

Know Your Bible

09. PRAYER AND YOUR PROBLEMS

NO privilege granted to man is of greater meaning than prayer. Those who have entered into the realm of communion with God have found it the source of spiritual life and vitality. It is in prayer that the

Know Your Bible

spirit of man finds anchorage and stability. A failure to explore the potentialities of prayer results in a shrinkage of spiritual life.

The benefits and blessings of prayer may be received without understanding all its mysteries. Many have failed to pray because of intellectual problems that arise in the realm of prayer. These have thought that all questions relating to prayer should be answered before praying is begun. Such persons seldom enter into a meaningful prayer experience. Prayer is more an exercise of the heart than of the mind. It would be unwise for us to refuse the blessings of electricity simply because we do not have a clear understanding of the scientific principles underlying its use. It is just as unreasonable for us to refuse acceptance of the blessings of prayer when certain mysteries concerning it remain unanswered. Reasons of the heart can be ultimately more convincing than the evidences of reason.

It should be said that prayer defies definition. It is as indefinable as life itself. This fact, however, should not discourage us, because the highest realities always rise above the competence of the human mind. Men have unnecessarily obstructed their spiritual vision because of a false concept of the mind's capacity.

While prayer cannot be defined, it can be illustrated. Manifold illustrations amplify and clarify the meaning of prayer. They let in streams of light which show its beauties in clear outline. Prayer is the opening of the heart's door to the influence of God's promptings. It is allowing the Spirit to come in. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me." Revelation 3:20. To pray is to allow oneself to be found by God. When one is willing to be found by God, he is less allured by the low persuasions of the flesh. God is always willing to bring blessings to His children. He does not need to be made willing. Prayer is taking hold of God's willingness to help those who are willing to receive help.

In a real sense the best prayer that we can offer to God is our own helplessness. An infant appeals most successfully to its mother because of its need. The helplessness itself is the prayer. A recognition of our inability to help ourselves is the river bottom down which God can send high tides of blessing. Abraham Lincoln said: "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day." Effective praying is human weakness casting itself upon divine strength.

Spiritual discernment and sensitiveness are impossible without prayer. What the optic nerve is to the eye, prayer is to the Christian life. Our spiritual vision is dimmed because our prayer life is barren. A Christian without prayer is like a human skeleton without flesh and blood and muscle. Prayer provides a spiritual telescope through which we can look into the depth of spiritual realities.

It is through prayer alone that we can enter into the will and purpose of God.

A sixteenth-century mystic has said, "Prayer is not to ask what we wish of God, but what God wishes of us." Too often we pray in a way which would lead men to believe that God was under obligation to obey us. Genuine prayer would ask what God wishes of us. Prayer in the highest sense desires to find the will and guidance of God for human experience. Our capacity for discernment is meager and limited. Tennyson has said: "Prayer is like opening a sluice between the great ocean and our little channels, when the sea gathers itself together and flows in at full tide."

Prayer is a sure refuge for a distressed spirit. It is this refuge that is so clearly illustrated by the psalmist: "My soul, wait you only upon God; for my expectation is from Him. He only is my Rock and my salvation: He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory: the Rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. Trust in Him at all times; you people, pour out your heart before Him: God is a refuge for us." Psalm 62:5-8.

Often we hear the question, "Must I agonize in prayer to receive what I need?" Many have the concept that prayer is a struggle with God to make Him ready to release what we so greatly need. This is truly a parody on God's character. Praying is not a battle to make God willing. Phillips Brooks has truly said: "Prayer is not conquering God's reluctance, but taking hold of God's willingness." The willingness of God is clearly shown by the words of Jesus: "For everyone that asks receives; and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" Luke 11: 10-13.

Too many have exploded themselves toward God in prayer by physical strain and internal compulsion. The moon cannot reflect on a restless sea, nor is it possible for God to reflect His peace upon a strained and restless mind and body. Receptivity is a state of relaxation and trust. "He makes me to lie

Know Your Bible

down in green pastures: He leads me beside the still waters.” Psalm 23:2. “Be still, and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10. “Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.” Philippians 4:6.

A well-known Christian writer has written: “O how many lose the richest blessings that God has in store for them in health and spiritual endowments! There are many souls who wrestle for special victories and special blessings that they may do some great thing. To this end they are always feeling that they must make an agonizing struggle in prayer and tears.... All the agonizing, all the tears and struggles, will not bring them the blessing they long for. Self must be entirely surrendered. They must do the work that presents itself, appropriating the abundance of the grace of God which is promised to all who ask in faith.”

Jacob had the mistaken idea that God’s blessing was available through human struggle. God found it necessary to incapacitate Jacob physically before Jacob could learn that it was the loving Savior who bears every sincere prayer offered in faith not human effort but human surrender that brought God’s blessings. By surrender Jacob gained what it was impossible for him to gain by conflict and struggle. Jacob was not blessed because of his struggle. He was blessed when he gave up the struggle and gave himself fully in submission to God. Human struggles are the result of an unwillingness to surrender fully to God’s grace. The struggle is always with ourselves, never with God, who has long been willing to give us what we need.

Often Christians who have prayed for many years say that they have had no tangible omen of an external nature by which they may have assurance of acceptance with God. These have prayed earnestly and long for outward evidence. Often a sign is not given and the person desponds and weakens in his prayer life. Often such Christians have been faced with decisions. They say: “If only God would give an external answer to show what should be done.” They have prayed for signs, but usually nothing happens. “Gideon received answers,” they say. “Why does not God give me a sign by which I may know His will?”

Jesus had much to say concerning those who sought external, outward evidence. His usual message is one of rebuke for those who seek signs. “A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign.” Matthew 16:4. To Thomas, who sought a physical verification, Jesus said: “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” John 20:29.

God desires to bring conviction from within and not from without.

True prayer is “God make me” not “God give me.” Too many of us wish God to answer prayers apart from life rather than in life. If God does not give outward signs, it is that He wishes us to develop maturity to make intelligent decisions by a realistic appraisal of facts rather than by an external sign. Often our prayers are selfish. They revolve around our own wants and needs. A basic reason for unanswered prayers is given by the apostle James, who says: “You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts.” James 4:3.

The best prayers are usually prayers in which self is completely forgotten.

Too many of us want God to do things for us instead of with us. We desire external answers to prayer instead of inward answers. The continual manifestation of external guidance by the way of signs would weaken the moral character and not strengthen it. A good parent desires that a child learn to make his own decisions from within. An external stop and go signal would inhibit all moral and spiritual development. Paul says: “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13. Christ therefore desires to make individuals inwardly strong by His presence, so that they may move from heart motivation instead of external coercion. Wisdom is to be given from within and not from without. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that gives to all men liberally, and upbraids not; and it shall be given him.” James 1:5.

Gideon’s asking for signs was not an evidence of faith but of hesitation to believe. Gideon himself realized his false procedure when he said: “Let not Your anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me prove, I pray Thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.” Judges 6:39, 40. The giving of signs was a concession to Gideon’s lack of faith rather than an evidence of his faith. God often makes such concessions because of our spiritual immaturity, but His desire is that we may develop strength to make intelligent decisions from within through His indwelling.

This type of praying is known as intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is unselfish prayer. Our egocentricity in prayer is recognized by the prophet Isaiah: “And he saw that there was no man, and he wondered that there was no intercessor.” Isaiah 59:16. The Lord’s Prayer is a model for unselfish praying. Here there is no self-centered praying. “Our Father,” “our daily bread,” “our debts,” “our debtors,” show the true way in unselfish prayer.

Know Your Bible

The basis, for intercessory prayer rests in our social dependence. "For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself." Romans 14:7. An old Latin proverb says: "One man is no man at all." No man is the whole of himself; his friends are a part of him. William Law has truly said: "Intercession is the best arbitrator of all differences, the best promoter of true friendship, the best cure and preservative against all unkind tempers, and all angry and haughty passions!"

It is true that God often rests our neighbor's good on our prayers. Their good rests on our toil and thoughtfulness; why, therefore, should it be thought strange that their good should rest on our prayers? Our self-centeredness is the cause of a lack of intercessory prayer. Intercessions are the result of generous devotion. It is difficult to intercede unless we love.

Great men of prayer have been great intercessors. The apostle Paul said: "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Romans 9:3. Moses prayed: "Yet now, if You wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which You hast written." Exodus 32:32. John Knox pleaded: "Give me Scotland, or I die." Martin Luther on one occasion said, "I feel as if I were being prayed for." The greater the spiritual stature of the person, the more unselfish his prayers will be. Jesus is the greatest intercessor in our behalf. Concerning Peter's coming struggle, Jesus said: "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not." Luke 22:32. "He ever lives to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:25. Samuel considered it sin not to pray for others. To King Saul he said: "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you." 1 Samuel 12:23.

Prayer is the avenue of approach to God. When we depend upon human organization, we derive the benefits of organization; when we depend upon intellectual discipline and education, we get what these can do; when we depend upon prayer in conjunction with organization and intellectual discipline, we get what God can do.