

HEART TO HEART TALKS

THE VALUE OF PRAYER

PRAYER is the Christian's native breath, the Christian's native air. Prayer is the earnest longing of the heart after God. It may be uttered or unexpressed. It brings the believer into communion with his Maker. He talks with God as he talks with an earthly friend. And as he listens attentively for reply, there comes sweet assurance of divine acceptance and divine guidance. The period of devotion may thus become the sweetest of all association—more precious than fellowship with the closest friend or relative.

When should prayer be offered? David, the king of Israel, declared, "Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." Psalm 55:17. Daniel, the prime minister of Medo-Persia "Kneeling upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God." Daniel 6: 10. And this he did under most trying circumstances, when by this very act he brought danger of death upon himself for his devotion.

I believe it is well to have stated periods for prayer, and three times a day is none too often for us to seek special help and wisdom from our Lord and Master. But while we may have stated times of prayer, we are to cherish the spirit of prayer continually. And to this we are exhorted by the apostle Paul, "Pray without ceasing." 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

And Christ the Lord declares that "men ought always to pray, and not to faint." Luke 18:1. It is not possible for us to be always on our knees in prayer to God. But it is possible for us so to sense our dependence upon divine power and wisdom that our minds will instinctively turn to the Lord for divine guidance in the accomplishment of every task. We should cherish the spirit of constant devotion.

Places of Prayer

It is well to have special places of prayer. These places will become hallowed spots. And they do not need to be lordly palaces in which we shall hold audience with the King of kings. He humbles Himself to meet with us in the lowliest places of earth. Under some spreading tree in the forest, in our private room—these simple places may be transformed into an audience chamber of the great King. The Holy Spirit broods over the place. We feel that we stand on holy ground.

Some years ago I visited the humble home of one of our brethren in Germany. In his home he had chosen a corner where he daily knelt before God for His blessings. God seemed nearer in this corner than in any other place in the house. But we may find an altar of prayer wherever circumstances may place us. As we walk the streets, as we sit at our desk, as we do our housework, as we plow in the field, we may hold communion with our blessed Master. We may stand on the street corner in the midst of the milling multitude, absorbed as they are in worldly pursuits, and there hold communion with Heaven. What a precious privilege is ours. We may find a direct line of communication with the throne of grace. And under such circumstances God will hear our cry as truly as when we pray in some place of solitude.

Family and Public Prayer

There is afforded us at the family altar a great opportunity to place before our Savior not alone our own personal needs but the needs of our loved ones. Unfortunately, in many homes the family altar has been broken down. There is great need today that it be revived from the dust. As parents, we need to gather our children around us and present them before God as an offering to Him and to His service. And the influence of family worship will go with our children through their lives.

How many times in my own experience have I benefited by the prayers of a godly mother. (My father was not a believer until shortly before his death.) Daily she sought God for His divine benediction to rest upon each of her nine children. My room was directly over hers. Many times I heard her praying in the still hours of the night. Sometimes my childish curiosity led me to rise from my bed and listen through a crack in the floor of my room. One by one she went over the names of her children, praying that they might be led to give their hearts to Christ, that they might develop into earnest Christians. These prayers melted my heart and affected my afterlife. God granted her petition, and every one of her children found in Christ, their mother's Friend, a Savior. Let us not neglect the family altar. If it has been broken down, let us restore it. Let us come to it daily with our offerings of praise and devotion, and our petition for guidance and power for Christian living.

A great privilege is afforded us in uniting with our friends and neighbors in more public prayer. This may be at the weekly prayer meeting of the church. It may be in a more restricted circle, where we unite with others for the attainment of some mutual objective. It may be for the restoration and life of some one who is ill. It may be in behalf of our missionaries who are laboring under trying circumstances in

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foreign lands. Praying before others may entail a cross because of personal embarrassment, but with persistence this will soon pass away. As we obtain help in hearing others pray, so there will be help for others in our prayers. The prayers may be feebly expressed. We may not know how to pray as we ought, but God understands. "Likewise the Spirit also helped our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. And he that searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Romans 8:26, 27. By the aid of the Holy Spirit our broken utterances are taken and presented in an acceptable manner before the great Ruler of the universe.

The objects of our prayer may be as numerous as our life interests, as our burdens of heart. We may pray for our friends and for our enemies. We may pray for our ministers, our Bible instructors, our colporteurs, our institutional workers. We may pray for our own personal needs, spiritually and temporally. There is nothing too small to bring to the attention of our heavenly Friend.

If the Lord heard prayer only in great trials, some would feel little need for His help. Personally, I have had few great trials in my life, but I have had a great multitude of small trials. And one of the most comforting things in my Christian experience is to believe that God takes account of the little things, and that He is interested in the little experiences that come into my life, because He loves me, the same as I am interested in all the little experiences of my children, because I love them.

Sad it would be, indeed, if in our devotions to God we made petition to Him continually for life's blessings and never remembered to praise Him for what He has done. Praise should precede our petition. Declared the apostle Paul: "The goodness of God leads thee to repentance. " Do we sometimes feel cold and indifferent in our religious experience? If we do, it is well for us to sit down and contemplate the goodness of the Lord. Let us think of all that Christ has done for us, realizing that the life we now live and our hope for the life to come is ours through His mercy and grace; that the food we have to eat, our clothing, our homes, the association of friends, everything we have and possess, comes not because we deserve it, but in spite of our unworthiness. I say, let us consider these things, and our hearts will overflow with new love for the One who has done so much for us.

My parents were stern disciplinarians, and sometimes in my older boyhood days I was inclined to feel that they were hard and unkind; but when I considered the many evidences of their love showered upon me daily, I recognized that they had disciplined me in love, even though I could not then understand its full value. Even so, as we contemplate God's goodness to us, we shall understand by faith that even life's trials and difficulties are experiences for which we may be thankful.

The Lord bestows many blessings upon mankind unconditionally. He sends His rain upon the just and upon the unjust. He does not, apparently, place in this world a premium upon righteousness. If He did, men would be led to serve Him outwardly for the sake of temporal gain. We cannot always discern between the righteous and the wicked, but there will come a time when this will be most evident. In the day of final accounts, when Christ makes up His jewels, when He separates between those who know Him and those who know Him not, "then shall you return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that served God and him that served him not." Malachi 3:18.

And so, let us not be tempted to say that "it is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?" Sometime we shall see that God places a just estimate upon character, that He looks upon the heart, and not alone upon the outward life, and that those who faithfully obey Him will be rewarded by Him in the end. And although the Lord bestows upon saint and sinner in this world many general blessings, He has promised special blessings to His children upon certain conditions. Some of the principal conditions we may profitably enumerate.

No formal request on our part will open to us the storehouse of spiritual blessings. We must have a living sense of our own great need. And in response to this we have this gracious promise: "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon your offspring." Isaiah 44:3.

The Exercise of Faith

"Therefore I say unto you, What things so ever you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them." Mark 11:24.

The very fact that we come to the Lord in prayer shows some measure of faith on our part. And yet we must recognize that we have sought the Lord many times in a formal and perfunctory manner, without really expressing the utmost desires of our hearts. We have prayed from a sense of duty. And prayers under

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these circumstances are attended by but little living, vital faith.

It is our privilege to believe that if our prayers are in harmony with the will of God, He will grant our requests, not because of our worthiness, but in spite of our unworthiness because of our great need, and above all, because of His love for us. He who gave His only-begotten Son to die for us when we were lost in sin and rebellion, will, in His kindness and compassion, bestow upon us every needed requirement.

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” Romans 8:32. Let us not only ask, but let us also believe.

The Exercise of Forgiveness

“When you stand praying, forgive, if you have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” Mark 11:25, 26.

We are reminded of this divine admonition every time we utter the Lord’s prayer. When we pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” we are virtually asking God to treat us the same as we treat our fellow men. And why should He not do this? Why should He not mete to us the same measure which we give to others? It certainly would be just.

Reconciled to Others

In seeking reconciliation with God by the confession of sin, we must seek reconciliation with our fellow men. If we bring to God our gift of praise and of prayer, and remember that we have wronged our brother, the consciousness of that wrong will destroy our peace of mind and shut out the blessing of God. Referring to this, the Master says:

“If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remembered that thy brother hath ought 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.” Matthew 5:23, 24.

We cannot excuse ourselves from making our sin right on the grounds that our brother has wronged us. If he has committed twenty sins to our one, we are to go to him as though we were the chief sinner. God does not hold us responsible for making the sins of our brother right, but He does hold us responsible for making our sins right, and only as we do this can we confidently expect an answer to the petition which we present before Him.

Forsaking Iniquity

“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.” Psalm 66:18. God does not bless us in order that we may consume it upon our lusts, in order that we may carry out some selfish purpose. He blesses us for our own highest good. He blesses us that the blessing may redound in the end to His glory. Let us be sure that as we come to the Lord, no selfish consideration prompts our requests. Let us be sure that we are not living in sin, that just as far as is humanly possible through the grace which Christ imparts, we have put every sin out of our lives.

Keeping God’s Commandments

“Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.” 1 John 3:22. By no works of our own can we gain the righteousness of Christ. “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:8-10. Christ in us will do the works of Christ. “He that said he abides in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” 1 John 2:6.

The evidence of our fellowship with the Lord will be seen in our love for and obedience to His righteous requirements. And only as we come to the Lord with a consciousness of renunciation of sin on our part can we take hold of His promises with faith. If we are conscious of living in sin when we come to God for help, the sin of which we are daily guilty will rise up before us like a great mountain and shut out God from our vision. It is to this the apostle John refers when he says, “Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.” 1 John 3:21, 22. How greatly this emphasizes the need of our parting company with sin, of our not regarding iniquity in our hearts.

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The Habit of Prayer

One Christian writer has said that when it becomes the habit of the soul to commune with God, the power of the evil one will be broken. The habits of life are made up of a long series of acts or words of the same character. A habit becomes a part of our life. We perform it unconsciously. Several years ago I changed my office room. I had gone to the old room day after day for a number of years; so even after I changed my room I found myself unconsciously turning in that direction, and sometimes I would stand before the door of the old room before I was aware of my mistake.

When one forms the habit of prayer, in every hour of need he unconsciously turns to God. He does not have to stop and reason, Now I'll go and pray; but as he faces danger, as he senses his need, his thoughts instinctively turn to the Lord for help. It is in this way that he prays without ceasing. We need to pray much in order to form in our lives the habit of prayer. We need to exercise persistence in all our Christian experience—persistence in the study of the Word of God, persistence in well-doing. And we need to exercise this same persistence in prayer to God. If the answer to our requests does not come at once, we are to pray on. If the light does not break through, and we fail to see clearly the leading of the Lord, we are to pray on. We are to pray on and pray through. Pray through the darkness; pray until light breaks.

Persistent Prayer

Why does the Lord apparently turn aside the first petition addressed to Him, but respond to persistent pleading? Is it because He failed to hear us at first? Was He indifferent? Did He need to have His interest in our behalf awakened? No indeed. God's ear is ever attentive to the cry of His children. Sometimes, in His great wisdom, He delays the answer in order to enlarge our vision and increase our faith. Then, too, in answering prayer, the Lord often works through means and agencies. Perhaps as soon as our prayers ascend to Him, He sets in operation means whereby these prayers can be answered.

We have a beautiful illustration of this in the experience of the prodigal son. He left his home and went into the world. He spent all his money in revelry and excesses. During all this time his heartbroken father was praying for his return. But it was not until the prodigal was brought into dire distress that his heart turned back again to the home of his childhood. When he was reduced to penury and lacked for bread, he remembered that in his father's house there was an abundance and to spare, and so he resolved that he would return and seek his father's forgiveness. In the end the Lord answered the persistent prayers of the father.

And this is an encouragement to you, dear parents, today. Have you a child who has wandered from the home fold, who has forgotten you, who is lost in the pleasures of sin? And are you crying out to God for his return? Do not become discouraged. The Lord may have already set His hand to bring about the recovery. He may be permitting that child to go through experiences that will lead him to see the foolishness of sin, the result of following his own ways. It may be that thus his heart will be turned back again to the God of his parents.

Believing While Waiting

The book of Psalms is one of the most wonderful books in the Divine Record. In its study the human mind finds an answer to almost every mood that possesses it. Are we cast down and discouraged? The psalmist passed through this experience. Are we beset round about by enemies who are speaking evil of us? David knew of this experience.

Are we joyful and triumphant in God? We can find the psalmist, in his experience, rising to the very height of joy and rejoicing. But he did not always obtain a speedy answer to his prayer. We have in the twenty-seventh psalm this statement:

I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." He did not always see all he desired. But that which kept him from fainting and discouragement was the faith that he would see that goodness in the end. And with this faith he continues, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."

And so I would say to every discouraged soul who may read these words, If you do not yet see a fulfillment of your desires, if your earnest petition to God remains unanswered, "wait on the Lord: be of good courage." Pray on and believe on. God, in His own time, will answer your request if in His great wisdom it be for your highest good.