is possible.

Many such unconverted souls actually pray to a deity whom they hate

and dread, one whom they think can only be appeased by works of human merit, a deity who, instead of mitigating the sense of spiritual emptiness, actually contributes to it. Prayers offered to such a deity can never be motivated by any other purpose than to avoid His wrath rather than to seek his help.

*In conclusion, we emphatically reiterate that the sole basis for a life of prayer that gives man full, unreserved access to the providential care, protection, and guidance of God is genuine conversion and unconditional surrender to Christ.*

### Questions

1. What scriptural evidence do we have that God hears the prayers of truth seeking sinners?
2. Is the sinner's access to salvation in Christ through the direct means of prayer? Discuss.
3. Discuss the difference between a person being a child of God as expressed in Acts 17:28,29 and in John 3:5; Galatians 3:26,27.
4. Discuss the necessity of surrender to Christ as the basis for a worthy prayer life. Consider such passages as John 14:6; 15:5; Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 10:19,21,22; 4:14-16.
5. Discuss the connection of the Christian's prayers with God's grace in successful Christian living.
6. How does the life and character of Jesus Christ reveal to us the nature of the loving Father?
7. Discuss how one who truly loves God wants to speak to Him in prayer and how God wants to hear his prayers. How is one's love for God creative of prayer itself?
8. What role does the Holy Spirit play in the Christian's prayer life?
9. Why is the prayer life of the unconverted soul impotent and futile?
10. Is your prayer life expressive of true conversion and surrender to Christ, of genuine love of God and a sense of constant need of His aid?

## THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER (1)

The efficacy of the prayers of God's faithful children is affirmed many times in the sacred scriptures. For example, Jesus declared, "Ask, and it shall be given you; Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, who, if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone; or if he shall ask him for a fish, will give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matthew 7:7-11). Jesus further declared, "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:22). See Mark 11:24. James 5:16 affirms, "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working."

Every sincere prayer offered to God by His faithful children receives an answer from Him. This does not mean that He answers all prayers immediately or exactly in the way the petitioners expect, but He does answer every prayer offered in accordance with His will and in the desire to see His will done. If one inadvertently asks God for something that he should not have, subsequently failing to receive it, actually his prayer has been answered. God's "no" is as much an answer to prayer as His "yes." God cannot and will not answer any prayer in a way which would be inconsistent with His moral and spiritual nature. He will not give His children anything that will harm them, but only what is good for them. Repeating the words of Jesus previously quoted, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" The question is rhetorical. If human fathers, with their tendency to do evil, are solicitous for the welfare of their children, giving them only what is for their good, how infinitely more is this true of our perfect heavenly Father. "They that seek Jehovah shall not want any good thing" (Psalm 34:10).

Worthy prayer does, indeed, "avail much in its working," but only as it relates to the real needs of men and to the righteous will of God. Necessarily, then, we conclude that the "all things" mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 21:22, where the great efficacy of prayer is affirmed, are also limited to the good of man and the will of God.

### *The Power of God*

The *efficacy* of prayer is the power of God. We must indelibly write this truism on our hearts and minds. In making a proper estimate of the efficacy of prayer, we must first be cognizant of the unlimited power, consistent with His moral and spiritual nature, which God possesses.



How can we have any doubt at all concerning the ability of God when we realize that this unmeasured and immeasurable universe is the product of His hand? Constantly He maintains its intricate machinery by His power. Every living thing grows by the power of His might. Nothing is too difficult for His omnipotence. This reality of the abundantly able God is affirmed in one of Jeremiah's magnificent prayers: "Ah Lord Jehovah! behold, thou hast made the heavens and the earth by thy great power and by thine outstretched arm; there is nothing too hard for thee . . . the great, the mighty God, Jehovah of hosts is his name; great in counsel, and mighty in work" (Jeremiah 32:17-19). In Matthew 19:26, Jesus plainly, tersely expressed the unlimited power of God: "With God all things are possible."

Whatever the Christian needs for happy, fruitful, victorious living—both physical and spiritual—God has all sufficient power to supply it. "And God is *able* to make *all* grace abound unto you: that ye, having always *all sufficiency* in everything, may abound unto every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning" (James 1:17). "God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Ephesians 3:20). See also Colossians 2:2,3; 2 Peter 1:3; Ephesians 1:3,19,20; 3:14-19; 1 Corinthians 15:57.

As we briefly considered in the last lesson, the blessings or power that God gives His children is through Christ; hence, whatever the scriptures say concerning the power of Christ is equivalent to speaking of the power of God. Jesus said, praying to the Father, "All things that are mine are thine, and thine are mine" (John 17:10). Paul referred to Christ as "the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). He further declared, "And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Ephesians 3:8 portrays the power of God in Christ as "the unsearchable riches of Christ." The Greek word translated here as "unsearchable" is *anexichniastos*, occurring but once elsewhere in the New Testament, in Romans 11:33, where the writer, after referring to the depth of God's riches, described His way as "past tracing out" (ASV). This is a literal rendering of the word. The riches of God in Christ are like a track that cannot be explored, like a mine whose treasures are inexhaustible, like a fountain whose waters eternally gush forth. Any attempt to measure, "to trace out," the inexhaustible riches of God in Christ is as futile as the attempt to measure the sky by the span of the fingers or to empty the ocean by spoonfuls.

What, then, is prayer but the tapping of God's riches, the plugging in on the current of God's power. It is the setting free and making operative the power behind all power, the power of God. It is the connecting wire along which God transmits His power in our lives and thus enables

us to get above and beyond ourselves. It redeems our lives from spiritual impotence and poverty by connecting them with the power and riches of the infinite God. It gives us the consciousness that we are not unsupported units but part of the all powerful dynamo which is God. However weak a Christian may be in himself, divine power is conveyed to him when he prays, and he becomes the agent through which it acts. It is, therefore, no overstatement of the case to affirm that the basic power for victory in the spiritual life is in prayer. We cannot but agree wholeheartedly with Forbes Robinson's observation that "a man's power in the spiritual world is measured by his prayer." And the same omnipotent God has all power in His material creation to answer our prayers in supplying our every physical need. See Matthew 6:11,33.

Augustus Neander, the great ecclesiastical historian, referring to the writings of the early postapostolic religious leaders, states, "The soul of the whole Christian life is considered to be *prayer*. Even they who otherwise differed widely in bent of mind, or habits of thinking, were agreed in acknowledging this."

Origen spoke of the power of prayer in the spiritual life as follows: "How much has each one among us to say about the efficacy of prayer, when we would thankfully record the benefits received from God? Souls which had long lain barren, and which became conscious of their dearth, rendered fruitful by the Holy Spirit through persevering prayer, have given forth words of salvation full of the intuitions of prayer."

Since it is impossible for Christians to live happily and victoriously without the power of God in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57), it is impossible for them to live happily and victoriously without prayer, which is their means of relying on divine power. When Paul wrote the words of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me," he tacitly affirmed that he could do all things through prayer which was expressive of unreserved loyalty to Christ.

Using a military term, we can think of prayer as being the "strategic position" of the Christian life. When a general chooses a place from which he intends to strike an enemy, he pays closest attention to the points which he thinks most important in the fight. No matter how significant the other points may be, to overlook the most important point is to invite certain disaster. So it is in the Christian life. To overlook prayer means certain disaster. The matter is just this simple and plain: *With prayer, the Christian's striving for spiritual victory by the grace of God through faithfulness to Christ will be successful; without prayer, no matter how diligently he may strive to please God in every other phase of Christian responsibility and privilege, he is bound to fail.* It is either the case of *praying or perishing.*

Thou art coming to a King,  
Great petitions with thee bring;  
For his power and love are such  
None can ever ask too much.

## *Prayer and Human Endeavor*

The faithful Christian knows that after he has accomplished all that is possible by his own physical, spiritual, and mental strength, he will still fail to live life to the fullest and to properly prepare for eternity unless he receives the benefits of God's grace in answer to his prayers. Thus he is constantly active in prayer. Even when he is the strongest in his strivings for the Christlike life, he prays, knowing that prayer is not only the refuge of the weak but also the reinforcement of the strong. He knows that the most efficient application of himself to Bible study and to good works will turn out to be impotent and futile without divine reinforcement through prayer.

No valid conclusion, however, can be made that God answers prayers as a *substitute* for human endeavor. The faithful Christian is fully aware that his prayers are a mockery unless he strives for the most efficient service possible in doing the will of God and ordering the affairs of his daily life. Read carefully Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46; Romans 12:11; Colossians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:12,13. Prayer, like faith, is dead without works, being alone. See James 2:24. When alive, it is never alone. Charles Spurgeon said, "Pray to God, but keep the hammer going." Lyman Abbott advised, "Let no one pray for victory unless he is willing that God should answer by giving him a battle to fight."

For example, the farmer who is a faithful Christian does not pray to God for assistance in giving him a crop as a *substitute* for his obligation to prepare the soil, plant the seed, etc., but as a *reinforcement* of his efforts. He expects God to do for him what he cannot do for himself. Thus we can see that no Christian's prayers to God for the sick, poor, and needy are to be substituted for his responsibility to "work that which is good toward all men" (Galatians 6:10), "to bear the infirmities of the weak" (Romans 15:1), etc. Neither are his prayers for self to be substituted for his study of God's holy word and the application of it in his life. See 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 1:5-11; 3:18.

God never does for His children what they can do for themselves. He who expects God to answer his prayers by doing for him what he can do for himself prays in vain. On the other hand, we must always be cognizant of the fact that human endeavor can never be a substitute for the strength and aid of God, and that even human endeavor must ultimately end in failure without divine reinforcement.

It is said that the presence of Napoleon on the field of battle was equivalent to a reinforcement of forty thousand men. Why? Because he so increased the fighting value of every soldier in his forces that his mere presence was equivalent to another army on the fields. Prayer will do that for the faithful soldier of the cross. The man of prayer is the best kind of man. The man of God who is reinforced by the power of God in prayer is drawing what the non-praying person cannot have. He is a man of power because he is a man of prayer.

## ***Prayer and Autosuggestion***

Skeptics and certain religious modernists teach that the only efficacy one finds in his prayers is within himself. To them, prayer is merely autosuggestion, a sort of glorified pep talk given to oneself in order to spur him on to greater accomplishments.

In denying that prayer is *merely* autosuggestion, it would be foolish to deny the reflex influence for good realized from the Christian's communing with God in prayer. No one can commune with the heavenly Father regularly, lovingly, and reverently who is not purified, edified, and strengthened within himself by the very fact that he has come into the divine presence and spoken to God. Then, too, in praying sincerely for specific things, the Christian is automatically incited to do his part in making them possible. If he prays for the good of his enemies, he will better strive to do them good; if he prays for the conversion of souls, he will work harder to teach them about Christ; if he prays for help in understanding God's word, he will more diligently study it, etc.

But we forthrightly deny that the subjective influence of prayer for good is its sole efficacy. Prayer is not, as certain critics allow, a "healthy lie of life" which pours confidence into the mind of man but that excludes any power external to him. In answer to prayer, God does something; he imparts some substantial, invaluable benefits. The popular saying, "He who prays rises from prayer a better man," has no meaning unless God, in answer to prayer, helps *make* him a better man.

Prayer not only sets the human will against sin, it also enlists divine power against sin. It not only sets the human will in favor of victorious living, it also sets the divine will in favor of victorious living. By the reinforcement which it brings through the immediate action of God upon the soul, evil thoughts are repelled, the powers of darkness are overcome, the motives are purified, drooping courage is revived, and faith is strengthened. There is no possible condition in which prayer cannot bring needed help from God to man, whether in the physical or in the spiritual realm, for in righteous prayer the Christian has accepted the sublime affirmation of God's never failing, solicitous care for His followers: "For himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in any wise forsake thee. So that with good courage we say, The Lord is my helper; I will not fear" (Hebrews 13:5,6). *Prayer is omnipotent because God is omnipotent.*

Are you discouraged? Pray. It will comfort you.

Are you peaceful? Pray. It will confirm you.

Are you tempted? Pray. It will uphold you.

Are you fallen? Pray. It will uplift you.

## Questions

1. Discuss the infallible assurance of the efficacy of righteous prayer given in Matthew 7:7-11; 21:22; James 5:16.
2. Does God answer prayers in any way that is inconsistent with His moral and spiritual nature?
3. Discuss the ability of God to give man everything he needs to sustain both his physical and spiritual life, considering such passages as 2 Corinthians 9:8; James 1:17; Ephesians 3:20; 1 Timothy 6:17.
4. What is meant by the term "unsearchable" to describe the riches of God in Christ?
5. Why is it impossible for the Christian to live a happy, fruitful, victorious, complete life without prayer, no matter how zealously he may try to please God otherwise?
6. How did Origen feel about the efficacy of prayer?
7. Is the Christian to pray as a substitute for human endeavor? Explain thoroughly.
8. How does prayer operate as a reflex influence for good?
9. Give arguments to refute the skeptic's claim that prayer is only auto-suggestion.
10. Are you making prayer a real power in your life?

## THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER (2)

The most helpful information concerning the reality of the efficacy of prayer is to be learned from a study of specific Bible prayers. Some striking examples from both the Old and New Testaments will be considered in this lesson.

### *Elijah's Prayer at Mount Carmel*

“. . . Elijah the prophet came near, and said, O Jehovah, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Jehovah, hear me, that this people may know that thou, Jehovah, art God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again” (1 Kings 18:36-38).

This prayer was offered during the contest between Baal's four hundred prophets and God's prophet Elijah at Mount Carmel. All day long the false prophets rent the air with their futile prayers to Baal. Then at the end of the day Elijah stepped forward with simplicity and reverence. After preparing the altar for the evening sacrifice, he expressed a simple, trusting prayer to the living, omnipotent God. The answer came forth immediately: "Then the fire of Jehovah fell, and consumed the burnt-offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench (verse 38). The most stubborn heart could not fail to be convinced of the great efficacy of prayer on that memorable occasion. "The prayer of a moment had accomplished what the howlings of a whole day had failed to achieve."

### *Hezekiah's Prayer for Deliverance from the Assyrians*

"And Hezekiah prayed before Jehovah, and said, O Jehovah, the God of Israel, that sittest above the cherubim, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline thine ear, O Jehovah, and hear; open thine eyes, O Jehovah, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, wherewith he hath sent him to defy the living God. Of a truth, Jehovah, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone; therefore they have destroyed them. Now therefore, O Jehovah our God, save thou us, I beseech thee, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou Jehovah art God alone" (2 Kings 19:15-19).

The answer God gave to this prayer is seen in the terrible destruction He wrought on the arrogant Assyrians: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of Jehovah went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred four-score and five thousand" (verse 35).

### ***Nehemiah's Prayer for a Successful Petition***

“Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven” (Nehemiah 2:4).

Nehemiah was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes. His heart was heavy and his countenance sad because his beloved home city Jerusalem was in ruins. He wanted to return and rebuild the wall and gates. But to do so he had to get permission from the king. Before, however, he made his petition, he offered a prayer to God which was rewarded with a bountiful answer: “And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me” (verse 8). God’s hand was in Nehemiah’s request to the king, making it effective so that the prophet was granted leave of absence to return to Jerusalem. See verse 20.

### ***Daniel's Prayer in Defiance of a King's Decree***

“And when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his chamber toward Jerusalem); and he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime” (Daniel 6:10).

In defiance of the decree of Darius, Daniel kept his window open toward Jerusalem and prayed to Jehovah three times daily, which was his usual habit. This gave occasion for certain of his political enemies to make a plot to have him put out of the way. So he was cast into a den of hungry lions to be torn to pieces and eaten. But trusting prayer stopped the lions’ mouths, and Daniel was released from the den unharmed. “So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he had trusted in his God” (verse 23). Daniel’s constant habit of prayer proved to be a storehouse of divine help in time of need.

### ***Jonah's Prayer from the Fish's Belly***

“Then Jonah prayed unto Jehovah his God out of the fish’s belly. And he said, I called by reason of mine affliction unto Jehovah, And he answered me; Out of the belly of Sheol cried I, And thou heardest my voice. . . When my soul fainted within me, I remembered Jehovah; And my prayer come in unto thee, into thy holy temple” (Jonah 2:1,2,7).

This quotation is part of the prayer Jonah offered to God when he had been three days and three nights in the fish’s belly. The penitent, contrite prophet, who had been swallowed by the great fish as punishment for his disobedience, now sought deliverance from his unhappy plight by the power of God through prayer. His prayer was forthrightly answered: “And Jehovah spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (verse 10). The God who had the power to prepare a fish to swallow the disobedient prophet (1:17), also had the power to answer his prayer and deliver him out of the fish’s belly. No request in prayer, consistent with the divine will, is too difficult for God to answer.

### ***Prayer for Boldness in Preaching***

“And they, when they heard it, lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, O Lord, thou didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David thy servant, didst say, Why did the Gentiles rage, And the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, And the rulers were gathered together, Against the Lord, and against his Anointed: for of a truth in this city against thy holy Servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel foreordained to come to pass. And now, Lord, look upon their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness” (Acts 4:24-29).

Peter and John had returned to the company of their fellow disciples following their release from prison. The Jewish authorities had strictly charged them to preach no longer in the name of Christ. And now all these disciples in concert offered a mighty prayer to God, climaxed with the request that He would grant them boldness to proclaim the gospel. Their request was granted in a spectacular exhibition of divine power: “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken wherein they were gathered together; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spake the word of God with boldness” (verse 31).

Commenting on this passage, Stanley Lockhart has well said, “When we learn that prayer is a force and not just a form we will see earth-shaking results.”

This example, as well as others to follow, impresses upon our minds that the great accomplishments made by the early church for Christ were due to the many faithful members who relied through prayer on God’s strength and guidance for the success of all their worthy endeavors. It was the efficacy of prayer that made it possible for these early disciples to withstand all the forces of evil directed against them and to bring glad tidings of Christ into every nook, corner, and cranny of the known world. With the power of prayer they faced persecution, imprisonment, privation, and even death with courage and undefeated faith to conquer the forces of spiritual darkness. Cannot we Christians of the twentieth century catch the radiant spirit of the prayer life of our first century brethren and also see our efforts to conquer the world for Christ crowned with great success?

### ***Prayer for Dorcas***

“But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning to the body, he said, Tabitha, arise . . .” (Acts 9:40).

Dorcas was a greatly beloved disciple of Christ, “full of good works and almsdeeds which she did” (verse 36), who died and was deeply mourned by those who knew her. Then Peter was sent for. He entered the death chamber, earnestly prayed to God, and in loving answer to his



prayer God raised Dorcas. "And she opened her eyes; and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand, and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive" (verses 40,41). In this case, prayer reached beyond the gates of death.

### ***Prayer for Peter in Prison***

"Peter therefore was kept in the prison: but prayer was made earnestly of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5). "Many were gathered together and were praying" (Acts 12:12).

Peter was taken into custody by the order of King Herod. His life was in jeopardy. Humanly speaking, nothing could be done to save him, so Peter's faithful brethren prayed to God on his behalf. Allying themselves with the Infinite Being, they believed anything might happen; and while they prayed, the chains by which Peter was bound fell from his hands, the gates were opened, and he walked out of the prison. There was no doubt about the power of prayer that night.

### ***Prayer for Removal of Thorn***

"And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch. Concerning this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he hath said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Wherefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

The thorn in the flesh by which Paul was afflicted was evidently some humbling physical infirmity which was seen by others. Looking at the matter superficially, we might believe that Paul's prayer was unanswered because the specific request he made was denied. Looking at it more deeply, we see that this prayer was answered in that Paul received what his heart of hearts really desired: the grace of God to withstand the infirmity of the flesh. The formal request was denied, but something better was given. Leighton said, "When we beg deliverance, we are not unanswered, if he give patience and support." Thus was Paul's prayer answered when, instead of the removal of the thorn in his flesh, he received sufficiency of divine grace so that he could say, "Most gladly therefore will I glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." There is no question that his prayer was most efficacious through the power of Christ given him.

"To secure the highest good to his children the heavenly Father does not hesitate to deny the lower for the higher. He denies the stone that is asked so that he may give the loaf that is needed; he denies the removal of the thorn that he may bestow his triumphing grace."

The foregoing examples of prayer have been considered without any comments being made as to whether the answers given them were miraculous or natural. The emphasis has been on the *fact* rather than on the *means* of God's power in making prayer effective. In light of the scriptures there can be no question that in God's dealings with His people He has answered prayer both by miraculous and natural means. His answer to prayer through miracles has manifested His power in *suspending* or *superseding* natural law. His answer to prayer through natural means has manifested His power in *utilizing* natural law.

Limited space will not permit us to present the various scriptural arguments proving that God no longer answers prayers through miracles, that miracles were not intended in the divine order to be manifested beyond the infant stage of the church, but only before the revelation of God in Christ was completed in the New Testament.

However, there are those who deny that any benefits are to be received from God through prayer if He no longer manifests His power in miracles. This conclusion is derived from the false assumption that the only way God can answer prayer is through miracles. True it is that God has manifested miraculous power in times past, suspending natural law, but He no longer does so. Our divine Father, who put into operation all the laws of the natural world, does not need to change a single law to give aid to men; but He simply puts His will into these laws and uses them in answer to the prayers of His children. It is unnecessary for us to know just *how* the providential care of God operates through natural law in answering our prayers, but it is imperative that we firmly believe the *fact* that the omnipotent God does answer all righteous prayers.

James 5:16-18 stresses the efficacy of prayer and its answer from God through natural means: "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working. Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." The original record of the drought and rain described in this quotation, found in 1 Kings 18 and 19, plainly shows that nothing miraculous was involved in the answer God gave to Elijah's prayer. There was no rain in answer to his first prayer because, obviously, the normal atmospheric conditions for rain were absent. Rain came in answer to his second prayer because the normal atmospheric conditions for rain were present. Observe 1 Kings 18:45, "And it came to pass in a little while, that the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain."

## Questions

1. What were the circumstances of the offering of Elijah's prayer at Mount Carmel and the answer God gave to it?
2. What significant recognition concerning God was made by Hezekiah in his prayer for deliverance from the hand of Sennacherib?
3. Did God operate through human agency or apart from it in the answer he gave to Nehemiah's prayer?
4. How did Daniel's constant reliance on the protection and care of God through prayer prove to be a storehouse of power in time of need?
5. In light of the examples studied, what accomplishments were made by the primitive church through the efficacy of prayer? What lesson can we learn from this today?
6. How was Paul's prayer for the removal of the thorn in his flesh actually answered? Does God answer some of our prayers today in the same way?
7. Is the Creator without power in His physical creation? Does He answer prayers through natural means?
8. How was Elijah's prayer, recorded in 1 Kings 18 and 19, actually answered? How does this illustrate the statement, "The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working"?

## CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER (1)

It is not prayer per se that is acceptable to God, but prayer offered according to the divine order. The Lord's disciples recognized the need of divinely revealed knowledge concerning prayer when they requested, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Let us evidence this same spirit of inquiry after the mind and will of Christ as we analyze and consider the divinely ordained conditions of acceptable, efficacious prayer.

In so doing we must keep foremost in our minds the fact that the outward form of prayer is only the shell which preserves the life within. God is not only cognizant of the words of our prayers, but also of the spirit and attitude that prompt them. Thus it is possible for prayers to be couched in the very finest, most elegant verbal expressions, and yet be unacceptable to God if not offered in the right spirit. Jesus taught that God must be worshipped "in *spirit* and in truth" (John 4:24). 1 Corinthians 14:15 states, "I will pray with the spirit . . ." The word "spirit" in these passages refers to the spirit of man as it is attuned to the Spirit of God. When one's prayers are in keeping with the dictates and will of the Holy Spirit, they will always be correct in attitude as well as in form and content, thus reaching the throne of God's grace.

Now let us consider the conditions of acceptable prayer.

### *Sincerity*

Most certainly, sincerity is a basic, prime prerequisite of successful prayer. Jesus pleaded for sincerity in prayer when He taught, "And when ye pray, ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward" (Matthew 6:5).

The devotion of these religious "play-actors" (the literal meaning of the word "hypocrite"), whose example Jesus tells us to avoid, was a pitiful, shameful masquerade. As they stood in public places to pray, they sought to attract the attention of men rather than of God. Instead of thinking of and speaking to God alone, their prayers were in reality addressed to a human audience. They had no sense of God's presence, no conscious desire to commune with Him. Their praying was expressive of a desire to rely on their own merit rather than on God's goodness and mercy. Looking to man's approbation as their reward, they missed the reward of heaven. In short, their prayers reeked with hypocrisy and insincerity, and Jesus duly warns us not to be like them.

Prayers are also insincere when they are used merely as the means of easing consciences which are not conformed to the will of God. Such prayers falsely assume that the mere mouthing of words to God by rote or habit is sufficient to keep us in His grace and to stay the hand of His wrath.

All those who pray insincerely are resoundly denounced in Isaiah 29:13, "And the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their hearts from me." See Matthew 15:8. When one prays sincerely, he honors God with his heart as well as his lips. Such prayer presupposes the soul's desperate, urgent need of God. David well expressed this need when he wrote, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (Psalm 42:1). With this sense of great need of God, the psalmist offered a prayer that every faithful, devout Christian can also offer: "Hear the right, O Jehovah, attend unto my cry; give ear unto my prayer, that goeth not out of feigned lips" (Psalm 17:1). See Acts 12:5.

### *Humility*

To impress the minds and hearts of His disciples with the need of humility in their prayers, Jesus related the parable concerning a Pharisee and publican: "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get. But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be thou merciful to me a sinner. I say unto you, This man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; but he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:10-14).

In the introduction to this parable, it is plainly stated that it was taught for the benefit of "certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at nought" (verse 9). Its object was to expose and condemn the sin of self-righteousness and to exalt the virtue of humility.

The Pharisee was filled with pride, self-exaltation, and self-righteousness. As he extolled his virtues, he looked upon the Lord as his debtor for his works of human merit. The publican, on the other hand, made no pretense of righteousness; he well knew of his spiritual poverty. Realizing his sinful condition and his need of divine help, in humility and self-abasement he cast himself upon the mercy of God. The one who exalted himself was humbled, and the one who humbled himself was exalted.

Humility in prayer always involves the attitude of the publican: a strong sense of personal unworthiness and of God's perfection, of dependence on God's grace rather than on human merit. When a Christian is truly humble, he will not exalt himself in any form at all. In approaching God in prayer, he will never be guilty of assuming a demanding, dictatorial attitude. He will pray with the attitude of a servant coming into the presence of a Master, or of a subject coming into the presence of a Sovereign.

Referring to the necessity of humility in prayer, Ross W. Dye observed: "No eloquence, however great, will suffice. Not even assertions of humility will do. In fact, one who would have others behold his humility can exhibit only pride. Nothing is more incongruous than boasting of humility, and nothing is more natural to humility than prayer!"

"Wherefore the scripture saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble" (James 4:6). "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall exalt you" (James 4:10). See also 2 Chronicles 7:14; 34:27; Proverbs 29:23.

### **Fervency**

When one prays to God in humility and sincerity, he must be single-minded, intense, and fervent—not halfhearted, listless, and lethargic. His whole mind and soul will be projected without reservation toward the mind of God. "Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed *fervently* . . ." (James 5:17). "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, saluteth you, always *striving* for you in his prayers" (Colossians 4:12). The word "striving" in Greek literally means *agonizing*. In this particular passage, in connection with prayer, it is defined as meaning "to endeavor with strenuous zeal" (Thayer). Striving, agonizing, or endeavoring with strenuous zeal should characterize every prayer we offer to God.

### **Persistency**

"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him; and he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot arise and give thee? I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will arise and give him as many as he needeth" (Luke 11:5-8).

In this dramatic parable, which is placed between the *Lord's prayer* and the exhortation to "ask, and it shall be given you, etc." (see verses 1-4; 9-13), the Lord advocates importunity, or tenacious persistency, in prayer. Jesus did not imply, however, that God is unwilling to give us what we need. He never gives grudgingly. Prayer is not operative in urging a reluctant blessing from His hand. The reluctance of the neighbor was real; the reluctance of God is only seeming. The parable is a story of contrast, illustrating the difference between selfish compliance and loving responsiveness. The very certainty that God is ready to answer our prayers affords a reasonable ground for importunity, or persistency. Matthew Henry well said, "We prevail with men by importunity because they are *displeased*, but with God because he is *pleased* with us."

This same concept of persistency in prayer is also taught in the parable of the unjust judge and importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8), prefaced

with the words, "And he spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint." In this parable, Jesus told the story of a wicked judge who was moved to redress an importunate widow, not as an act of justice but because she kept bothering him by her continual coming; and He asks, "And shall not God avenge his elect, that cry to him day and night, and yet he is longsuffering over them?" To this question the immediate answer is given: "I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily."

The importunate widow did not lose patience, or faint, because the answer she sought was not forthcoming immediately, as she would have preferred it. Nor should we lose heart because God's "speedily" may seem slow to us. If God seems to tarry in answer to our prayers, it is because the proper hour has not come. There will be no *unnecessary* delay. And if the persistent pleading of the importunate widow prevailed over the apathy of a wicked judge, how much more will persistent pleading prevail through the love of a righteous God. The very reason for persistency in prayer is not that it overcomes divine reluctance, but that it finds a certain response in divine willingness and love. When we accept the reality of God's love for us and of His willingness to answer our prayers, we will keep on praying with a tenacious persistency that knows no abatement, all the while waiting for the answer in God's own due time.

Yes, we need to pray with a persistency that does not let go of God, that holds on to Him for dear life, that never accepts any seeming delay in God's answer as a final, irrevocable "no."

### ***Watchfulness***

"Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Mark 14:38). "But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36). "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is" (Mark 13:33). "Continue stedfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2). See also Ephesians 6:18.

Persistency in prayer depends upon watchfulness, a constant mental and spiritual alertness to the need of prayer for strength to withstand temptation and to live victoriously. The texts quoted above imply that the one who prays with watchfulness will always be aware of the temptations that confront him and will avoid them with the help of God. He will follow the injunction of 1 Peter 5:8,9: "Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom withstand stedfast in your faith, knowing that the same sufferings are accomplished in your brethren who are in the world." Surely, one who is watchful concerning the devil is alert to the need of God's strength through prayer in successfully withstanding him.

Chrysostom said, "The devil knoweth how great a good prayer is."

Quesnal said, "If we must watch and pray, to prevent and withstand temptation, let us not be surprised that so many enter in and fall thereby: it is for no other reason but because there are very few who watch and pray in that manner and that constancy which they ought. Prayer is necessary in order to watch, and watchfulness in order to pray; and both the one and the other are to secure us from temptation."

The spirit of watchfulness in prayer is expressed in the command to be "sober unto prayer" (1 Peter 4:7). Christians are to be sober with a view to prayer, constantly on the watch for anything and everything that will either keep them from praying or that will be fatal to the efficacy of their prayers. Our prayers become spiritless, hollow verbal gestures when we fail to be sober and incessantly watchful. As the price of our spiritual liberty is eternal vigilance, so is the price of efficacious prayers also eternal vigilance. "Prayer," said Bernard, "is a virtue that prevaieth against all temptation." But this is true only when a sleepless vigilance is exercised.

"Watch, as a sentinel suspecting the approach of any enemy; as a physician attending to all the symptoms of a disease; as the keeper of a prison watching an insidious and treacherous criminal. We need to watch against the temptations arising from worldly associations, from the sinfulness of our own hearts, and from the vile insinuations of the enemy, all of which mar the efficacy of our prayers" (George Barlow).

### **Thoughtfulness**

"I will pray with the understanding . . ." (1 Corinthians 14:15). This passage in its context refers to prayers that are expressed in a language which cannot be understood by the hearers in a public assembly. If it is absurd for one to offer a public prayer that cannot be understood by others, how much more absurd it is that prayers, whether offered in private or in public, be meaningless to the one uttering them.

Jesus said, "And in praying use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not therefore like unto them" (Matthew 6:7,8). Wendt renders these words: "When ye pray, do not babble as the heathen." Jesus does not here teach against the *fact* of repetition in praying, any more than He does in regard to teaching. In both praying and teaching, repetition, when used discriminately, is effective from the standpoint of emphasis. However, our Lord does denounce *vain* repetitions—the empty, meaningless, inane mumbling of the same expressions over and over again, as though the potency of prayer is measured by its sound and length. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane "saying again the same words" (Matthew 26:44). His prayer was repetitious, but not vainly so. Every word was uttered with reverential understanding.

There is much that is aimless in prayer—prayer without meditation, that consists of grandiloquent and trite phrases, signifying nothing to the one praying. Such prayers are words and nothing more. Augustine



said, "We may pray most when we say least, and we may pray least when we say most." The Gentiles thought they would be heard for the multiplication of their words rather than their understanding of them. Martin Luther remarked, "Few words and much meaning is Christian; many words and little meaning is heathenish."

The Roman Catholic practice of repeating "Hail Mary, etc." is wrong, if for no other reason, because it is vainly repetitious. Like the turning of the Tibetan prayer wheel, it wrongfully assumes that in prayer men are heard for their much speaking. But do we ever pray in this same mechanical fashion? We must constantly remember that it is not the mere words of our prayers which make them acceptable to God, but our understanding of them.

### Questions

1. What is meant by praying with the spirit? Discuss how God is cognizant not only of the outward form of our prayers, but also of the spirit and attitude that prompt them.
2. What was the motive behind the prayers of the hypocrites?
3. In regard to prayer, what is the meaning of Isaiah's statement, "with their mouth and with their lips [they] do honor me, but have removed their heart from me"?
4. What was the difference between the attitude of the publican and of the Pharisee in the prayers they offered to God?
5. What attitude does one have toward himself who prays in humility?
6. Discuss the meaning and need of fervency in prayer.
7. How can we harmonize the need of persistency in our prayers with God's willingness and readiness to answer them?
8. Why is watchfulness necessary in maintaining a constant, worthy prayer life and in using prayer as the means of enlisting God's help against temptation?
9. Explain how it is possible to be repetitious in prayer without being vainly so?
10. Are you striving to pray with sincerity, humility, persistency, watchfulness, and thoughtfulness?

## CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER (2)

In continuing our study of the conditions of acceptable prayer, we must constantly keep in mind that prayer per se is not acceptable, but prayer offered in keeping with the divine order. The following conditions are most important and must be given serious consideration by all who would pray acceptably:

### *Godly Living*

As we have already discussed in this series of lessons, prayer is not a substitute for the Christian's responsibility to serve God, but is the reinforcement of his worthy endeavors. Yet many Christians live spiritually indolent, impure lives and expect the mouthing of a few words of prayer from time to time to make all things right between themselves and their Creator. Needless to say, they pray in vain. It is impossible to graft righteous prayer on a slippery life.

The inseparable relationship of a devoted Christian life and righteous prayer is impressed on our minds by such passages as 1 John 3:21,22, "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, we have boldness toward God; and whatsoever we ask we receive of him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight." This quotation is expressive of what has always been true in regard to the correct relationship of man to God: the necessity of human submission to the divine will. Proverbs 15:29 states, "Jehovah is far from the wicked; but he heareth the prayer of the righteous."

We must not think, however, that the keeping of God's commandments is the meritorious cause of the answers given to our prayers. The grounds are, of course, the grace of God and the merits and intercession of Christ. No one receives God's answers to his prayers on the basis of his own merits. See Luke 17:10. But it is also true that to reject the divine will is to reject faith in and love for God and Christ. Without this faith and love there can be no reliance on or access to God's grace and Christ's merits. See James 2:17; 1 John 5:3; John 14:15; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 John 5:4. How then can one possibly pray lovingly and trustingly, seeking the benefits of God's grace and Christ's merits in his life, who rejects the commandments God enjoins upon him?

Jesus further stressed the need of godly living for acceptable prayer in John 15:7, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you." The word "if" implies an alternative. It limits the answer to prayer to those who fulfill the twofold condition which Jesus here laid down. It is self-evident that no man fulfills this twofold condition of abiding in Christ and Christ's words abiding in him who does not diligently study the divine word and who fails to essentially live a godly life.

Yes, if we would pray to God for His manifold blessings and have our prayers answered, we must zealously strive by God's grace to follow the path of obedience, turning away from evil and doing good, for "the supplication of a *righteous* man availeth much in its working."

In the lesson dealing with hindrances to prayer, we shall expressly deal with the adverse effect of ungodly living on the Christian's prayer life.

### ***Self-Denial***

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). These words of Jesus affirm that in living for and with Him, His disciples must deny everything in their lives that is contrary to the divine order, expressed by Paul as "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts" (Titus 2:12). But more than this, Jesus teaches that His followers must even deny some things that are not wrong within themselves, such as sleep, recreation, and physical sustenance, whenever such denial is necessary to meet the higher call of Christian service and worship. See 1 Corinthians 7:5. When one's attitude is such that he will forego no bodily want, no time from business and pleasure, in order to give himself to meditation, spiritual contemplation, and prayer, his prayer life will necessarily become ineffectual and meaningless.

The thought of fasting in connection with prayer has a repugnant connotation to some of God's children. They would argue that fasting has no meaning for them because it was not specifically commanded by Jesus, or because Christians in general in this generation have not practiced it.

Neither of these arguments is sound. The unwillingness of so many Christians of the present generation to renounce their bodily wants and comforts in order for more effective worship and prayer is not really expressive of loyalty to New Testament authority, but of a paganistic, materialistic philosophy that has crowded out genuine spirituality from their lives. True it is that the New Testament gives no direct command to fast, but its practice by Christ's disciples in connection with prayer is otherwise assumed and advocated. "Then, when they had *fasted and prayed* and laid their hands on them, they sent them away" (Acts 13:3). "And when they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had *prayed with fasting*, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23). See also Luke 2:37; Psalm 35:13; Nehemiah 1:4. In all these references we see the spirit of self-denial manifested by faithful children of God in temporarily foregoing the satisfaction of certain physical wants that they might devote all their thoughts and affections under unusually significant circumstances in praying to God.

The New Testament advocates no special fast days, nor the exclusion of certain kinds of food from one's diet. Neither does it stipulate any

specific time, circumstance, or place for any phase of self-denial for the improvement of one's prayer life. Whatever choices are made concerning fasting or any other phase of self-denial must be the choices of each individual Christian according to his own peculiar situation in life. But deny himself he must if he would make his prayers truly effectual.

### *In Accordance with God's Will*

"And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him" (1 John 5:14,15).

Prayer cannot be forceful unless it brings the human will into union with the divine will, or as A. M. Fairburn expressed it: "the establishing of harmony between two wills—God's and man's." We do not pray in an effort to change God's will, but in an effort to bring our wills into accord with His. "The object of prayer is not to bend God's will to ours, but to raise ours to God; it is not to change but to accomplish the divine purpose." The blessedness in prayer is in choosing the Father's good and acceptable and perfect will. One cannot make the following request for others unless first he makes it for himself: "Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth" (Matthew 6:10). Leonard Mullens has well said, "Let us always remember with whom we deal—our own loving Father, who is the great God of the universe. And when my will beats against his will, there can be but one answer to that situation. God's will must be done! His answer must be the final answer and my will must bow down to his will. A living faith will cause my will to submit to his own good and perfect one, for it does take faith to pray to God."

It is as possible to pray a false doctrine as it is to sing and preach a false doctrine. For example, if one were to pray for the conversion of souls without their repentance, manifesting either an abysmal ignorance or stubborn rejection of God's will, he would ask for something diametrically opposed to the divine will. See Luke 13:13; 24:47; 1 John 5:16. Thus we must be certain that the substance of our prayers is in keeping with God's will as revealed in His holy word. If we would pray aright, then, we must perpetually be diligent to "grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Christians who do not zealously apply themselves to the study of the divine word cannot offer acceptable prayers to God.

We must realize that since our knowledge of God's word will always be imperfect, our knowledge of His will concerning us and all mankind will also be imperfect. Therefore, every prayer we offer should include an expression of our sincere desire that His will be done in all things and that our lives always conform to His will. It is not enough, however, that we desire His will be done; with His help we must do our part in seeing that it is carried out. The one who rejects the will of God

concerning the life he should live can never sincerely pray that God's will be done. See 1 John 3:21,22.

As was discussed in a previous lesson, the faithful Christian's imperfect knowledge of what he should pray for, as acceptable to God, is compensated by the invaluable aid of the Holy Spirit, who makes intercession for him. See Romans 8:26,27.

### *In the Name of Christ*

Jesus said, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, that will I do" (John 14:13,14). "And in that day ye shall ask me no question. Verily, verily, I say unto you, If ye shall ask anything of the Father, he will give it you in my name" (John 16:23). See also John 15:16; 16:26; 1 Peter 2:5.

Jesus conditions acceptable prayer on asking in His name. How very wrong it is, however, to limit this condition to the mere repetition of the words, "in Jesus name," loosely appending them to our prayers. Of course, we should gladly and reverently utter these words when we pray, but they do not make a bad prayer good, nor do they convert an unholy desire into a worthy one. They are not a cheap sesame to open the door of God's grace for us. There is no power in merely reciting them. The idea that the verbal invoking of the name of Christ will cause God to heed our prayers is most absurd, as if words were adequate as ends within themselves. Such an idea is as ridiculous as the belief that the mere verbal spouting of scriptures is acceptable in pleasing God and driving away the devil.

When Jesus said, "It is written," quoting scripture to the devil (Matthew 4:1-10), the power He had against temptation was not just the verbal use of divinely revealed words but His personal understanding and utilization of their meaning. For example, He quoted certain scriptures to the devil concerning the necessity of living by the Father's words and of worshipping Him; but more, His entire life was a perfect, practical demonstration of the meaning of these scriptures. So it is that the power we have "in the name of Christ" in prayer is not the mere quoting of a phrase, but our understanding of and reliance on its meaning.

To pray in the name of Christ is to be in close and intimate fellowship with Christ, to recognize and to live by the sanctity and supreme authority of His will concerning us, to conform our wills to His will. He declared, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18); "If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my words: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me" (John 14:23,24); "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). Whoever rejects the will and authority of

Christ cannot possibly pray in His name, for the scriptures teach that the sum total of the Christian's life is to be under the influence and mastery of Christ. "And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).

To pray in the name of Christ is to recognize that He died for us, paying the price of our redemption and supplying divine power for fruitful, successful living in His service. Therefore, it is for His sake and because of His merits that God answers our prayers. Any appeal we might make for God's assistance through prayer on the basis of our own sake or merits will never rise very high. When we approach God in prayer in the name of Christ, we do so with the realization that Christ is our sole access to the Father's grace. Andrew Murray said, "When I go in the name of another I deny myself, I take not only his name, but himself, and what he is, instead of myself, and what I am." See John 14:6; Hebrews 4:14-16. When we so pray in the name of Christ, we truly recognize that His "name . . . is above every name" (Philippians 2:9).

### **Faith**

"And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:22). "All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24).

These quotations actually express in different forms one and the same utterance made by Jesus following His miraculous withering of the fig tree. A more literal rendering of Mark's words, which obviously express also the meaning intended by Matthew, would be: "Believe that ye *have received* them"; that is, have so much faith in the willingness and power of God through Christ to answer your righteous prayers that what you *expect* to receive from God is considered as an accomplished fact, or present reality, as though the answer to prayer is coincident with prayer itself.

In Mark 11:23, the verse immediately preceding His statement concerning believing prayer, Jesus said to His disciples, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou taken up and cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that what he saith cometh to pass; he shall have it." Are these words to be taken literally? If so, the promise was a special one given to the apostles involving miraculous power, as was also the promise of power to cause a fig tree to wither (Matthew 21:21). If this explanation is valid, we have no right to turn this promise to ourselves and to expect to remove literal mountains and to cause fig trees to wither in answer to our prayers. But if the promise of power to remove mountains is not to be taken literally, it would mean that there are no obstacles, however great, which can permanently impede the conquering prayer of faith. Seeming mountains of sorrow, pain, anxiety, temptation, and all else that would hinder

or prevent the victorious Christian life, become as molehills or plains by the power of prayer.

The lesson that we must receive concerning the Lord's teaching on prayer in Matthew 21 and Mark 11 is that whatever power God has offered men in answer to prayer cannot be utilized without unwavering, unquestioning faith. See Matthew 17:14-19. We have the divine assurance that whatever we ask for in faith, consistent with God's will, shall be given us. Read again and again Luke 11:9,10.

The necessity of faith in the power of God to answer prayer is too often accepted by Christians as an academic fact rather than as a practical reality in their prayer life. The unbelief which is characteristic of the prayers of so many Christians does not involve any denial of God's existence nor of the fact that he answers prayer, but the persistent, perplexing doubt that He will answer their specific petitions to Him. How many of God's children have weakly asked Him for help, and then when no concrete answer was seen to their prayers, they shrugged their shoulders and flippantly said to themselves that they really did not expect an answer? What is the point in praying to God at all with this kind of attitude?

After James exhorts those who lack wisdom to request it of God, he designates the absolute requirement of faith to make such a request answerable by God: "But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord; a doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6,7).

The Christian whose life is victorious through Christ is one whose life is supercharged with faith. "And this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). Let us be certain always that our prayers are offered in faith, nothing doubting, for without faith they will never reach the throne of divine grace. Read Matthew 8:13; 9:28; Mark 5:36; 9:23; Luke 8:48.

### Questions

1. What is the meritorious cause of the answers God gives to our prayers?
2. Why is godly living necessary in making our prayers acceptable?
3. What is the relationship of self-denial to an effective prayer life?
4. What contribution does Bible study make to effectual prayer?
5. How does one pray in accordance with God's will?
6. Does one truly pray "in the name of Christ" merely because he appends these words to his prayers?
7. What is the figurative concept of removing mountains by the power of believing prayer?
8. What is the difference between an academic and a practical acceptance of faith as a condition of acceptable prayer?

## PRAYER AS COMMUNION

The three elements of acceptable prayer are communion, petition, and intercession. *Communion* is that phase of prayer in which we turn our attention toward God. It is the first essential element and the basis of the others. *Petition* is the second element, in which we turn our attention toward our own needs. *Intercession* is the third element, in which we turn our attention toward the needs of others.

Communion does something *to* us; petition has something done *for* us; and intercession has something done *through* us. But before something can be done *for* us and *through* us, it is absolutely necessary that something be done *to* us, which takes place in communion. Until the Christian's soul is established in communion with God, there can be no answer to his petitions and no power in his intercessions.

Communion is that part of prayer which removes every barrier between the Christian and God. It is the attitude of complete submission to Him. It is that act of worship which seeks God's glory and subordinates the human will to the divine will. It is the contact the Christian makes with God so that his prayers can be answered. It is the line that connects the Christian's soul with the dynamo of God's omnipotent power. To commune with God in prayer is to share in His holiness. "Get close to the seller of perfume if you would be fragrant," says an Arabian proverb. Get close to God in prayer if you would have your poor, frail life uplifted with the glory of His holiness.

### *Adoration and Praise*

In our zealous desire to receive blessings from God, we can easily place the emphasis almost entirely on desires and wishes in our prayers and fail to keep uppermost in our minds the divine source of these blessings: the all-gracious, all-wonderful, all-powerful heavenly Father.

How much an earthly father delights in the words of worthy praise his children give to him! How he is filled with joy when one of his children throws his arms around his neck and exclaims, lovingly and sincerely, "Dad, you are the greatest father anybody ever had!" And how very close his children feel toward him and what great joy and satisfaction they receive because they tell him of their admiration, respect, and love for him!

Does not our heavenly Father, who loves us more than any earthly father, also take delight in the praise and adoration expressed to Him by His loving, faithful children; and do they not feel very close to Him and receive great spiritual satisfaction and upliftment because they have so spoken to Him in prayer?

There can be no communion with God in prayer without praise and adoration. We must not, however, confuse praise and adoration with



flattery. Children often use flattery as the means of getting their father in a mellow, pliable mood to give them what they want. No self-respecting father wants to be flattered, or insincerely praised, by his children. And our heavenly Father most certainly rejects all prayers offered Him in a flattering vein. He cannot be bribed by any insincere form of praise and adoration into granting our requests.

In presenting to His disciples what is commonly known as the *Lord's prayer*, as a model of simplicity and clarity, Jesus began by uttering words of adoration to the divine Father, "Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Matthew 6:9). This expression of adoration is certainly part of the *Lord's prayer* that we can use verbatim in our prayers.

The very act of the Christian acceptably praying to God presupposes his respect for the infinite grace, dignity, love, majesty, and goodness of the heavenly Father, whose name is supremely holy. "Worship is worship. Mingled feelings of awe and fear, of wonder and love, take possession of the sincerely praying soul, as the vision of God's essential glory breaks upon his sight. All that is within him goes out to bless and magnify his holy name."

How can any Christian who is deeply devoted to God, loving Him with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, possibly keep from expressing this attitude of devotion and love when he prays to Him from whom all blessings flow, the source of every good and perfect gift? How reverently and ecstatically he can join in the chorus of the seraphim before the throne of the Most High God, rapturously exclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). His sense of rich communion with God in praising Him through prayer is in the same spirit as Augustine's beautiful prayer of praise:

Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised;  
Great is thy power, and of thy wisdom there is no end.  
And man, being part of thy creation, desires to praise thee—  
Thou movest us to delight in praising thee;  
For thou hast formed us for thyself,  
And our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee.

Reverent men in every age have lifted up their voices to the Creator in adoration and praise, as they ascribe to Him all honor, power, and glory. Time and time again the prayers of faithful men in the Old Testament reveal such expressions of adoration and praise as the following: "Thine, O Jehovah, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty . . ." (1 Chronicles 29:11). "Bless Jehovah, O my soul. O Jehovah my God, thou art very great; Thou art clothed with honor and majesty" (Psalm 104:1).

This same spirit of adoration and praise for Jehovah also permeated the prayers of His followers whose names are recorded in the New Testament. Jesus Himself, the sinless one, sublimely praised His Father in

prayer when He exclaimed, “. . . O Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Matthew 11:25). It was said of the first converts to Christ that they continued stedfastly in “praising God” (Acts 2:47). The closing words of Jude’s epistle are in the form of a prayer of adoration and praise, beautifully expressing the attitude of all God’s faithful, praying children: “Now unto him that is able to guard you from stumbling, and to set you before the presence of his glory without blemish in exceeding joy, to the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and power, before all time, and now, and for evermore. Amen” (verses 24,25). Hebrews 13:15,16 stresses praise as the sacrifice we make to God with our lips: “Through him then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to his name.”

*“Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created” (Revelation 4:11). “Hallelujah; Salvation, and glory, and power, belong to our God” (Revelation 19:1).*

### **Thanksgiving**

In our zealous desire to receive the blessings of God, not only can we be forgetful of rendering praise and adoration to Him, but also of rendering Him thanksgiving. It is certainly important in the development of Christian character for one’s prayer life to be saturated with expressions of gratitude for the manifold blessings of God, but it is obvious that there can be no gratitude *expressed* without gratitude *felt*.

Gratitude is a grace inseparably a part of sterling Christian character. The Christian who does not feel grateful to God for the blessings he receives from Him every day of his life is the worst kind of ingrate. How can anyone lovingly and appreciatively contemplate the innumerable blessings he continually receives from the gracious, bountiful hand of God and not spontaneously and simply say, “I thank thee, Father”?

In the seventeenth chapter of Luke is told the poignant, moving story of the Samaritan leper who was the only one among ten lepers healed of the Lord who felt gratitude deeply to return and glorify God in thanksgiving to Him: “And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, with a loud voice glorifying God; and he fell upon his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan” (verses 15,16). The response of Jesus to this incident is a severe indictment of ungrateful people in every age: “Were not the ten cleansed? but where are the nine? Were there none found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger?” (verses 17,18).

Words of adoration and praise are given to God for what He is; words of thanksgiving are given to Him for what He does. How very, very much He does for us, and how very, very much we have to be grateful for! See James 1:17; Acts 17:28; John 15:5. When we deeply sense the magnitude of God’s blessings, we will gladly and joyously “continue

stedfastly in prayer, watching therein with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2). The simple command of Colossians 3:15 will be obeyed with the greatest relish: "Be ye thankful."

In reverently considering the blessings of God and for what we should thank Him, uppermost in our hearts and minds should be gratitude for His greatest gift, His only begotten Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Every spiritual blessing God gives His children is through Christ (Ephesians 1:3). Indeed, we are taught to thank God for all His good gifts through our heavenly high priest Christ: "Giving thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father" (Ephesians 5:20). See Colossians 3:17.

Yes, for all that Christ means to us we are to be thankful to God: for salvation, for spiritual victory, for providential care, for blessings ad infinitum. The apostle Paul had much to say in his epistles about thanksgiving to God for Christ and the blessings and victorious power realized through Him. "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57). "But thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14). "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15). "I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Timothy 1:12). See Romans 6:17,18.

When we contemplate our personal unworthiness and the reality that God's gifts of salvation and of power for fruitful living in Christ are gifts of His grace, our expressions of thanksgiving to Him will overflow from abundantly grateful hearts.

To be able to enumerate in our prayers every specific thing for which we can be grateful to God is a sheer impossibility, for the blessings we receive from the divine hand are innumerable. However, as we gratefully keep before us a keen awareness of the supreme blessing of Christ and His peace, joy, and salvation, let us not forget to continually thank God for the following daily blessings:

1. *Physical Sustenance.* Everything that sustains our physical lives—food, drink, clothing, shelter—comes from the bountiful hand of the Creator. See Matthew 6:11; Deuteronomy 8:17,18; Job 1:21; Psalm 50:10-12; Haggai 2:8. Grateful Christians never let a day go by without expressing great gratitude for physical sustenance and for the measure of health allotted them.

2. *Providential Care and Protection.* Knowing that "to them that love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28) and that the loving, faithful Christian has the assurance of God's continual care and protective presence (Hebrews 13:5,6), we have every reason to be grateful to God for the daily working of His providence in our lives. We must never let a day go by without abundantly thanking Him for His providential care and protection. See Daniel 6:10.

3. *Fellow Christians.* Paul's epistles are replete with personal expres-

sions to God of gratitude for those of his fellow Christians whose fellowship and the inspiration of their godly lives were of such great blessing to him. "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:4). "I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you . . . for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel" (Philippians 1:3,5). "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers" (1 Thessalonians 1:2). See also Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:9; Acts 28:15. Let us never let a day go by that we do not profoundly thank God for the blessings He gives us through the fellowship and encouragement of our fellow Christians.

4. *Future Blessings.* ". . . in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Philippians 4:6). In this passage the apostle Paul teaches that we are to give thanks not only for past blessings, but also for blessings to come. He plainly ties thanksgiving in with the petitions we make to God for what is yet to be received. Since God's word is sure, it is as appropriate to thank Him for what He has promised as well as for what is already in hand. Let us never allow a day to go by without expressing profuse thanksgiving to God for the wonderful blessings to be received in the future.

Thanksgiving in prayer is indeed communion with God, the fellowship of grateful human hearts with the loving, merciful, and benevolent heart of the heavenly Father. Our prayers must be permeated with thanksgiving to God for Christ, salvation, peace, joy, providence, food, drink, shelter, the beauties and grandeur of the face of earth and sky, Christian fellowship, opportunities for worship and service—for blessings without end!

*"O give thanks unto Jehovah, call upon his name" (1 Chronicles 16:8).  
"O give thanks unto Jehovah; for he is good; for his lovingkindness endureth for ever" (Psalm 107:1)*

### **Confession**

The New Testament teaches that an integral part of righteous prayer is the confession of sin. In communing with God in prayer, it is necessary that we humble ourselves before the Almighty in an honest, forthright declaration and admission of our shortcomings. Prayer devoid of the confession of sins is prayer devoid of the spirit of humility. No Christian can come into the righteous presence of God in the spirit of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving, to enjoy communion with Him, who fails to realize his shortcomings and to penitently confess them.

In coming into the presence of his father to renew fellowship with him, the prodigal simply, humbly, and penitently acknowledged his sinful condition. See Luke 15:21. The attitude he expressed in his confession should be a model for the confessions of sin we offer in our prayers to the divine Father.

True, sins committed against men are to be confessed to them (Matthew 5:23,24; 18:15; James 5:16); but since all sins are against God, it is needful that they be confessed to Him. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The foregoing passage does not imply that the Christian is bound to specify every particular sin he has committed—whether in word, thought, deed, commission or omission—which would be impossible; but he is bound to penitently, humbly admit in his prayers the *fact* that he has sinned against his Creator, and as far as it is possible for him to do so, to be explicit in the enumeration of specific sins. Such confession to God is truly good for the soul. For in confessing his sins he lances a festering conscience and invites the healing power of God in Christ. At the same time, he unburdens himself of his fears, disappointments, and sorrows. A. M. Fairburn said, "We show God in confession our souls as we see them that he may show them to us as he sees them."

Preparing for the confession of sins to God in prayer affords the Christian a splendid opportunity for a rigorous self-examination whereby he can come to an awareness of the extent of sin in his life, and thus with the help of God, overcome his shortcomings.

### Questions

1. What are the three elements of acceptable prayer and their respective functions?
2. What is the difference between sincere praise and flattery? Why cannot God be bribed into answering our prayers?
3. Why does the faithful, loving Christian readily and spontaneously praise and adore God when he prays?
4. Discuss some of the passages of praise and adoration quoted in our lesson, from both the Old and New Testaments.
5. Relate the story of the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, and discuss the contrast between the gratitude of the Samaritan and the ingratitude of the others.
6. For whom should we be most grateful to God? Why?
7. Name and discuss some specific blessings we enjoy daily for which we should thank God.
8. Discuss the confession made by the prodigal son to his father as a model of imitation for our confessions of sin to God.
9. Under what circumstances is a confession of sins in general in order, and when is it advisable to confess specific sins?
10. How is a confession of sins to God good for the soul?

## PRAYER AS PETITION

In this series of lessons we are using the word "prayer," from the Latin *precarius*, as a generic term to include all aspects of man's speaking to God, defined by Webster as: "The offering of adoration, confession, supplication, thanksgiving, etc. to God." In the main, this word as used in the New Testament, translated from the Greek *proseuche*, means making a request or asking, describing the petitionary function of our speaking to God. However, its generic use is seen in such passages as Philippians 4:6; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Timothy 2:1, where it is conjoined with the word "supplication," from the Greek *deesis*. Obviously, in these passages "prayer" is a generic term, indicating the speaking to God in its various aspects, whereas "supplication" has reference to prayer for special needs.

Thayer defines *deesis* as: "1. need, indigence. 2. a seeking, asking, entreating, entreaty." Whether *deesis* or *proseuche* is used to describe the petitionary function of prayer in the New Testament, the basic idea behind both of these words is man's "need, or indigence." As we have emphasized throughout the previous lessons of this study, all prayer is predicated on man's indigence and weakness, and thus his need of God. In prayer he seeks to satisfy this need.

The Christian needs the edification and upliftment that come with communion with God in prayer; so he prays, offering the sacrifice of his lips to God in praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and confession. More, the Christian needs the help of God that can only be received by supplication, or petition—asking, seeking, or entreaty—so he prays. It is this latter element to which we shall devote our attention in this lesson.

Actually, in scriptural usage supplication involves prayers for others as well as for self. See 1 Timothy 2:1. In a sense, then, all prayers of entreaty on behalf of others are petitionary. But in this study, if somewhat arbitrarily, the petitionary function of prayer is being limited to the requests made for self, whereas requests for others will be designated by the specific term "intercession."

The scope of petitionary prayer is emphasized in Philippians 4:6, "In nothing be anxious, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." Nothing can be sought in prayer which God cannot supply. Whatever we need, physically or spiritually, is to be included in our petitions to God. The range of petitionary prayer, then, is the entire range of human *need*.

Reliance on the help of God "in everything," in every phase of life, through prayer is the secret of overcoming our anxieties and secret fears. Notice how the inspired writer connects the exhortation "in

everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God" with the command "in nothing be anxious" and with the promise "the peace of God that passeth understanding shall guard your hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus." The picture is plainly evident. When the faithful, devout, loyal Christian, who strives to do God's will and relies on His grace, puts himself in the Father's care, seeking his help through prayer in everything, what is there for him to be fearful about? The Almighty God is taking care of him. Why should he fret, worry, or be anxious about anything when he depends on the never failing grace, power, care, and protection of God in Christ? See John 16:24, where Jesus connects answered prayer with fulness of joy.

In praying for both physical and spiritual blessings, we must understand the difference between God's treatment of them. Temporal blessings are never promised by God absolutely; spiritual blessings are. Our Father may have good and valid reasons for withholding physical blessings; for example, as in the case of His refusal to grant Paul's petition for the removal of the thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10). But He can have no possible motive or interest in withholding spiritual blessings. We always have the need of "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3), and God never refuses our righteous petitions for these blessings. The material is always relative; the spiritual is absolute. Thus the absoluteness that belongs to prayer relates solely to the spiritual.

There are things which God exalts above our temporal interests. There are things He desires for us more than physical health or worldly prosperity. With Him, outward things are never supreme or absolute. Therefore, He will never answer our request for temporal things when He knows that they will either be contrary to our spiritual welfare or to the spiritual interests of others. To so act otherwise would be inconsistent with His moral nature.

God's answer to our prayers will always be according to our *real* needs. When we realize this, through prayer we shall constantly rely on the Father's providential care and the working of His grace in our lives, ever believing that everything He does for us in answer to our prayers will be for our good. Thus we will never begin any undertaking at all which we believe to be proper without seeking God's guidance and protection through prayer. See Romans 1:9,10; 15:30-32. How true it is that no sermon should ever be preached, no lesson taught, no trip taken, no work of any kind done, etc., without first going to God in prayer.

### ***Physical Blessings***

Keeping in mind the precedence of the spiritual over the physical and the validity of physical things only as they are used for spiritual ends, the following temporal things are legitimate objects for petition in prayer:

1. *Bodily Sustenance.* In the Lord's prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). When one so petitions God, in sincerity and faith, he tacitly admits his dependence on God for physical sustenance. Such a petition is not greed or avarice as such. The word "daily" in the Greek can mean "needful." We are to pray only for enough bread to sustain us, not to pamper us—bread that will sustain us to work for Christ and to serve mankind.

Giving a generic meaning to the word "bread," all our physical, bodily needs are to be included in the scope of our petitions for daily bread. See Matthew 6:31-34. Whatever we need in the way of physical sustenance we are to pray for. And if God withholds any physical need from us at anytime, we can know that it is for our good, to make possible the fulfilling of a higher need, and that, as always, the spiritual must take precedence over the physical. See 1 Corinthians 4:11-13; Philip-  
pians 4:11-13.

2. *Bodily Health.* Paul's petition to God for the removal of the thorn in his flesh was a prayer for freedom from a physical handicap, for bodily health. If he had thought that it was not right for him to make such a petition, he would certainly not have made it. The fact that in this particular prayer God did not grant his request does not deny the validity of such a petition.

The exhortation of Philippians 4:6, "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known unto God," certainly includes requests for bodily well-being. But when one prays for physical health, he must desire that it may be given providing it will make for the highest good, by his healed body making it possible for him to more abundantly and efficiently serve the Lord. If, however, it is God's will that he suffer bodily affliction, he gladly accepts it as the higher good, knowing that the spiritual always takes precedence over the physical. Even the continuity of his earthly life depends on the will of God (James 4:15); therefore, whether he lives or dies, if he is faithful to the Lord it will be for the best.

3. *Material Means to Help Others.* As a good steward of God, the Christian knows of his responsibility to "work with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have whereof to give to him that hath need" (Ephesians 4:28). See Acts 20:34,35. If it is right for the Christian to work for material means to help others, it is also right for him to pray for God's help in such worthy endeavor. Yes, it is entirely right for the Christian to pray for money, providing his motive is to use the money he receives for spiritual ends, in the service of God. God will grant such a request if its bestowment will not be harmful to the petitioner or to others, or stand in the way of spiritual blessings. Read again Philippians 4:11.



## *Spiritual Blessings*

Since the entirety of one's life in Christ has meaning only as faith and love are cultivated unto eternal salvation, the final ends of prayer are spiritual and moral. God will never withhold these blessings for a single moment when the faithful Christian seeks them in prayer. The Christian's need of spiritual blessings is absolute; thus every petitionary prayer he offers to God must stress requests for the spiritual and eternal above the physical and temporal.

Let us now give special attention in our study to emphasis on petitions for spiritual blessings.

1. *Forgiveness of Sins.* The Christian's primary spiritual need is constant freedom from the guilt of sin through God's forgiveness. In the *Lord's prayer*, Jesus enjoined petition for forgiveness on His disciples: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). After Simon the Sorcerer was baptized, becoming a child of God, he fell under the influence of temptation and attempted to buy the gift of God, the power to confer the Holy Spirit on men. Peter rebuked him for his sin and exhorted him, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thy heart shall be forgiven thee" (Acts 8:22).

Hebrews 4:16 states, "Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need." Our first and basic need in coming to God in prayer is for mercy to cover the sins of the past. The word "mercy" rules out human merit. When pardon is received by the mercy of God, it will be through the merits and for the sake of our high priest, Jesus Christ. See Hebrews 4:14,15.

It is comforting for God's children to know that when they fall into the snare of the devil and sin, they can approach the throne of grace in prayer, contritely and penitently, with full assurance that their sins will be pardoned by the merits of Christ. "My little children, these things write I unto you that ye may not sin. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins . . ." (1 John 2:1).

Indeed, the Christian's entire life should be so prayer saturated, so constantly aware of the need of divine mercy and of reliance on the merits of Christ, so dedicated and committed to Christ, that the blood of Christ continually washes away the sins he commits because of the weakness of his flesh. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

2. *Power to Withstand Temptation.* In forgiveness of our sins we see the curative power of prayer. In deliverance from temptation we see the preventive power of prayer. When we come to the throne of grace, not only are the sins of the past blotted out through the mercy of God,

but grace is given to help us in fighting the good fight of faith. We need the grace of God through the indwelling Christ to withstand the devil and the temptation he places before us. In the *Lord's prayer*, Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). The Lord exhorts us, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41). The fact that God answers our petitions for power to withstand temptation is also affirmed in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." See Jude 24.

3. *Wisdom*. An absolute requirement for victory in the fight of truth and righteousness against error and sin is wisdom, the power of discernment. However much information, or factual knowledge, we may obtain, we cannot utilize it without wisdom. The divine writ tells us how to secure it: "But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given to him" (James 1:5). See 2 Chronicles 1:10; Philippians 1:9,10.

4. *Faith and Love*. Although faith results from the hearing of divine revelation (Romans 10:17), the increase of one's faith cannot be possible, however much he may study God's word, without divine help through prayer. No Christian's faith is perfect; mingled with his faith is some doubt. Thus on his lips should be the constant prayer, "I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Such a prayer is the same as praying for help in the understanding of God and His Son Jesus Christ through our study of the sacred scriptures. See 2 Timothy 2:15; John 17:3. We must never open the Bible with the intent of studying any part of it that we do not pray to God for help in our comprehension and acceptance of its message of life and godliness.

As the Christian's faith is imperfect, so is his love. Paul's intercessory prayer for the love of the Philippian Christians to "abound yet more and more" (Philippians 1:9) is a prayer that every Christian can well offer for himself. God will surely answer our requests for more love for Him and our fellow men if we will wholeheartedly submit ourselves to Him and His will.

### ***Cooperation with God***

Whatever the Christian prays to God for, in faith and sincerity, he is bound to cooperate with the Father in doing his part to make his prayers effectual. In a previous lesson we stressed the fact that prayer without works is dead. Too much stress cannot be given to this scriptural tenet. We do indeed need God's help, which we seek through prayer and without which we are bound to fail. But God will not answer our prayers unless we offer them in commitment to Him and

His will. What we ask of Him we must work for with His help. We must pray for God's providential care and guidance, but we must also plan every undertaking with painstaking care and carry it through with diligence and efficiency. See Romans 12:11. We must pray for our daily bread, but we must also labor to secure it. "If any will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). We must pray for physical health, but we must also do what we are able to make it possible. We pray for material means to help others, but we must also do what we can to obtain it. We must pray for forgiveness of sins, but we must also do what is necessary to secure it: repentance and confession (2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1:9). We must pray for power to withstand temptation, but we must also "resist the devil" (James 4:7). We must pray for wisdom, but we must also apply our hearts and minds to the pursuit of it. See Proverbs 2:2. We pray for understanding of the truth to produce greater faith, but we must also apply ourselves to Bible study (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:18). We pray for more love for God and man, but we must also seek understanding of all that God reveals about love in His holy word (1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 4:7-21; etc.).

*Yes, works without prayer are dead, and prayer without works is dead.*

### Questions

1. Discuss the Christian's need of God's help through petitionary prayer.
2. What is the relationship between freedom from anxiety and petitionary prayer as presented in Philippians 4:6,7?
3. Discuss the difference between God's treatment of prayer for temporal and for spiritual blessings.
4. What should be the principal motive behind the Christian's petitions for physical blessings?
5. Why should the Christian make no plans for anything at all, undertake no endeavors at all, without praying to God for help and guidance?
6. Discuss prayer as access to the mercy of God in the forgiveness of sins.
7. What is meant by the phrase, "grace to help us in time of need"?
8. Why is wisdom an absolute necessity in living the Christian life?
9. How can prayer increase our faith and love?
10. Why is it necessary that all petitions for God's blessings be offered in commitment of ourselves to Him and His righteous will?

### PRAYER AS INTERCESSION

Prayers which are entirely self-centered, which seek God's blessings for oneself alone, are not acceptable to the Father. We are taught to pray for others as well as for self: "I exhort therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercessions, thanksgivings, be made for all men . . ." (1 Timothy 2:1). Every human being stands in need of God's help; thus every human being comes within the scope of our prayers.

Righteous intercessory prayer is expressive of good will toward all men, the seeking of their good and never their harm. It is in truly loving all men that we find the motivation to pray for them. The greatest service that loving Christians can render any human being is to pray for him.

Let us now observe some of the special classes of men for whom we should pray, included in the "all men" expressed in 1 Timothy 2:1.

#### ***Secular Leaders***

In 1 Timothy 2:2, immediately after Paul had enjoined prayers for all men on Christians, he specified prayers on behalf of secular leaders: "for kings and all that are in high place; that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity."

We must pray for political leaders, even though we may not always agree with their policies nor admire their personal lives, for they most certainly need the guiding hand of God in directing the secular affairs of men. See Romans 13:1-7. If we would have a world of peace, where men can live in harmony with their neighbors and enjoy full freedom to worship and serve God, "to lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity," we must pray that God will intervene in the affairs of men and guide the heads of nations in working for international cooperation and peace rather than for conflict and destruction. This means that we must pray for the leaders of the communist nations as well as for the democracies, for dictators as well as for democratically chosen leaders.

We must also pray for divine guidance to be given to officials who serve on a more local level: governors, councilmen, law officers, etc. The actions of these men affect the life of the individual citizen for better or for worse. Prayer seeks their actions for the better.

#### ***All Christians***

". . . with all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and *supplication for all the saints*" (Ephesians 6:18). Prayer is to be made for all saints, or Christians, without exception. Writing to the "saints and faithful brethren in Christ that are at Colossae," Paul and Timothy declared,

“We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you” (Colossians 1:3). Paul wrote to Philemon, verse 4, “I thank my God always, making mention of thee in my prayers.” See Romans 1:9.

In praying for our brethren in Christ, we must constantly keep uppermost in our minds, as is true also concerning petitionary prayer, that the spiritual must always take precedence over the physical. Praying for the physical health and prosperity of the saints is certainly important, but it is far more important that we pray for their spiritual health and prosperity. “Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as *thy soul prospereth*. . . *Greater joy have I none than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth*” (3 John 2,4).

Verily, above all else in our prayers for the saints, we must be solicitous for their spiritual welfare. We must pray that they abstain from evil. In writing to his Corinthian brethren, Paul said, “Now we pray to God that ye do no evil” (2 Corinthians 13:7). We must pray also that they cleave to righteousness, bearing fruit in every good work by the power of the indwelling Christ. Such a prayer was offered by Paul for the Philippian saints: “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that ye may approve the things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11). Similar prayers for Christians are recorded in Ephesians 1:16-19; 3:14-19; Colossians 1:9-11; 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; Romans 1:9,10.

Earl Packwood has effectively stated that “if each member of each congregation would pray for one another as did Paul, we would have unity and fellowship like we have never known before. With this Christ-like attitude, division and strife would end and any spirit of competition would vanish into spiritual unity and love.”

We must pray for our brethren when they go astray, when they depart from the heavenly Father as did the prodigal son from his father. Our efforts to restore them to the grace of God will be useless unless we seek divine help by praying on their behalf. Our brethren never need our prayers as much as when they have fallen into the snare of the devil.

### ***Spiritual Leaders and Proclaimers of the Word***

It may not appear reasonable from the human viewpoint that prayer is the greatest ministry in the church. We might be inclined to think that preachers who speak to thousands of people, or teachers who come in contact with many souls in Bible classes, or those who engage in personal evangelism, or the overseers who tend the flock of God in local congregations, would have the greater ministries. But the truth of the matter is that no successful ministry of preaching, teaching, or

overseeing can be possible without godly, praying Christians behind it.

No finer, more capable, devoted proclaimer of the gospel ever lived than the apostle Paul; yet he was most zealous and profuse in his requests for the intercessions of the saints on his behalf. For example, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Romans 15:30); "Ye also helping together on our behalf by your supplication" (2 Corinthians 1:11); "Brethren, pray for us" (1 Thessalonians 5:25); "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run and be glorified, even as also it is with you and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and evil men; for all have not faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:1,2). See Hebrews 13:18; Colossians 4:2,3.

Consider the far reaching effects of the ministry of prayer. A faithful saint may be confined to his bed in sickness and pain, unable to go anywhere to tell sinners about Christ, yet the effectiveness of his prayers for the ministry of the word everywhere will be realized in the four corners of the earth.

This is a ministry in which every faithful Christian can engage—men, women, boys, and girls. Let us pray fervently and unceasingly for all those who labor in the teaching of God's word everywhere, at home and abroad, that they may bring a rich harvest of souls to Christ and that God will protect them and guide them continually. Let us pray fervently and unceasingly also for our spiritual leaders, the men who watch on behalf of our souls (Hebrews 13:17), that their labors may lead God's people forward and upward.

One of the worthy attributes of the early church in general was the solicitous care of its members in praying for those who preached the gospel, as we discussed in a previous lesson. See Acts 11:25. How we need more and more of the ministry of prayer in the church of the twentieth century.

### ***Physically Afflicted***

In offering prayers for all men, the faithful Christian will evidence special concern for physically afflicted people, both saints and sinners. He will pray for the orphans and indigent widows and for all others who are poor and needy. He will pray for the sick, crippled, and infirm. Doubtless, the healing of the father of Publius, a pagan, was miraculous (Acts 28:8). But the significant fact is that Paul prayed before he laid his hands on him to heal him. His prayer expressed loving concern for a suffering human being. And the God who healed the sick by miraculous means in answer to Paul's prayer also has the power to heal the sick by natural means in answer to our prayers.

James 5:16 declares, "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." This passage advocates intercessory prayer for the sick. Confession is mentioned in connection with a Christian who is sick and wants the prayers of his brethren for

his recovery. Sins that burden the conscience would interfere with such prayers; they would prevent trustful reliance on God's strength. The humility involved in confessing one's sins to another, and at the same time to God, would be an invaluable assist to the prayers offered for his physical recovery.

Let us pray one for another when we are physically afflicted, for "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working" (James 5:16). See James 5:14,15.

### ***The Unsaved***

Included in the "all men" for whom we should pray are the unsaved. Indeed, this class embraces a great majority of the world's population, of every race and nationality. No greater concern should lie on the heart of the Christian than for lost souls. If he truly has compassion for human souls and desires their salvation, combined with his efforts to reach them with the gospel, will be unceasing prayers on their behalf.

Paul's desire for the salvation of his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Jews, drove him to his knees and found ready, uninhibited expression in earnest and continual prayer to God for them. He said, "My heart's desire and my supplication to God is for them, that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1). See 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.

In stressing the importance of intercessions for sinners, we would not in any way minimize the importance of human endeavor in taking the gospel to them. Indeed, "we have this treasure [the gospel] in earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7a), and it is the weighty responsibility of the Lord's disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:16). Nevertheless, the power that leads men to Christ is of God and not of ourselves, and although men can "plant" and "water" in the work of reaching sinners with the message of the cross, it is always God who gives the increase. See 2 Corinthians 4:7b and 1 Corinthians 3:6. Thus in praying for the unsaved, we are seeking God's power to be wrought in everything that will contribute to the increase of souls for Christ.

It is said of Jesus that "when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered, as sheep not having a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). This feeling of compassion Jesus had for suffering, sinful, lost mankind prompted Him to say to His disciples, "The harvest indeed is plenteous, but the laborers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37).

Do we have the same attitude toward the lost as our blessed Lord? Are we moved with deep compassion toward all sinners—regardless of their race, nationality, social or economic standing—when we consider their unhappy plight as sheep without a shepherd? Yea, if our hearts truly go out to precious souls in sin with strong feelings of tenderness, love, and compassion, we will of a certainty pray unceasingly that God

will send an innumerable host of faithful laborers into His harvest so that there will be a great ingathering of souls for Him.

### ***Enemies***

Included in the "all men" for whom we are to pray are also our enemies. Perhaps this is the most difficult phase of intercessory prayer. Jesus taught, "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven . . ." (Matthew 5:43-45).

Praying for those whom we admire and respect, although part of Christian responsibility and privilege, is not the highest test of the relationship of unselfish love and sterling character to righteous prayer. When we can lovingly, reverently, and sincerely pray for those who have mistreated us, we then reach the highest pinnacle of attainment in prayer. One never comes closer to the ultimate in spiritual ecstasy than when he prays for his enemies. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to hate any person, no matter what offenses he may have committed against us, if we sincerely pray for him. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus depicts prayer for one's enemies as the natural, inevitable result of the love he has for them.

Suppose, however, a Christian has been mistreated by someone, and his attitude toward his antagonist is resentful and bitter. He knows that he cannot please God unless he loves his enemy. But try as he may by his own determination alone, he cannot completely remove all feelings of bitterness and animosity from his heart. What should he do? Pray! Pray that God will help him love his enemy. The more he prays in this vein, the more able he finds himself to pray for his enemy. Before long he finds that he can humbly, reverently, and without reservation pray that God will give succor and help to the one who has harmed him. Yea, verily, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?" (Matthew 5:44-46).

### ***Cooperation with God***

As we considered in lesson eight, the Christian is bound to cooperate with the Father in doing his part to make his petitionary prayers effectual. This is true also of intercessory prayers. Such prayers are unavailing unless we back them up by unreserved commitment of ourselves to the will of God.

Not only must we pray for all who are in "high place," but we must also "render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21), being "in subjection to the higher powers" (Romans 13:1),



and proving ourselves to be loyal, honorable, and hard working citizens who willingly cooperate in worthy endeavors for the betterment of society. Not only must we pray for all men everywhere, but we must also, "as we have opportunity, work that which is good toward all men" (Galatians 6:10). Not only must we pray for all the saints, but we must also "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Not only must we pray for God's prodigal children, but we must also follow the injunction, "Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness, looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Not only must we pray for our spiritual leaders, but we must also follow the divine command, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them" (Hebrews 13:17). Not only must we pray for proclaimers of the gospel, but we must also encourage them in any and every way that is possible and willingly give of our financial means for their support (1 Corinthians 9:13; Galatians 6:6). Not only must we pray for the poor, sick, and distressed, but we also must minister to their needs (James 1:27; Matthew 25:35,36). Not only must we pray for the unsaved, but we must also see that every means at our disposal is used to influence them to accept Christ and His salvation (Matthew 5:13-16; Mark 16:15,16; etc.). Not only must we pray for all our enemies, but we must also obey the command, "But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head" (Romans 12:20). See also Luke 6:27,28.

*Yes, works without prayer are dead, and prayer without works is dead.*

### Questions

1. What attitude is necessary toward all men in order for the Christian to pray for them?
2. Why should we offer special prayers for "all that are in high place"?
3. Discuss intercessory prayer for the saints as described in Philippians 1:9-11.
4. Why can intercessory prayer be considered the greatest ministry in the church? Who can be successful in this ministry?
5. Discuss praying for the physically afflicted.
6. What is the relationship between desire for the salvation of sinners and intercessions for them?
7. Discuss the difficulty in praying for our enemies. What must we do when there is bitterness in our hearts toward them?
8. How availing are intercessory prayers without our cooperation with God in carrying out His will?

## WHEN AND WHERE TO PRAY

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). “Praying always” (Colossians 1:3). “Praying at all seasons” (Ephesians 6:18). “. . . always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1). See also 1 Chronicles 16:11; Luke 21:36; Colossians 4:2.

It is evident that since prayer is to be made at all times, it is to be made wherever the Christian may be, at all places. Cf. 1 Timothy 2:8. Thus the basic tenet of this lesson is that the time for prayer is every time, and the place for prayer is every place.

The Christian may have an audience with the Father for as long as he so desires. He can talk with Him any minute of any hour of any day, at any and every time. God is never too busy caring for the things of His universe to deny His children as much time as they need to spend with Him in prayer.

Furthermore, the Christian may pray in any place he happens to be, at home or away from home, in a church building or in a factory. He may pray in his car, in busses, in trains, in airplanes. God not only hears prayers that are offered from the sick bed, but also from the athletic field. *Prayer at every time at every place: that is the Christian's prerogative!*

### *The Attitude and Spirit of Unceasing Prayer*

Obviously, the commands to “pray without ceasing,” “praying always,” etc., cannot mean that all our time is to be spent in the conscious upliftment of our hearts to God in direct petition, intercession, thanksgiving, or praise and adoration. As a specific act of devotion and worship, prayer must have some limitation of time in the life of the faithful Christian. But as a state of heart and mind, there is a sense in which prayer is never to cease. Considering the meaning of prayer in this light, let us give careful attention to the following truisms:

1. *The Entire Life of the Faithful Christian Is an Unceasing Prayer.* Victor Hugo said, “Whatever the attitude of the body, the soul may be upon its knees.” When the soul is constantly humbled before God, one's life will be one living, breathing prayer. When the Christian's life is truly committed to God in Christ, prayer becomes as unceasing as life, and ends only when life itself ends.

2. *The Faithful Christian Prays Without Ceasing in the Sense of Maintaining an Unbroken Dependence on God.* What is the primary meaning of prayer but the acknowledgment of one's need of God? Unceasing prayer, then, is constant, trusting reliance on God's power, grace and love. When one unceasingly lives with a faith in God that fully trusts in Him for “every good and perfect gift,” his most widely

scattered and fragmentary prayers will be united into one continuous whole.

### ***The Practice of Unceasing Prayer***

It is axiomatic that when the Christian's life is one of dependence on God, trusting faith in and complete commitment to Him, the spirit of prayer that unceasingly pervades his entire life will manifest itself in much time devoted to the overt act of prayer, of speaking to God. One who prays spasmodically, who devotes little time to the overt act of conversing with God, does not pray without ceasing, or at all seasons. No Christian can afford to be so busy here and there with his daily affairs of business, family, and recreation that he does not take time to pray. The Christian who is too busy to pray is too busy to rely on the grace and power of God, and thus he is too busy to prepare for heaven. We do not argue that we are too busy to eat, to drink, to sleep, to work, to play, etc., and we must never argue that we are too busy to engage in something far more significant than the foregoing activities: reliance and dependence on God, the source of all our blessings, through prayer.

We must pray in times of sickness, poverty, and sorrow; and we must pray in times of health, prosperity, and happiness. We must pray in fair weather as well as in foul weather. God is not to be sought only as a refuge in time of trouble, but also as a firm bulwark of strength in every time of affluence and triumph. Our petitions to and communion with Him in prayer are appropriate and significant at every time, place, and circumstance in our lives. "Some pray only in the sunshine, others only in the storm; the believer prays always."

Every day should begin and end with prayer. As O. Feltham said, "Prayer should be the key of the day and the lock of the night. At night it is our covering; in the morning it is our armour." And between morning and night we must often go to God in petitionary, intercessory, thanksgiving, and praising prayer.

There are times when we need to turn loose from our business affairs, domestic duties, and everything else, and devote ourselves solely to prayer. This, in principle, is the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:5, where Paul exhorts Christians to give up their conjugal rights, "that ye may give yourselves to prayer." As we need time to refresh the body in rest and recreation, so we also need time deliberately set apart for prayer, a time of unhurried communion with the heavenly Father. From such periods of prayer we come forth clothed with new power and new zest for godly living.

### ***Private Prayer***

There are times every day of the Christian's life when he needs to be alone with his God as he unburdens his heart to Him in prayer. Jesus taught the necessity of private prayer when He said, "But thou, when thou

prayest, enter into thine inner chamber, and having shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee" (Matthew 6:6). Yes, there is a social side to prayer, and there is also a solitary side. There is prayer in which the spirits of Christians blend in harmonious utterances to God, and there is prayer in which God and the individual soul are alone, a communion with heaven that is close, intimate and personal.

The "inner chamber" to which Jesus refers is any place or circumstance where our prayers cannot be heard by anyone but God. The reason for the command given by Jesus to His disciples for them to pray in their "inner chamber" was so they would avoid the sin of the hypocrites who offered private, personal prayers in public to be heard of men. *Prayers that are appropriate only in private must be offered only in private.* We must not think, however, that our "inner chamber" is merely a room with physical boundaries. Whenever and wherever we withdraw from the outside world and its distraction and give our attention wholly to God in prayer, unheard and unseen of men, we are truly retired to our "inner chamber." Let us greatly value and cherish the blessed moments we spend all alone every day with our God in the sweet and edifying communion of prayer.

### **Social Prayer**

As there is a solitary side to prayer, there is also a social side. There is the side to prayer when Christians come together in loving fellowship with each other to blend their hearts in communion with God. True, social prayer is not a substitute for private prayer, and neither is private prayer a substitute for social prayer. Both are greatly important in the spiritual welfare of every child of God. This should be especially stressed for the benefit of those who discredit any prayer that is not offered in private. Such unfaithful children of God argue that they can pray as acceptably alone as with other Christians. For anyone to so argue is to inadvertently admit that he is selfish and self-centered, unwilling to share his religious experiences with others. He has no genuine regard for the value of Christian fellowship, an essential part of the Christian life.

Acts 2:42 states that the first converts to the gospel continued "steadfastly in prayer." The context of this statement indicates that it refers to public, or social prayer. And the subsequent early history of the church as recorded in the book of Acts corroborates this conclusion, for if there is any one characteristic of the early disciples in general that stands out beyond all others, it is their steadfastness and constancy in praying together. These first converts were not individualists. They felt the need of the encouragement of each other to make possible the fullest life. It is said that they "were together" (Acts 2:44), "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). Thus it was only natural that they should pray together for the mutual benefit and strength of all.

Note well the following significant uses of social prayer:

1. *Resolving Conflicts Between Brethren.* One of the greatest influences for resolving conflicts in the church is social prayer. When difficulties and dissensions arise between brethren in Christ, above all else they need to pray together. There is no difficulty which separates Christians that cannot be removed with the help of God through sincere, fervent prayer when those involved seriously seek to resolve their differences. "Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 18:19).

2. *Emergencies and Special Occasions.* In the early church, whenever emergencies arose, or when there were special occasions of common interest and concern to the members, invariably a prayer meeting was held. For example, when the apostles suffered persecution and imprisonment, their fellow saints prayed together for them (Acts 4:24-31; 12:5,12). When elders were appointed in the churches, the brethren prayed together (Acts 14:23). When Paul and Silas had been beaten and cast into prison, they prayed together (Acts 16:25). When Paul bade the Ephesian elders a final farewell, they prayed together (Acts 20:36-38). When Paul and his fellow workers bade farewell to the disciples in Tyre, they prayed together (Acts 21:5).

Of this "togetherness" in prayer which was such a marked characteristic of the early church, Augustus Neander wrote, "On pressing emergencies, affecting either the church in general, or individual members of it whom all felt a special interest, the whole church assembled for prayer; and all general deliberations were opened with prayer. It was in prayer, that the brotherly fellowship, the mutual sympathy of the members of the One Body was to be specially expressed; each was to pray in the spirit of all, and to present the interests of all the brethren, which he regarded as his own, before the great Head of the Church, and through him, before Eternal Love." What an increase in the fighting power of the church against evil, what strength to meet every emergency, what growth in love and fellowship, would be realized if brethren in Christ would meet together often to seek God's help and grace through common prayer!

### ***Prayer in Worship Services***

The prayers offered God in set worship services are an integral part of the spiritual welfare and development of Christians and of the maintenance of harmony and unity in the church. There can be no occasion of public worship that faithful Christians do not commune with God and invoke His blessings and strength through prayer. See 1 Corinthians 14:14,15. Can any Christian who sincerely respects the teaching of God's holy word and enjoys the fellowship of his brethren fail to attend the worship services of the local congregation and pray together with other Christians? See Hebrews 10:25.

## ***Leading in Public Prayer***

It is in order here to consider the important work of leading in public prayer. Whoever engages in this activity has a weighty responsibility on his shoulders. His prayer must be the prayer of all those whom he is endeavoring to lead into the presence of God if there is to be fellowship in this phase of worship. Thus it is imperative that his prayers be worthy of being offered by everyone who is praying with him. Some suggestions for efficient, worshipful leading in public prayer are the following.

1. *Speak Audibly and Clearly.* Obviously, the members of a prayer group cannot pray with their leader unless he prays loudly and clearly enough to be heard and understood.

2. *Offer the Prayer to God.* On the face of it, this may seem like an entirely unnecessary suggestion since it would naturally seem that no child of God would even remotely think of praying to anyone but the heavenly Father. Yet it is quite possible for one to audibly begin a prayer with "Our Father who art in heaven," and then pray with the desire of receiving the attention of men rather than of God. How many public prayers are, in fact, presented as sermons to men rather than as prayers to God? Of course, an acceptable public prayer is to be *heard* by men as well as by God, but it is to be *offered* only to God.

3. *Avoid Vain Repetitions.* Vain repetitions in any prayer, whether private or public, are to be strictly avoided. But the danger in so praying is perhaps greater in public than in private. Too often a prayer leader is fearful that his prayers will seem unreasonably short to others, so he prays merely as an exercise in filling out time. He may repeat himself to the extent that his prayers become plainly ludicrous, devoid of any genuine worshipful spirit.

The habit of repeating God's name over and over again in a prayer is vainly repetitious. In some public prayers almost every sentence begins with some form of God's name. The listeners may subconsciously listen for the repetition of the name and thus lose the spirit of the prayer.

4. *Avoid Trite, Hackneyed Words and Expressions.* There is a tendency in the church to follow "the traditions of the fathers" in public prayer. The modes of expression in the prayers of one generation become the modes of expression in the prayers of the next generation. Instead of applying ourselves intelligently and diligently to the offering of prayers that have freshness and originality of expression, we tend to take the easy way out and merely ape the prayers of our predecessors. When one who so prays begins a prayer, those who have heard him pray before know almost exactly the expressions he will use—the same sing-song monotonous use of such outworn expressions as "He who coming to this low ground of sin and sorrow," "go with us now to our

respective places of abode; guard, guide, and direct us," "if we have been found faithful, give us a home with thee in heaven," etc., etc., etc.

It is not that these expressions denote concepts that are wrong, but when they are used over and over again, generation after generation, they tend to attract attention to themselves rather than to the concepts which they represent. They tend to make prayer banal and boring rather than fresh, edifying, and uplifting.

5. *Be Sincere and Natural.* When one acceptably leads in public prayer, he is directing the minds and hearts of fellow Christians to the presence of God. He is not trying to prove how much he may know about the scriptures nor how capable he may be in expressing himself in public. In being sincere, natural, and unassuming, however, he will not be crude and uncouth in his speech, for he will strive to be his *best self* in speaking to God—not the best self of someone else, but his *own best self*. With this attitude of sincerity, naturalness, and humility, his prayers will always be directed to God for the benefit of all who pray with him. They will be prayers of good understanding, expressed simply, plainly, and clearly, so that all who pray with him will feel that they have truly come into the loving presence of God.

### **Family Prayer**

Husbands and wives, sons and daughters, who do not pray together fail to take advantage of the greatest force of all, the power of God, in maintaining a home in which harmony, peace, love, and good will prevail. Every Christian home should have time set apart each day when the entire family is together to invoke God's blessings and guidance through prayer. Indeed, families that pray together stay together.

### **Questions**

1. How can one pray unceasingly, yet not devote all of his time to the overt act of prayer?
2. Discuss the absurdity of any Christian maintaining that he does not have time to pray.
3. What is meant by the phrase "your inner chamber"?
4. Describe the attitude of the person who insists that he can do all of his praying at home, that it is unnecessary for him to join other Christians in prayer.
5. Discuss the value of social prayer in helping to resolve conflicts between brethren.
6. Describe the practice of the primitive church concerning social prayer for pressing emergencies and on special occasions.
7. Discuss the suggestions made concerning leading in public prayer.
8. What is the significance and importance of family prayer?

## HINDRANCES TO PRAYER

At the root of the widespread spiritual lethargy and impotency in the body of Christ is the prayerlessness and the weak and unavailing prayers of so many of its members. It is axiomatic that Christians are no stronger than the power of their prayers and that whatever hinders or limits their prayers hinders or limits the power of God in their lives.

The devil knows that if he can hinder the Christian's prayers or keep him from praying, he can make him spiritually powerless, vulnerable to the power of evil.

It is a great tragedy when any Christian allows certain hindrances to come into his life which make it impossible for God to answer his prayers or which cause him either to pray spasmodically or not to pray at all. Such hindrances must be carefully noted and dealt with, or spiritual disaster will surely follow.

Actually, lessons five and six, dealing with the conditions of acceptable prayer, partially consider the hindrances to prayer, in some instances by direct reference and in others by implication. Obviously, anything that is contrary to a condition of acceptable prayer is a hindrance to prayer. It is felt, however, that one lesson in this series should stress the negative side of prayer so that we may have a greater and clearer awareness of the dangers and hindrances that threaten our prayer life. In the main, the material in this lesson has not previously been dealt with in our study, but in connection with what we shall now discuss, it will prove helpful for us to carefully read again lessons five and six.

### *Wandering Attention*

Have we not all been aware that when we begin to pray, unless we are especially watchful and alert, our minds tend to wander off to the thousand and one distractions that affront us, and we find ourselves saying words and phrases without any real sense of communion and contact with God? To avoid the hindrance to prayer of our wandering attention, we must constantly realize that prayer is a condition of activity rather than passivity. It calls for strict attention, for the fixing of the mind by a definite effort of will on God and the confident expectancy of His answer. At times concentration in prayer is not difficult. We can pray spontaneously, with little effort, no matter what distractions are about us, because of some special urgency that moves us to seek the help of God. But in the main, prayer is not an easy thing; it takes a resolute and sustained act of the will to continue unmoved by distractions in the exercise of speaking to God. See 1 Peter 4:7.

"He only can bow the knee in a right spirit, and hold real fellowship with God, who is able to throw off all temporal affairs like a loose garment, and free from distracting thoughts address himself to God."



We need to take time for contemplation and meditation and for Bible study in order to prepare ourselves for concentration and strict attention in prayer. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). To ponder about the greatness of God, to contemplate His infinite love and mercy, to meditate upon His precious word and His continual interest in our welfare, and to fill our hearts with grateful, loving thoughts of Him, will contribute immeasurably in preparing our minds for prayer that will lead our souls upward into the infinite presence of God.

### ***Persistency in Sin***

When a child of God persists in the course of sin, it is impossible for him to reach God in prayer. "Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1,2). "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). "For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears unto their supplication: but the face of the Lord is upon them that do evil" (1 Peter 3:12).

The foregoing passages pointedly affirm that any child of God who turns from the divine will and continues in the course of sin is not on praying terms with God. But this does not mean that one must be perfect, completely devoid of sin, before he may reach God in prayer. If sinless perfection were a condition of acceptable prayer, it would be useless for any Christian to pray. Speaking for himself and all other Christians, the apostle John said, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). James 3:1 declares, "For in many things we all stumble."

What separates any Christian, then, from God so that his prayers go unanswered? It is not his weakness or frailty, not his lack of perfection, not the mistakes and blunders he makes along the way, but his persistency in sin, his stubborn refusal to confess his wrongs and to seek God's forgiveness or his turning to God for forgiveness without truly repenting of his sins. One who asks God for forgiveness with no intent of quitting his sins is not in a penitent state, and his prayers are useless. Are we guilty of assuming an "Excuse me, Lord" attitude in our prayers, asking God's pardon for our sins only as a means of easing our consciences for a while, but deep inside realizing that when temptation presents itself again we will repeat these sins? Such an attitude makes sheer mockery of prayer. This attitude is what David had in mind when he said, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Psalm 66:18).

As a matter of fact, sin persisted and continued in day after day will eventually destroy all desire to rely on God's power through prayer. Persistency in sin is the very negation of trusting faith in God and Christ. The degree of weakness in one's faith is the degree of weakness in his prayer life. And when his faith dies, all relish for the grace and

power of God also dies. Thus the need of giving serious attention to such exhortations as Hebrews 3:12,13, "Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God; but exhort one another day by day, so long as it is called Today; lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Every child of God who trifles with sin, who disobeys God persistently, could do well to consider the penetrating and valid analysis made by J. H. Jowett of the devastating effect on the soul of the entertaining of sin in the heart and life: "We have opened the heart to some insidious anti-Christ. We are entertaining some unclean spirit, some secret sin, which is corrupting our spiritual taste, and rendering it incompetent to discern and appreciate 'the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.' That is the first step in spiritual degradation!

"But now follow on a step farther. A man becomes possessed by this feeling of religious weariness. He loses his relish for the things of God. What then? Then he begins to sceptically inquire about the use of prayer. A decision is easily reached that for him, at any rate, there is no use in prayer. But he cannot stop there. He needs must justify himself, and he finds the amplest and most comfortable justification in the more general statement that all prayer is useless, a vain farce, a mere baying at the moon. I know that along the line of intellectual inquiry some men have reached the conclusion that prayer is useless. Of that I speak not now. I am now tracing the line of moral and spiritual degradation, and I say that sin begets a deep spiritual distaste and weariness, and this distaste begets a sense of the uselessness of prayer. Unbelief in prayer is one of the foul offsprings of the outraged conscience."

If we would keep the channel of communication open between ourselves and God, we must diligently study God's word to "grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18); we must "resist the devil" (James 4:7) and "imitate not that which is evil, but that which is good" (3 John 11).

"To pray while living in wrongdoing is to spread sail while leaving the anchor unlifted."

### *Asking Amiss*

"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may spend it in your pleasures" (James 4:3). When one's motive in praying for something material, or temporal, is not that he may glorify God and relieve the poor, distressed, and afflicted, but that he may live in sensual ease and pleasure and pamper his lusts and carnal appetites, his prayers will go unanswered. See Luke 8:14.

When we petition God for temporal things, for worldly prosperity and success in our material affairs, it becomes us to examine our motives with the closest scrutiny. Nowhere are we more liable to exercise self-deception, to be mistaken in regard to our real motives, than in prayer to God for material things.

## ***Marital Discord***

“Ye husbands, in like manner, dwell with your wives according to knowledge, giving honor unto the woman, as unto the weaker vessel, as being also joint-heirs of the grace of life; to the end that your prayers be not hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). This passage is a reference to a particular hindrance in prayer. Peter affirms that the Christian husband who would be on praying terms with God must treat his wife with respect and honor. It may be that Peter here assumes it is the normal thing for the Christian husband and wife to pray together, and that such prayer is hindered by the sins of the husband against the wife, which would also be sins against God.

Immediately preceding his teaching concerning the responsibility of husbands to their wives in order for unhindered prayer, the apostle exhorted wives to be in subjection to their husbands. See verses 1-6. Evidently, a happy, harmonious home life contributes immeasurably to the effectiveness of the prayers of both husband and wife, whether engaged in jointly or privately; but it is impossible to maintain an environment conducive to righteous prayer when there is bickering, quarreling, and strife.

## ***Unrighted Wrongs***

Every unrighted wrong committed by any Christian against others hinders his prayers. In essence, this is what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:23,24, “If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.” In effect, Jesus affirms in this passage that if the animal sacrifices the Jews offered on a literal altar were nullified by unrighted wrongs against their fellow men, how much more this is true in regard to the spiritual sacrifices Christians offer to God through Christ. See Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 1 Peter 2:5. God will not accept any act of worship from us when we fail to rectify the wrongs we commit against others. Thus the offering of our lips to Him in prayer is in vain until we become reconciled with those whom we have wronged. If we would be on praying terms with God, we must be on decent and honorable terms with our fellow men.

## ***Unforgiveness***

Another example of the hindrance of sin to prayer is revealed in the Lord's teaching concerning the responsibility of His disciples to hold toward others a forgiving spirit: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14,15). God refuses to answer our prayers for the forgiveness of sins committed against Him when we refuse to forgive others their sins against us. James 2:13 states, “For judgment is without mercy to him

that hath showed no mercy: mercy glorieth against judgment." The forgiving spirit is a merciful spirit. It is by the mercy of God that men's sins are forgiven in Christ (Titus 3:5,6); and unless we show mercy to others in granting them forgiveness, we will face God in judgment without His mercy.

When we came to Christ for salvation, all the innumerable sins we had committed against God were forgiven—fully, completely, and finally! How absurd it is, then, for redeemed souls, citizens of the divine kingdom, children of the heavenly Father, to manifest an unforgiving spirit toward those who have sinned against them. Concerning the prayers for divine forgiveness of the unforgiving person, Augustus Hare wrote, "Conceive an unforgiving man, with heart full of wrath against his neighbor, with a memory which treasures up the little wrongs and insults and provocations he fancies himself to have received from that neighbor; conceive such a man praying to God most high to forgive him his debts as he forgives his debtors. What in the mouth of such a man, do these words mean? That you may fully understand their meaning, I will turn them into a prayer, which we will call *The Prayer of the Unforgiving Man*: 'O God, I have sinned against thee many times; I have often been forgetful of thy goodness; I have broken thy laws; I have committed many secret sins. Deal with me, I beseech thee, O Lord, even as I deal with my neighbor. He hath not offended me one-hundredth part as much as I have offended thee, but I can not forgive him. He has been very ungrateful to me, though not an hundredth part as ungrateful as I have been to thee, yet I can not overlook such base ingratitude. Deal with me, O Lord, I beseech thee, as I have dealt with him. I remember and treasure up every little trifle which shows how ill he has behaved to me. Deal with me, I beseech, O Lord, as I deal with him!' Can anything be more shocking and horrible than such a prayer? Yet this is just the prayer the unforgiving man offers up, every time he repeats the Lord's Prayer." See Matthew 18:21-35.

### **Conclusion**

*It is either pray or perish!* Thus it is imperative that we diligently guard ourselves against anything and everything that would come between our prayers and God or that would keep us from praying. The price of freedom from all hindrances to our prayers is constant vigilance and watchfulness. Do you want God's help in removing the hindrances to your prayer life that now exist so that you can live in His grace and power? If so, then pray to Him. In the worthy words of Andrew Murray, "Begin by acknowledging, by confessing before Him, in a childlike and simple manner, the sin of neglecting and desecrating the inner chamber. Bow before Him in deep shame and sorrow. Tell Him that your heart has deceived you by the thought that you could pray as you ought. Tell Him that through the weakness of 'the flesh,' and the power of the world, and self-confidence, you have been led astray. Come in your sin and

weakness to the inner chamber, and begin to thank God, as you have never thanked Him, that the grace of the Lord Jesus will surely make it possible for you to converse with your Father as a child ought to do. Hand over afresh to the Lord Jesus all your sin and misery, as well as your whole life and will, that He may cleanse and take possession of you and rule over you as His very *own*.

“You may be sure that deliverance will come. Expect it, and you will begin to understand that the inner chamber is the revelation of the glorious grace of the Lord Jesus, which makes it possible for one to do what he could not do himself; that is, to hold fellowship with God, and to experience that the desire and power are received which fit a man for walking with God.”

### Questions

1. Why does the devil work so zealously to hinder the Christian's prayer life?
2. How does our wandering attention hinder our prayers?
3. Explain how it is possible to commit sin and yet stay on praying terms with God.
4. Why is it important for us to examine our motives when we petition God for temporal things?
5. Discuss discord in family life as a hindrance to prayer.
6. What does Matthew 5:23,24 teach concerning the necessity of righting the wrongs we have committed against others?
7. Discuss the hindrance to prayer of an unforgiving spirit.
8. How may we guard against all hindrances to our prayer life? What must we do when such hindrances arise?

### PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS (1)

The last two lessons in this series will deal with prayer in the life of Jesus. In a sense, they may be considered the most important lessons in the entire study, for how better can we learn how to pray than by observing the prayer life of Jesus?

The importance and significance of prayer is best exemplified in the life of Jesus, our perfect example. He furnishes the most shining example of the power of prayer. Prayer formed the warp and woof of His daily life. It was the spiritual environment in which He lived, moved and had His being. "Like the diver who goes down to the bottom of the sea, he kept his communication unbroken with the top, and was thereby enabled to live unharmed in the poisonous air of this lower sphere."

There was never a moment of His earthly ministry that He was not in the spirit of prayer. Yet his possession of this constant attitude of prayerfulness did not exalt Him above the need of overt, explicit acts of prayer. It was because the spirit of prayer permeated His whole life that He spent so much time on His knees, pouring out His heart to God. He relied on prayer continually as the means of maintaining communion with the Father and as the expression of His complete dependence on God. If the sinless One Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, our elder brother, relied on prayer for victorious living, how dire is the necessity that we, the younger sons of God, rely on prayer in order to sustain our lives in keeping with the divine will.

In every respect with but one exception Jesus is our example in prayer: He never petitioned God for the forgiveness of sins. He alone of all who have lived on the earth was entirely devoid of sin; hence he had no confession of it to make, and no forgiveness of it to ask. He is portrayed in 1 Peter 2:22,23 as the one "who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, threatened not." 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, "Him who knew no sin . . ." The Hebrew letter depicts Him as "without sin" (4:15), "holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens" (7:26).

Although He did not pray for the forgiveness of sins, He was "made like unto his brethren" (Hebrews 2:17) and was "in all points tempted like as we are" (Hebrews 4:15). Thus He had the same need of the Father's help to keep from sin, to withstand the devil, as we. His God is our God, His Father is our Father; and He used the same means of drawing on the resources of God as all others of the Father's children. Trusting fully in the Father's power to sustain His life, He prayed unceasingly and has given us the perfect example of effectual prayer.

True, Christ prayed for Himself as well as for others, but His prayers were never selfish. Even when He prayed for Himself, which He often

did, He was motivated by the desire to receive divine help to fulfil His mission of ministering to the needs of mankind. In His desire to draw all men to God, He constantly prayed for them. The world which He came to redeem from the bondage of sin lay heavy on His heart, and His prayers on its behalf rose constantly to God.

We cannot doubt that Jesus not only prayed *for* others but also *with* them. As one of the Hebrew community, a son of the law, He must have joined together with His Jewish brethren in ardent prayers to God many times. He must also have prayed often with his disciples. Working and laboring together, they must have spent many precious moments in the fellowship of prayer. It is possible that the disciples joined Jesus in the prayers He uttered as recorded in Luke 9:18; 11:1. When the Lord offered a blessing, or gave thanks, for the bread and the fruit of the vine at the inauguration of the Lord's supper, His disciples must have prayed with Him.

During the first thirty years of His life, called the silent years, Jesus must have prayed often and long; yet no prayers of this period have been recorded. Indeed, of all the many hours He spent in prayer during His personal ministry only a very small part of His prayers have been recorded. But the information we do have concerning His prayer life, given in the New Testament, suffices to plainly show forth the ultimate significance and meaning of righteous prayer. As we briefly study the inspired record, let us carefully note how the prayers of Jesus exemplify the various conditions and aspects of availing prayers, keeping constantly in mind the contribution they can make to our own prayer life. Surely, if we catch the radiant spirit of the Lord's constant communion with God in prayer, we cannot help from greatly improving our prayers, making them more and more meaningful in our lives.

### ***Prayer at His Baptism***

"Now it came to pass, when all the people were baptized, that, Jesus also having been baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily form, as a dove, upon him, and a voice came out of heaven, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21,22). See Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11.

The public ministry of Jesus began with His baptism "to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). It was not merely by chance that on such an auspicious occasion Jesus should pray. His baptism signified the act of supreme self-consecration, of submission to the Father's will. It was the dedication of Himself to the great Messianic mission, the "seeking and saving of the lost" (Luke 19:10). But to successfully complete His mission, he had to depend on the power of God, and so he prayed. His prayer was as significant as His baptism. Without the support and strength of God through prayer, the Lord's act of dedication in baptism would have been futile. Dedication to God in baptism and reliance on His power through prayer inseparably belong together. Prayer without

dedication is as meaningless as dedication without prayer.

The Lord prayed at the beginning of His ministry, and every subsequent undertaking in His earthly life was attended with prayer. Indeed, His last public act was a prayer, as He commended His spirit to the Father. His whole life was saturated with prayer.

The lesson which here especially commends itself to us is that the right way to begin any worthy and significant undertaking is with prayer. When one is baptized into Christ, having His sins washed away in the blood of the Lamb, dedicating himself to God and His righteous will, he begins his ministry as a servant of righteousness, or a disciple of Christ. When should he begin depending on God for a successful and fruitful ministry? As soon as he walks in newness of life! When should he begin praying? Immediately! And in all his subsequent life as a Christian, he must never begin any worthy undertaking without lifting his heart to God in prayer.

### ***Prayer in Solitude***

“And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose up and went out, and departed into a desert place” (Mark 1:35). “But so much the more went abroad the report concerning him: and great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew himself in the deserts, and prayed” (Luke 5:15,16). See also Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46.

Jesus knew supremely well the value of private prayer, of praying in solitude. To secure uninterrupted converse with God, He went apart from His disciples and the crowds that surrounded Him to the solitude of deserted places. His was a busy, exhausting ministry of caring for great throngs. He needed mental and physical rest and the recuperation of His energy after periods of arduous toil. In private prayer, separated from the noise and hubbub of a busy world, He found access to the strength He needed for the tasks and responsibilities that lay before Him.

If our Lord sought through prayer the strength of God for inward renewal in the wear and tear of life, how much more urgent is our need of reliance on God’s strength through prayer. When drained of strength by life’s strains and stresses and when facing the arduous tasks of the future, how much we need to spend uninterrupted periods of quiet, private converse with our Father in prayer.

Jesus also needed strength to resist the temptation to indulge in self-honor, or self-glory. His fame was quickly spreading, great multitudes were hearing His preaching, and His healing ministry was attracting widespread attention. Again the devil would offer Him the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. To make Himself secure from all temptation to follow the path of worldly glory and to turn His success into self-exaltation, Jesus prayed.

How dangerous success can be to the weak, frail disciples of Christ! How easy it is for their vanity to be tickled by fame and popularity! As



someone has said, "The sun of prosperity is more dangerous than the frosts of adversity." When we are tempted to indulge in self-glory, self-exaltation, and self-honor because of the success and prosperity that come our way, we can only overcome such allurements of the devil by relying on God's strength through prayer.

### ***Prayer Before Choosing the Twelve***

"It came to pass in these days, that he went out into the mountain to pray; and he continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12).

The object of this night long prayer is learned from the context. We are told by Luke that after this prayer vigil was over, "when it was day, he called his disciples; and he chose from them twelve, whom also he named apostles" (verse 13). The choosing of the apostles was to be a momentous decision in the life of Jesus, affecting all the future history of mankind. He would not make a decision of such great import without seeking the wisdom and guidance of the Father. And so he prayed all night long. Here we see great persistency and importunity in prayer. The Lord poured out His soul before God in a stream of holy desire until the answer came. He was all prepared as the result of this night of prayer to follow God's will in choosing the men who would form with Him the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20) and who would bear witness concerning Him as the Son of God and Saviour of men.

How often we are confronted with the necessity of making important decisions in our lives. It is fool's play to try to make these decisions all alone, to rely solely on our fallible human judgment and wisdom. Above all, we need to pray persistently and with importunity, seeking the wisdom that is from above so that all the decisions we make will be in accordance with God's will.

### ***Prayer on the Mount of Transfiguration***

"And it came to pass about eight days after these sayings, that he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up into the mountain to pray. And as he was praying the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became white and dazzling" (Luke 9:28,29). See Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8.

The praying of Jesus is the key to the understanding of His transfiguration. It was while the Lord was in close communion with God in prayer that the great change took place which caused His face and garments to shine with majestic splendor. Matthew says, "His face did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as light." This contact through prayer with the glory of heaven made possible the flashing of the divine glory that was within Christ.

Think of what habitual communion with God in prayer will do for us. It will make our souls shine with the brightness of heaven and bring out the best that is in us to the glory of God. G. Campbell Morgan remarked, "Communion with God issues ever in a transfigured life." Ian Maclaren

said, "Prayer and communion with God will imprint a glory on a homely face yet, which, though it be no wise miraculous, does none the less show where the man has been. If we live more habitually in the secret place of the Most High, our faces would oftener seem like those of angels, and a pure and quiet heart would make itself seen there."

### ***Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving***

"At that season Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . ." (Matthew 11:25). See Luke 10:21; John 11:41.

Our Lord was ever mindful of the need of praise and thanksgiving in His prayers to God. In the particular passage quoted here, He praised the Father as the Lord of all creation, and in the same prayer He expressed His profound gratitude for the divine goodness and power which had made possible the revelation of divine truth.

Let our lips also continually praise God in the spirit of adoration and thanksgiving as we recognize His majesty and goodness.

### ***Prayer for Peter***

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:31,32).

Jesus was ever mindful of the individual disciples in His prayers. He did not just pray for mankind en masse, but for the individuals who compose it.

The disciple Peter was in danger of succumbing to temptation that would bring him under the complete power of Satan. But Jesus prayed on his behalf, that his faith would not fail. The word "fail" here implies total extinction. True, the prayer of Jesus did not keep Peter from denying Him at a time of great weakness, but it did keep his faith from becoming totally extinct, or wrecked. So certain was Jesus that His prayer would be answered that, after telling Peter about His supplication for him, He immediately said, "When once thou hast turned again, establish thy brethren."

Jesus is thoroughly aware of the dangers which threaten the faith of all His disciples, and he ever lives to make intercession for them before God so that they may receive all the power they need to keep their faith in Him living and growing. Let us constantly pray to God through Him that our faith and the faith of others will never succumb to the wiles of the devil.

### ***Prayer of Anguish***

"Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name. There came therefore a voice out of heaven, saying, I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:27,28).

This prayer portends the agony of Gethsemane. In its context, Jesus

speaks of being "lifted up from the earth . . . signifying what manner of death he should die" (verse 32,33). Now that the thoughts of His impending death are uppermost in His mind, the humanity in Him shrinks in horror at the suffering and pain before Him, and in prayer He cries out an agonizing question, an inquiry as to the possibility of the cross being lifted from Him, of "the hour" being averted. But immediately this question is put aside, for He knows that His divine mission must have its climax at "the hour" when He is lifted up on the cross. And now the Saviour concludes this brief prayer of anguish by reaffirming His unreserved submission to the divine will: "Father, glorify thy name." The answer is immediately forthcoming from God: "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."

The Saviour has turned to the loving Father in time of trouble and sorrow to receive strength and comfort; and now that God has answered His prayer, the present conflict is over, the dark cloud withdraws itself and the Redeemer is further strengthened to go on to final and complete victory.

"He is our example in prayer; in time of trouble the same blessed source of strength and comfort is open to us. He is our example in submission to the divine will: acquiescence in the Father's will is the true source of inward peace and strength to endure. He is our example, as the divine Son, in desiring the highest good—the divine glory" (W. Frank Scott).

### Questions

1. How important was prayer in the life of Jesus? Discuss the significance of His prayer life as example for us.
2. What is the significance of the prayer Jesus offered at His baptism and the practical lesson we receive from it?
3. Why did Jesus do so much praying in solitude?
4. What was the significance of the Lord's long prayer vigil before the choosing of His apostles? What should be our attitude concerning prayer as we face the necessity of making crucial decisions in our lives?
5. What was the connection between the Lord's praying on the Mount of Transfiguration and the subsequent change made in the appearance of His countenance?
6. How certain was Jesus that His prayer for Peter would be answered?
7. Discuss the Lord's prayer of anguish, recorded in John 12:27,28.

## PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS (2)

### *Prayer for His Disciples*

We now come to the intercessory prayer of Jesus for His disciples, offered immediately following His farewell discourse. This is the longest and most complete prayer of Jesus recorded in the New Testament. You are requested to carefully read all of John 17, the complete record of this prayer, before considering the discussion in this lesson.

Concerning this prayer, Philip Melancthon wrote, "No more noble, no more holy, no more salutary, no more lofty voice has ever been heard in heaven or earth than this very prayer of the Son of God." Martin Luther said, "It is indeed above measure a fervent, heart-felt prayer, in which He revealed and poured out the depth of His heart both toward us and toward His Father. But the power, the character, and the virtue his prayer has in itself I cannot set down sufficiently, I fear. For however plainly and simply it is expressed, it is so deep, so wide, so rich, that no one can sound its depths."

This great prayer consists of three distinct phases, or sections, in which Jesus prayed as follows:

1. *For Himself (verses 1-5)*. In praying for Himself, the Lord actually prayed for others, for only by the completion of His Messianic mission through the power of God could He manifest full authority over men and give to them eternal life.

2. *For His First Disciples, the Apostles (verses 6-19)*. In this phase of prayer, Jesus expressly prayed for His apostles, the disciples who were chosen to bear witness of Him before the world.

Jesus prayed for their *oneness*, or *unity* (verse 11). The important task of bearing fruitful witness concerning the only begotten Son of God, the crucified, resurrected Saviour of men, would demand a united front on the part of all the apostles. The devil would work to create dissension among them. Thus they needed this prayer of the Master on their behalf for power to withstand the devil and to maintain harmony and unity among them.

Jesus prayed for their *protection from evil* (verse 15). This was not a request that His disciples be removed out of the sphere of evil, but that they should be kept from the contamination of evil, that their lives would be morally and spiritually pure. God's power manifested in their lives would protect them from all evil.

Jesus prayed for their *sanctification* (verse 17). To sanctify is not so much to purify from sin as to hallow, or dedicate, or consecrate to the service of God. "In saying, then, 'sanctify them,' Jesus solicits for them a heart entirely devoted to the task they will have to fulfill in the world. Their whole strength, talents, life, must be dedicated to this great task,

the salvation of men, which involves the renunciation of all self-gratification, however lawful, the absence of all self-seeking" (Frederic Godet).

3. *For His Disciples of All Ages* (verses 20-25). In this phase of the prayer, Jesus prayed for every Christian, or disciple, who would ever live, for the church of all the ages: "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word" (verse 20). Jesus prayed not only for the original band of disciples, the apostles, but also for you and for me and for every other Christian of the past, present, and future. This prayer laid before God by the Saviour over nineteen hundred years ago can still be effective for our good if we will only cooperate with God in making it so.

Jesus prayed for our *unity*, that we may all be one in the Godhead even as the Father and Son are one (verses 20-23). This is not a prayer for the unity of the denominational world as such, but for the Lord's church, for those who have been baptized into Christ, who truly believe on Jesus Christ through the apostles' teaching. It is rank hypocrisy for Christians to overlook the shameful and tragic divisions in the body of Christ and only to see in this prayer a condemnation of the religious divisions represented by the denominations. Undeniably, Christ is desirous that all men be one in Him, but this particular prayer for unity is for *us*, those who are actually the Lord's disciples, members of His body, the church.

What are we doing to cooperate with God in making the answer to this prayer possible? We are commanded to "give diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Are we obeying this command? Are we diligently striving in the spirit of brotherliness and mutual forbearance, helpfulness, and love to reach out toward the perfect standard of unity manifested in the relationship of the Father and the Son? The very purpose of the oneness of His disciples for which Jesus prayed is that the world may believe that He was sent of God (verse 21). If the Lord's people were truly united, they could conquer the world for Christ.

Let us unceasingly pray for unity as did Christ. Let us diligently work for unity as did Christ. By so praying and working, we will see a united brotherhood spreading the glad tidings of Christ far and wide.

Jesus prayed that His followers might *behold His glory*. The climax of the Lord's intercessory prayer is expressed in the words, "Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundations of the world" (verse 24). He had already said, "The glory which thou hast given me, I have given them" (verse 22). This refers to the glory of Christ which men receive when they accept Christ as their Saviour and Master. But now the Lord prayed that those converted to Him might see His glory in all its heavenly fulness, that they might be with Him always. This is a prayer for the final gathering of the faithful saints in heaven.

In so praying for our eternal welfare and happiness, Jesus tacitly prayed

for our protection from the contamination of sin and our sanctification for the service of God, as He also prayed for the apostles. See Hebrews 12:14.

Albert Barnes' comment concerning the Lord's great intercessory prayer is a fitting conclusion to this phase of our lesson: ". . . a solemn and most affecting prayer—a prayer at once expressive of the profoundest reverence for God, and the tenderest love for men—simple, grave, tender, sublime, and full of consolation. It is the model for our prayers, and with like reverence, faith, and love we should come before God."

### ***Prayer in Gethsemane***

"And he went forward a little, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt . . . Again a second time he went away, and prayed, saying, My Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done. And he came again and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And he left them again, and went away, and prayed a third time, saying again the same words" (Matthew 26:39,42-44). ". . . and there appeared unto him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:43,44).

The passover supper was ended, the parting hymn was sung, and Jesus went out into the night with His disciples. They came to "the garden of the oil press," Gethsemane. At the entrance Jesus left eight of the disciples, and taking Peter, James, and John with Him, He went into the garden and exclaimed, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." Then he went a short distance farther by Himself and poured out His soul to God in prayer.

It is impossible for our finite minds to comprehend Christ's anguish of soul as He faced the pain and death of Calvary. So great was His agony that the sweat which oozed from His brow "became as it were great drops of blood." And so persistent and importunate was He in seeking the Father's help that He prayed three times, and, as the struggle deepened, the fervency of His prayer reached the highest pitch of intensity. "And being in agony He prayed more earnestly."

The human in Him cringed at the thoughts of the torture, agony, and death which would be His on the cross. Only if He could please the Father would He have rejected the cup of suffering which represented His forthcoming trials and death. Above all else, His desire was to submit Himself completely and fully to the Father's will. "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, *Not as I will, but as thou wilt.*" George Mathewson said, "There was a desire in the depth of his heart which was expressed unconditionally: it was that his human will might be one with the divine will."

The book of Hebrews, referring to this profound experience in the

Lord's prayer life, speaks of Him as our great high priest, "who in the days of his flesh, having offered up prayers and supplication with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and having been heard for his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation" (5:7-9).

Jesus was indeed "heard for his godly fear"—not that "the cup" passed away, but that He received strength to drink it; not that He escaped death, but that through death He was completely submissive to the Father's will and fulfilled the very object of His earthly mission. His prayer was actually a petition for strength to fulfil the divine purpose of His life, to hold to His decision to obey the Father at any cost. So being strengthened by the Father to be obedient unto death, He has become the author of eternal salvation to all who will submit themselves to God's will and purpose concerning them, whatever the cost may be.

"The help he sought and found in prayer may be ours also. We go to dark Gethsemane that we learn of him to pray; and to prevail in prayer. His conflict and his victory are ours; the blessed fruits of his travail are ours."

### ***Prayer on the Cross***

Three separate prayers were offered by the Lord during the ordeal of His crucifixion. Let us briefly consider each one of them.

1. *Prayer for His Enemies.* "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do . . ." (Luke 23:34). This is indeed one of the most magnificent passages in all the Bible. We are deeply moved by the picture it portrays of the dying Saviour, in great agony, requesting forgiveness for His enemies. This prayer reveals the Lord's unlimited love for mankind, a love which includes every human being, both friend and foe. Although Jesus expressly prayed for the soldiers who callously crucified Him and for those of the Jews who had clamored for His death, the very spirit of His prayer embraces also all the sons of men of every age who have been infected by the spiritual leprosy which makes them blind to goodness and insensitive to the suffering and pain of others. As it was the Lord's desire for the deliverance of all men from the guilt of sin through His Messianic mission, so it was also His prayer for them.

We must not see in this prayer a request for forgiveness separate and apart from the faithful submission of sinners to the will of God in accepting Christ as their Saviour. It is unthinkable that Jesus would ever make any request contrary to the divine will. Only penitent, baptized believers, those who surrender their lives to Christ, receive divine forgiveness of their sins.

The answer God gave to the Lord's prayer for the forgiveness of His murderers was in the provisions His providence made to bring them the

message of salvation in Christ. See Acts 2:14-41. And wherever this same message has gone and sinners have truly accepted it, the intercession of Christ for their forgiveness has been answered.

In following the perfect example of our blessed Lord, we too will pray for our enemies, for those who spitefully use us. See Luke 6:28. Some, however, argue that this is not merely difficult but impossible, that it is contrary to human nature. To them, loving one's enemy, wishing him well, doing him good, praying for him, is unnatural. And so it is, but *it is Christian!* It does indeed go against the grain of selfish human nature, but the genuine Christian has "crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof" (Galatians 5:24). He can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20). Yes, praying for one's enemies is contrary to human nature, but it is in harmony with the Christian nature, which is the nature of Christ. It is a most distinctive mark of the Christian, and no one has the right to call himself a loyal follower of Christ who does not pray for his enemies.

2. *Prayer of Inquiry.* "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). This prayer in the form of an inquiry was offered at the very peak of the Lord's suffering, when the forces of His body were almost completely drained and when the chill shock of death was imminent. The depth of meaning contained in this outcry of deep anguish can never be fully fathomed by human intelligence. But whatever meaning can be ascribed to it, we must realize that it shows how fully our Lord took our place, suffering in our stead.

John Wesley said, "Our Lord hereby at once expresses his trust in God, and a most distressing sense of his letting loose the powers of darkness upon him, withdrawing the comfortable discoveries of his presence, and filling his soul with a terrible sense of the wrath due to the sins which he was bearing."

B. W. Johnson observed, "These words can only express the idea that he was treading the winepress alone. As he hung on the cross, 'made sin for us,' he was left to struggle without a sense of the Father's presence. Still the cry, My God, My God! shows that he still clung to the Father as his own."

3. *Prayer Commending His Spirit to God.* "And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said this, he gave up the ghost" (Luke 23:46). Jesus began His earthly ministry in prayer, and now in prayer He ends it. His earthly life has come to an end, the terrible struggle of the cross is over, and our Lord is at perfect peace. The darkness is gone. The Father's face beams its loving approval upon Him, and Jesus finds perfect repose as He commits His spirit into the everlasting hands of God.

From the beginning to the end, the earthly life of Jesus was lived in



the spirit of sincere, fervent, persistent, humble, trusting prayer. As he lived in prayerful submission to the Father's will, so may we! As he lived a prayer saturated, and thus power saturated, life, so may we! As He breathed His last breath in commending His spirit to God through prayer, so may we!

### **Conclusion**

And now as a final word for our consideration, let us seriously and candidly examine the status of our prayer life. Are we praying without ceasing, at every season? Are we praying fervently, sincerely, humbly, trustingly? Are we praying for all men everywhere, for our enemies as well as our friends? Are we praying in confession of our sins, seeking God's forgiveness? Are we praying for our needs, spiritual as well as physical? Are we praying in thanksgiving, praise, and adoration? Are our prayers preceded by lives that strive to follow the footsteps of Jesus? Are we praying alone and with our families and Christian brethren? Are we praying in the Spirit, through Jesus Christ, the way, and the truth, and the life? Are we praying, praying, praying, until time shall vanish in the morning glow of eternity?

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer!  
That calls me from a world of care,  
And bids me at my Father's throne,  
Make all my wants and wishes known.

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer!  
The joy I feel, the bliss I share,  
Of those whose anxious spirits burn  
With strong desire for thy return.

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer!  
Thy wings shall my petition bear  
To Him whose truth and faithfulness  
Engage the waiting soul to bless.

—W. W. WALFORD

### **Questions**

1. In His intercessory prayer, what request did Jesus make for the apostles?
2. What is the connection between the Lord's prayer for the unity of His followers and His statement, "that the world may believe that thou didst send me"?
3. Discuss the content and purpose of the prayer Jesus offered in Gethsemane.
4. Discuss the significance of the Lord's prayer for His enemies as an example for us.
5. Give a summary of the Lord's prayer life.

