

Importance of Prayer

If we are not convinced of the importance of prayer we shall obviously not give much attention to it. The more we are convinced of its importance the more we shall be serious about it. We must surely see its importance when we consider:

The Example of Jesus

The Bible is full of fascinating people from whom we can learn much, but obviously the most important figure in the entire Bible is the Son of God Himself. He is our supreme example. He is of course much more than our example. He is our Saviour. We do not subscribe to the idea that Jesus came merely to show us how to live. We believe passionately that He came to die for our sins, to be our substitute on the cross and to ransom His people by the shedding of His blood. We do not consider that to be a point for debate: it is settled. However we do recognize that our Lord and Saviour is our example. He is our pattern, and we are called upon to pattern our lives on His.

If you want to learn how to live so that you please God you must study the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now when you do that you will discover that the Lord Jesus Himself was clearly a man of prayer. Jesus prayed. Notice these occasions in the Gospel of Luke when the prayer life of Jesus is brought into focus:

Luke 5:16 "And He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed".

Luke 6:12 "And it came to pass in those days that He went out into the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God".

Luke 9:28 "And it came to pass about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray."

Luke 11:1 "And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place..."

Luke 22:41 "And He withdrew from them about a stones throw, and He knelt down and prayed."

Clearly these verses indicate that prayer was a very central and crucial part of the life of Jesus. If we claim to have Jesus Christ as our example then prayer must have a real place in our life.

Now let us add to the example of Jesus.

The Teaching of Jesus

Two passages in this same Gospel of Luke will demonstrate to us that Jesus taught His disciples the importance of prayer. Look again at the 11th chapter. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray He responded by giving them what has become known as the "Lord's Prayer". We have this recorded in Luke 11:2-4. This was given to them as a model prayer. It was not intended to be repeated in a mechanical rote fashion with scarcely any thought given to the words being repeated. There is nothing wrong with Christians praying these exact words of course, and often it is helpful to do so; but we must beware of merely repeating the words without feeling or meaning. The account in Matt.6:9 puts it more clearly for us - "In this manner therefore pray". In other words Jesus is saying "pray like this; here is a pattern for prayers"; and it most certainly is just that.

Now back in Luke chapter 11, after he gives them this model prayer He then tells them the parable of the friend who came to borrow loaves at midnight. The whole purpose of that

parable is to teach the disciples to pray, and to teach them to pray earnestly and with great desire. He concludes the parable with the words, "And I say to you ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you".

Again in this Gospel of Luke, in chapter 18:1 we have this statement, "And He spoke a parable to them to this end, that men always ought to pray, and not lose heart". Then He tells them the parable of the Unjust Judge, and in this parable as in that of chapter 11 He is teaching them to pray, and to pray with tenacity, to keep on praying. You could hardly have stronger teaching as to the importance of prayer than these two parables by the Lord Jesus Christ. Both by example and by teaching Jesus shows us that prayer is important.

Our conviction as to the importance of prayer may be deepened as we also consider:

The Example of Paul

This great apostle, truly following in the footsteps of His Master demonstrates by His life that prayer is indeed crucial to the Christian. His letters give us moving and inspiring examples of prayer for other Christians. Listen to him as he prays for the believers at Ephesus:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power... (Eph. 1:1 5-19)

Or again listen to him as he prays for the Philippian Christians:

And this I pray that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and in all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.(Phil.1 :9-11)

If you read Paul's letters in the New Testament you will find in many of them such prayers; fervent, beautiful, mighty, reflecting the apostle's conviction that it was vital that intercession be made for the people of God. The inspired apostle, like His Lord, was a man of prayer.

However, it is interesting to note that Paul's conviction as to the importance to prayer is not only revealed by the fact that he prayed for others, but also by the fact that he begged others to pray for him. For instance to the Colossians he writes; "continue in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us that God would open to us a door for the word..." (Col.4:2,3). To the Thessalonians he writes, "brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in your prayers to God for me"(Rom.15:30).

Paul knew that prayer was essential; he needed to pray and he needed others to pray for him. Both the example and the requests of Paul underline what Jesus has already set out before us - the importance of prayer.

Other Great Men of Prayer

The fact is that the greatest of the servants of God were all men of prayer. The Bible records specifically that they did pray, and in some cases records their prayers for us. For instance in Gen. 18:22,23 we read "but Abraham stood yet before the Lord, and Abraham drew near and said.." The rest of the chapter is taken up with Abraham's remarkable intercession, his prayer that God might spare Sodom, because Abraham was concerned about his nephew Lot. Exodus 32:10-13 records a wonderful example of the prayers of Moses as he intercedes for the rebellious nation of Israel. It is a prayer of passion and boldness. In 1 Samuel 12, though we do not have an example of Samuel's prayer, we do find the people begging him to pray for them. It is clear that Samuel must have been known to them as a man of prayer. Samuel's comment in the chapter is interesting - "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you". Obviously to this man of God prayer was of such importance, and such a necessary duty that he considered it sinful not to pray for these people.

Now let us add final confirmation to our conviction concerning the importance of prayer, by noting that God conditions the giving of His blessing upon the offering of prayer.

Prayer - The Condition of Blessing

Prayer consists in more than just making request, but it is significant that God does make the bestowment of His blessing conditional upon the offering of prayer. It is not always that way. God is sovereign, and is therefore free to work any way He chooses, However the normal way of operating is that He grants His blessings to those who seek them in prayer. Take for example the text which is a favourite of many, 2 Chron.7:14

"If my people which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land".

Here are people envisaged as being in great need; but the blessing which they need is only given if they pray. We will of course note that other duties are also laid upon them, but our focus at this point is upon the need of prayer. We see the same principle in the words of Jer.33:3

"Call unto me and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not".

You see the connection - you call, and I will answer. I will show you great and mighty things, but you must ask for them.

Perhaps one of the most glorious passages in the Old Testament is the latter part of Ezekiel 36. Here God gives wonderful promises about giving a new heart and a new spirit to the people. He emphasizes the blessings which He will bestow; the focus is upon what God will do, and yet he ends the chapter by saying "I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them"(v.37). In other words God says "does this all sound good to you? Is this what you want? Very well then ask for it, seek me concerning this, make it a matter of prayer; you call and I will answer.

We have already seen how Jesus links these things together in the N.T. "ask and ye shall receive...." Do we wish to receive from God? Then we must ask of God. You see God has ordained that He will work in answer to the prayers of His people. It is not that He could not work without them. I have already said that God is sovereign and can work when and how He

Prayer

William Payne

wants. The fact is that God has been pleased to ordain that it shall be this way; that He will work in answer to prayer; his blessings will be given in answer to prayer. God's people will suffer if they do not pray. Prayer is essential for our spiritual well-being. The uniform testimony of the entire Bible is that prayer is of supreme importance.

What is Prayer?

In the last issue we spoke about the importance of prayer. Now we ask the question "what is prayer"? Many answers have been given to that question; in fact it is difficult to answer that question in one sentence or expression. One attempted definition put it this way: "prayer is the outgoing of the heart towards the Heavenly Father in unclouded faith". Now that definition reminds us that for true prayer to be offered the heart must be involved. Prayer is not merely a matter of saying words. John Burton expressed this beautifully in the words of the hymn:

I often say my prayers,
But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart
Go with the words I say?

I may as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,
As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.

For words without the heart
The Lord will never hear;
Nor will he to those lips attend
Whose prayers are not sincere.

Lord teach me what I need
And teach me how to pray;
And do not let me seek thy grace
Not meaning what I say.

Now that is a very searching and profound piece of poetry.

Merely saying words - even though they be very religious words, very true words, very beautiful words - is not prayer. For prayer to be true prayer there must be the engagement of the heart. Our expression of our hearts towards God.

This definition also reminds us that prayer is addressed to the Father. "The outgoing of the heart toward the Heavenly Father". When Jesus gave his model prayer it began "Our Father". When Jesus Himself offered prayer as recorded in John 17, he addressed it to the Father. When the disciples prayed in the hour of persecution they directed their prayer to the Father - "Lord, you are God...(Acts 4:24). In Acts 4:27 they say "for truly against your holy servant Jesus you anointed... ". So that they are clearly addressing the Father as distinct from the Son.

Now some people make a big issue about not praying to the Son or the Holy Spirit; they say this should never be done and that it is quite reprehensible. It could be demonstrated that we have Biblical warrant for addressing both the Son and the Holy Spirit in prayer. But it is true that the usual way of praying, taking the scriptures as our guide, is to address our prayers to the Father. In Matthew 6:6 Jesus instructs us, "when you pray, go into your room... pray to your Father ..."

However, though we pray to the Father, we must always pray to the Father through the Son. In prayer we come to God through Jesus Christ; in the name of Jesus Christ. It is important that we recognize this and believe this, that we have no possibility of an audience with God except it be through His Son, the Lord Jesus. "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim.2:5). A mediator is the one who brings two parties together; he is the one through whom one party approaches another. So that when sinful men and women approach the God of majesty and glory we must come through the mediator He has appointed. That mediator is Jesus Christ, and Him alone. This is the significance of such statements as:

Whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you.

Therefore brethren having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...(Heb. 10:19)

It is by the blood of Jesus; it is in His name that we come to the Father. We must not be presumptuous in our approach to God; we must not think that it is a light thing to approach Him; we must not think that we have a right to approach Him in our own name, in our own worthiness. We come to the Father through the Son, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Also, we come by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. In Zechariah 12.10 we come across the lovely title "the Spirit of grace and supplication". That is the Holy Spirit. He is the one who moves us to pray aright; he is the one who enables us to come. Paul spoke of "praying in the Spirit". He didn't mean in some mysterious emotional frenzy; he meant by the enabling of the Spirit of God. When you get on your knees, or you bow your head to pray it is a good thing to immediately ask God to help you to pray in the Spirit; that He would give you the grace of the Spirit to help you pray aright and to pray with liberty and freedom. Then proceed, trusting in His mercy to hear that prayer.

So prayer is the outgoing of the heart to the Heavenly Father. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by or in the Spirit. That is the way we approach God. That is the way he has ordained that it must be.

Now when we come in this way, what should the content of our prayer be? What is prayer? If you look at 1 Tim.2:1 you will notice that there are different aspects of prayer. It may not be wise to press the distinctions too finely and compartmentalize these words too rigidly; but they do indicate that there are different aspects. Paul speaks about "supplications" "prayers", "intercessions" and "giving of thanks". I am not going to use these actual words to discuss the content of prayer but I will cover pretty well what these words convey.

Adoration

Prayer involves adoration. That means that in prayer we should praise God for what He is. All too often we rush into the presence of God with our personal requests, full of ourselves and our own needs, when before anything else we ought to set our focus on God and let our minds lay hold on His greatness and glory. Jesus began His model prayer "Our Father which art in heaven". Immediately He directs our minds to God in His glory, and that is the way it ought to be. Remind yourself as you come in prayer that you come to the Sovereign Creator; you come to One who rules the world; you come to One who inhabits eternity. He is the One before whom angels veil their faces; He is the God of infinite splendour and glory. Praise Him for this. He is the God of grace and truth; He is the God who sets His love upon unworthy sinners and

brings them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Praise him for this. Adore the Lord for all that He is, and for all that He has done.

In prayer let something of His greatness get through to you. One of our problems is that we are usually in such a rush. This is often tragic. I think this is one of the reasons why, by and large, Christians are such spiritual pygmies compared with our forefathers. They took time to know God, to contemplate His glory and to learn of His greatness; we are usually in such a rush. We have lost the concept of waiting upon God. Seldom do we listen to the words of God through the psalmist, "be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46 :10). Do not be rushed in your private prayers; take time to adore; take time to let the sense of God's greatness seep into your soul and soak into your mind. This is one of the ways in which prayer can be such a blessing to God's people. Such adoration of God in prayer, when our minds are set on Him and we are contemplating His glory and greatness, results in the Christian being established and strengthened. In times of crisis it is the person who has become truly acquainted with his or her God through prayer who is stable and able to survive. Adoration is a vital aspect of prayer, when you render that honour and praise to God which rightly belongs to Him.

Confession of Sin

The aspect of prayer referred to above will inevitably lead to another and that is the confession of sin. The more clear our spiritual sight of God, the more acute will be our sense of sinfulness; and in prayer we are to confess our sins to God. Now there are many prayers recorded in the Bible which could illustrate all these aspects of prayer for us, but in my view there is scarcely a greater prayer in all the Bible than the one recorded in Daniel 9. Be sure to read it through carefully and slowly. You will notice that it begins "and I prayed to the Lord My God and made confession" ...v.4.

This is truly one of the most moving prayers in the Bible, and Daniel sets before us this example of the importance and the place of confession of sin. Sin mars the fellowship between a Christian and God; and when we have done wrong and we try to justify it, we try to excuse ourselves before God, then we hinder fellowship with God. If we have sin that we refuse to acknowledge before God then he has a controversy with us. David said "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" (Ps.66:18)

Of course this involves a humbling of ourselves before God, and the pride of our heart fights against that; but the Bible tells us that God gives grace to the humble and He resists the proud. Humility is exactly the spirit in which we should come to God. Let us not hide our sins, for the scripture says "he who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy" (Prov.28:13). When you pray, confess your sins before God; seek cleansing of His blood and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Thanksgiving

Then of course there is the element of thanksgiving. I am not thinking now of what was said under adoration, praising God for what He is and what He had done, but I am thinking of thanking God for all his blessings, both spiritual and temporal. I am sure that you have sung that hymn which says "count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done". How true that is. But is it not also true that we are very prone to complain, and we ought to be ashamed when we do so for we have been blessed beyond measure. Let me quote from another hymn, this time written by William Cowper:

Have you no words? Ah, think again,
Words flow apace when you complain,
And fill your fellow creature's ear
With sad tale of all your care.

Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,
Your cheerful song would oftener be,
Hear what the Lord hath done for me!

Some years ago the Readers Digest carried a moving story about a woman who had been blind for many years and who had her sight restored by an operation. It was a touching story, and at the end of it the woman said that when she is among people now and hears them complaining about their life, she has a great longing to say to them "but you can see, you can see!" She appreciates what a blessing that is. We often take so many blessings for granted. To have a healthy body; to be able simply to walk and talk, to hear and see; to have a sound mind that can reason and converse with others - what blessing these are! To have so much in the way of provision, food and clothing, comfort and shelter - oh how good God is to us! But if we know the Lord; if we have been born again and are united to Christ we have all spiritual blessings in Him. Surely we ought to sing,

Praise my soul the King of heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee His praise should sing?
Praise him, Praise Him Praise the everlasting King.

Supplication and Intercession

Both these words are closely related and they cover requests for ourselves and for others. In prayers we make our needs known to God. "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil.4:6). Nothing is to be overlooked in prayer. Nothing is too small to bring to God, nothing is too large. Your own needs and the needs of others must be brought before Him. But let me emphasize that the major focus of our requests ought to be spiritual blessing. Study the prayers of Paul. He does not overlook physical needs but the thing he is most concerned about is increase of faith and love; living to please God; knowing the will of God; being filled with the fruits of righteousness. Great spiritual requests are to the fore. Pray for your own growth in grace; pray for the blessing of others; pray for the cause of Christ; pray for missionaries; pray for the conversion of souls; let the embrace of your prayers be wide.

This then is prayer. It is the outgoing of the heart toward the heavenly Father in the name of the Lord Jesus by the power of the Spirit. It is adoration, it is confession, it is thanksgiving, it is supplication and intercession. It is communing with the living God, through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Prayer as Evidence of the Christian Life

Remember that when I use the word "prayer", I am not simply talking about saying certain words. There can be a kind of praying which is just the repeating of words, the reciting of certain formulas; a mere formality. Such "prayer" is not really prayer at all. In the last article I said that where there is true prayer the heart must be engaged; the definition I used spoke of prayer as "the outgoing of the heart to the heavenly Father." True prayer, not just the repeating of words, but true prayer is an evidence of the Christian life. Bishop J.C. Ryle was a man who spoke the truth with great plainness. He didn't beat around the bush and mince words; and in speaking of prayer he made the following statement:

Prayer is absolutely necessary to a man's salvation, I say absolutely necessary, and I say so advisedly. I am not speaking now of infants and idiots. I am not settling the state of the heathen. I remember that where little is given, there little will be required. I speak especially of those who call themselves Christian, in a land like our own. And of such I say no man or woman can expect to be saved who does not pray.

I hold salvation by grace as strongly as anyone. I would gladly offer a full and free pardon to the greatest sinner that ever lived. I would not hesitate to stand by his dying bed and say, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ even now and you shall be saved". But that a man can have salvation without asking for it, I cannot see in the Bible. That a man will receive pardon for his sins, who will not so much as lift up his heart inwardly, and say, "Lord Jesus give it to me", this I cannot find. I can find that nobody will be saved by his prayer, but I cannot find that without prayer anybody will be saved.

It is not absolutely needful to salvation that a man should read the Bible. A man may have no learning, or be blind, and yet have Christ in his heart. It is not absolutely needful that a man should hear the public preaching of the gospel. He may live where the gospel is not preached, or he may be bedridden, or deaf. But the same thing cannot be said about prayer. It is absolutely needful to salvation that a man should pray.

(Practical Religion, c 46)

Now the good bishop puts it characteristically plainly. Where you have a prayerless person, you have an unconverted person. Where there is spiritual life, Christian life, you will have prayer. Prayer is an evidence of the Christian life. Let me show you how that must be so.

First Perspective

Consider first of all, that when a person becomes a Christian, he or she receives the Holy Spirit. This fact is taught with great clarity throughout the Bible. In Ezekiel 36:27 we have the following great promise: "I will put My spirit within you.."

In the New Testament we have the endorsement and strengthening of that promise when the Lord Jesus says to His disciples:

"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you." Jn.14:16,17

And then of course the epistles of the New Testament speak of the reality of this fact. For example we have the words of Paul: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you..." 1 Cor 6:19

Any careful reading of the New Testament makes this clear, that when a person is born again that person receives the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the great New Covenant gift of God to believers. He resides in us; He moves and works in us.

Now what is the significance of that as far as prayerfulness is concerned? Well consider the title which was noted in the last article, "the Spirit of grace and supplication" (Zech.12:10). It is evident from the context of that verse that supplication is that which the Spirit's grace produces. Where the Spirit of God resides there will be grace and supplication. This is endorsed by the fourth chapter of Galatians, where Paul says, "and because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts crying Abba, Father" (v.6). Now evidently it is not the Spirit who cries "Father, Father", but the Christian into whose heart has come the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This passage clearly teaches that when the Spirit of God comes into a person's life the result is the outgoing of the heart to the heavenly Father. Where the Holy Spirit resides prayer will undoubtedly be offered. The heart will be lifted up to God.

Second Perspective

We may look at it from another viewpoint. That is, that prayer is a duty laid upon us by the Word of God. It is perfectly consistent for something to be a great privilege and a great blessing, and a duty at the same time. Some people seem to think that if something is a privilege it cannot be a duty, but that is clearly not the case. For instance, it is our duty to gather at the Lord's Table in remembrance of Him; but that is also a great privilege and blessing. So while prayer is a privilege and a blessing to a child of God it is at the same time a very solemn duty. God orders His children to pray. He doesn't merely suggest it or request it, he actually orders them to pray.

Consider the following statements:

"Pray without ceasing" (1Thess.5:17)

"I will therefore that men pray everywhere..." (Tim.2:8)

In Luke 10:2 Jesus orders His disciples to pray For a specific need, "The harvest truly is great... pray therefore the Lord of the harvest that he would send forth labourers into the harvest".

Again, "...pray for one another that you may be healed" (James 5:16)

These passages illustrate the point that we are not merely advised to pray; it is not a suggestion; we are told to pray. It is an order from the Captain of our salvation.

Now what are we talking about when we talk about a person being saved, being born again? He are talking about the person receiving Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. When you become a Christian you recognize the right of Jesus Christ to tell you what to do! And one of the marks and evidences that a person has been born again is obedience to Jesus Christ and His Word. Any person not interested in putting God's word into practice has serious reason to doubt that he or she has been born again. More than once Jesus described those who belonged to Him in

terms of their obedience to God. On one occasion when Jesus was preaching in a house the crowd was so great that the members of His family could not get to see Him. He was told "your mother and brothers and sisters are wanting to see you". He replied, "Who is my mother or brother or sister? Behold these who do the will of God, these are my brothers and sisters..." What a profound statement! Jesus was not being unkind to His earthly relatives, but He had to make it plain to them and to all people that it is not earthly attachment to Him that was important but spiritual attachment, spiritual oneness; and that spiritual oneness showed itself by obedience to God.

Now no Christian does the will of God perfectly. All Christians fail to a greater or lesser degree in this. But these are faults and failings, stumbling caused because of the sin which still remains in the Christian. Disobedience is not the general tenor of his or her life. For a person to know that God has imposed something on them in His word in this instance that they should pray and for that person to deliberately ignore or disobey that order continually through his or her life would be an indication that they did not belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus says "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" A Christian is someone who puts himself under Christ's command. "Ah," says someone, "I thought that a Christian was someone who had his sins forgiven and was given a place in heaven." Well, that is true, but it is not the whole truth! A Christian is a person who has his sins forgiven, and who has been given a place in heaven. But he is also a person who puts himself under Christ's command. So when Jesus, through His Word says "pray", the Christian prays. Prayerlessness reveals a spirit which is in rebellion against God.

Third Perspective

Conversion gives us to see our dependence upon God, and prayer is an expression of that dependence. The conversion experience is a humbling experience. It is a very humbling thing to see with conviction your own sinfulness. It is a very humbling thing to see yourself in the light of God's awful holiness. It is a very humbling thing to see that you cannot save yourself and that nothing you can be or do of yourself can make you acceptable to God. It is a very humbling thing to seek salvation at the foot of the cross. Pride is one of the most stubborn and vicious sins of human nature. Human nature says "I can do without God; I can do it alone; I can make it by myself; I can be independent even of God Himself. But true conversion puts a stake through the heart of pride. When God saves a sinner, that sinner sees his or her dependence on God.

The Christian recognizes his dependence upon God for grace to live the Christian life; dependence on God for strength to face the trials of life; dependence on God for wisdom to make right decisions; dependence on God for understanding of His word; dependence on God for health and strength, for daily food, for all things. But you cannot tell me that you know your dependence on God and yet you do not pray. When a man does not seek strength and wisdom and grace from God, and never brings his needs to God, whatever profession that man may make, it is unthinkable that he is a Christian.

In an earlier article I referred to the model prayer given by Jesus. You remember that it begins "Our Father which art in heaven.." But there is a second part of that prayer in which our needs are brought into focus, "give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins... and lead us not into temptation..." The words of the second part breathe the spirit of dependence upon God. The grace of God teaches us that that is so. Conversion enlightens a person so that he or she recognizes that God is the source of all good and blessing, and it is unthinkable a person so taught should not lift up the heart to God even as Jesus instructed us in that model prayer.

The conviction in the heart of a converted person that they are dependent on God's will lead them to pray.

Fourth Perspective

Conversion introduces one into fellowship with God. How beautifully John expresses this:

"that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." (Jn.1:3)

When we are born again we are introduced into that fellowship; a spiritual fellowship with God; and in that fellowship with God prayer is the great means of communion with Him. What would you think if someone asked a man, "do you know John Smith?" "Oh yes," is the reply, "He is my father". "Really," says the questioner, "Tell me something about him. What kind of a person is he?" "Well, I cannot really do that," comes the further response, "because I have never spoken to him in my life." I venture to suggest that if the man made such a reply you would think that he was not his father at all! To have a father yet never speak to him all your life would be incredible. Yet there are those who claim that God is their father; they say they are Christians and yet they never pray. They never have a word to say to their father! Surely it is impossible! True conversion introduces us into fellowship with God, and where there is fellowship there must be communion; there must be sharing; there must be a talking together. God speaks to His children through His word; they speak to Him through prayer. Where there is no prayer there can be no fellowship with God, and therefore no spiritual life.

I hope I have shown that Bishop Ryle's statement was correct. Where there is no prayer-life there is no real conversion, there is no spiritual life. Prayerlessness is a sad evidence of an absence of grace. May it be said of all who read this article, as it was said of the converted Saul of Tarsus,

"Behold, he prays".

Our Attitude in Prayer

In this series of articles on prayer I have talked, about coming to God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit. I have tried to describe what prayer is: that when we come to God we come with adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. It is also important to consider our attitude as we come to God in prayer. In what spirit should we come to God? In this article I will suggest some answers to that question.

Reverence and Respect

First we must come in a spirit of reverence and respect. One of the ways we are helped on the subject of prayer is by studying the prayers of the saints in scripture. Take Daniel's prayer in the ninth chapter of the book of Daniel: or Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple; or that which has become known as "the Lord's Prayer". You will observe that all these prayers are marked by a spirit of reverence. You will find the same if you consider the beautiful prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17:11 where Jesus refers to God as "Holy Father", and in v.25 as "Righteous Father". You cannot read any of the prayers of the Bible without discovering the same thing - there is always a reverent approach to God.

This does not mean that there cannot be a boldness in our approach, because we are encouraged to come with boldness to the throne of grace. It does not mean that we cannot come with a sense of joyfulness; we ought to do that because we are coming to our Father. But boldness and joyfulness must never banish reverence. God is our Father; but He is our Father "which art in heaven". This must ever be kept before us in our day. Generally speaking, this is a day when respect for authority of any kind is lacking. In my opinion it is a day when crudeness and ugliness are asserting themselves. Qualities of grace and gentleness, courtesy and nobility are brushed aside as having no practical value. It is a day of cynicism when the old saying is often fulfilled, "nothing is sacred". Christians have to guard against this worldly attitude rubbing off on them. We are not to be moulded by the world's attitude and opinion, and certainly in our attitude to God we must always maintain that reverence and respect which is right and fitting. We must ever keep the Biblical vision of God before us. We must see Him with the eye of faith as the High and Holy One who inhabits eternity. We must see Him as the One who dwells in light inaccessible which no man can approach unto. We must see Him as the Monarch of the ages, clothed with majesty and honour. He is the God of holiness and truth, the One who from everlasting to everlasting is God.

Only as we keep such a view of God before us can we be delivered from the sin of irreverence. It is a tragic thing that some heathen religions instill in their adherents a greater sense of reverence than we see in many evangelical Christians. If you lived in a Muslim land you would hear several times a day the call to prayer going out to "the faithful" from the minaret towers. "Alluhu Akbar" is the cry - God is great. If followers of a false religion have at least that much truth surely we who have the Word of God in our hands and the Spirit of God in our hearts ought to know it. God is indeed great, and when we approach Him it ought to be in reverence and respect.

The Spirit of Faith

Secondly, we must come in a spirit of faith. This is given strong emphasis in the Bible. For instance, James 1:5:

If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask of God ... but let him ask in faith

or again, consider Hebrews 11:6:

He who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

The Lord Jesus reminds us of this vital linkage, Matt.21:22:

And all things, whatever you ask in prayer believing, you will receive.

We must understand this statement in the light of the third point which we will come to in a moment, but let it be noted that faith, "believing" is an important ingredient in our prayers.

There are many other passages which present this same truth to us. God delights to see faith in His children; faith brings joy to the heart of God, and He calls for the exercise of it when we come before Him in prayer. Obviously we must have faith that God will answer prayer. He has said that He will, so it is a great dishonour to God for His people not to believe Him. It is hard to imagine a person praying if they did not believe that God did answer prayer. Imagine what an insult it would be if our children came to us and requested from us something which we had told them they could have, but as they came they said "well we are asking but we don't believe that you have any intention of giving this to us; we don't believe that your word can be trusted or accepted in this matter". How hurtful and insulting that would be! And how much more terrible is it when we come before God with unbelieving hearts, for we are really saying "I don't believe your word is trustworthy; I don't believe that you will do what you have said you will do". It is not strange that people don't experience any blessing from prayer if they come with unbelieving and untrusting hearts. "Without faith it is impossible to please God". We must have a confident spirit in prayer; we must believe that God will do what He has said He will do. We will have to recognize that He may not work in the way we expect Him to work; He may not work within the time-frame we would prefer; we have to grant that He works in mysterious ways; but we must have faith in His wisdom and His power. Faith is a potent weapon. The 11th chapter of Hebrews ought to be read more often than it is. By faith amazing things were accomplished by God's people, and without faith nothing will ever be accomplished. Come believing in prayer; let your spirit be one of confidence. Take God at His word and trust Him for an answer.

The Spirit of Submission.

We must also come in a spirit of submission. The greatest example of this is the Lord Jesus Himself in the garden of Gethsemane. Though under the most severe strain, and enormous pressure, He prayed "not my will, but thine be done". We must always pray in that spirit. Beware of demanding from God. Humility ought to mark your attitude in the presence of God, and if you have humility you will appreciate the fact that there are many things which you do not know. We get so full of ourselves sometimes that we think we know better than God; we think that we can instruct Him and tell Him what is best, and some people get very angry if God doesn't do exactly what they think He ought to do. But many a person has lived to thank God that He didn't answer their prayer! At the time they were upset; they doubted God's love and care and they were defiant and rebellious. But remember that you know so little. When we come to God we come to one who is infinite in wisdom; He knows all things; He knows the end from the beginning; and whenever we come in prayer we must always have a submissive spirit, praying for guidance in God's will and ready to accept that His will may be done in all things. The promise that God will hear and answer prayer is attached to the supposition that

we ask according to His will - "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us".

It is very important that we take all the Bible has to say on a given subject and not just part of it. Some people like to take the kind of verses referred to earlier and say "there, God promises that anything I ask for in prayer believing I shall receive". And they make a mockery out of it by asking for the most foolish things, and when they don't get them they say "I must not have enough faith, I didn't believe enough". Now certainly our prayers can be hindered by lack of faith, but we must remember that God's promise to answer our prayers and give us what we ask for is related to our asking according to His will. We need therefore to be spiritually minded that we might discern the will of the Lord, and we need to be submissive acknowledging that "now we see through a glass darkly." We may not be praying wisely; therefore we must pray submissively in the spirit of Jesus, "Thy will be done".

For the Glory of God

Our attitude in prayer must reflect a genuine desire for the glory of God. Some Christians think of prayer as possessing a magic lamp; they think that prayer is a great way for getting every little whim and fancy which comes into their mind. They think of God as the "genie" who exists to satisfy their every desire. But to come to God in a selfish spirit is to come in a wrong spirit. The concern of Jesus as reflected in John 12:27-28 was not his own comfort and well-being but the glory of His Father. That is not to say that we are not to pray for ourselves and our own needs; not at all. Our own needs are a legitimate concern for prayer, but we are always to seek first the glory of God. If that desire is dominant then we shall be kept in proper balance. You can see this working out in 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul prays three times that God would remove the "thorn in the flesh". What that really was we do not know, but clearly it was something which bothered him greatly. But though he prayed three times for its removal he came to understand that it was not the will of God that it should be removed. God had given him that thorn for a purpose; it was to keep him useful in the service of Christ; through that thorn the power of Christ rested upon him, and so he eventually came to glory in his infirmity.

Now Paul could never have come to that place had he not been supremely concerned about the glory of God. If he was to glorify God he must have the power of Christ resting upon him. If he had been concerned only with his own comfort he could never have rejoiced and gloried in this thorn. He would have gone about moaning and complaining that God didn't answer his prayer; he would have gone about feeling sorry for himself - "after all I have done for the Lord look at the way He treats me!" Some people act in this pathetic manner but this man has the glory of God for his greatest desire; nothing is more important than that, and that desire regulates his spirit in prayer.

Few things are more important than having a right attitude when we pray.

Arm of the Lord, awake, awake!
Thy power unconquerable take;
Thy strength put on, assert Thy might,
And triumph in the dreadful fight.

Why dost Thou tarry, mighty Lord?
Why slumbers in its sheath thy Sword?
Oh, rouse Thee, for Thine honour's sake
Arm of the Lord, awake, awake!

Behold, what numbers still withstand
Thy sovereign rule and just command,
Reject Thy grace, Thy threats despise,
And hurl defiance at the skies.

Haste then, but come not to destroy;
Mercy is Thine, Thy crown, Thy joy;
Their hatred quell, their pride remove,
But melt with grace, subdue with love.

Why dost Thou from the conquest stay?
Why do Thy chariot wheels delay?
Lift up Thyself; hell's kingdom shake:
Arm of the Lord, awake, awake!

Henry March, 1839

Unanswered Prayer

At some time or another every Christian has felt perplexed and discouraged because it appeared to them that their prayers were not being answered. David, the sweet singer of Israel, and a man after God's own heart experienced such times of difficulty. He begins Psalm 13 with these plaintive words:

How long O Lord?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long shall I take counsel in my soul?
Having sorrow in my heart daily?

Those are the words of a discouraged man who feels that God isn't hearing or answering his prayers. Listen to him again in Ps.55:

Give ear to my prayer O God,
And do not hide yourself from my supplication.
Attend to me and hear me;
I am restless in my complaint...

Or again, consider the words of Psalm 88, "a Psalm of the sons of Korah":

But to you I have cried out O Lord,
and in the morning my prayer comes before you.
Lord why do you cast off my soul?
why do you hide your face from me?

These few examples show us that to be perplexed by unanswered prayer is not a new experience to the people of God. The greatest of saints have grappled with this problem and felt keenly about it. I wanted to suggest some reasons why some of our prayers are not answered, for I think that if we see these reasons we may be helped and encouraged not to despair or allow ourselves to be cast down by the experience.

Testing

Consider first of all how God tests our faith and our earnestness by not answering prayer. This is beautifully illustrated for us in the incident with the Syrophenician woman recorded in the gospels. This woman came to Jesus with a prayer for the healing of her daughter (Matt.15) but Jesus does not answer her. When he does speak to her he does not at first grant her petition, he seems to put her off and deliberately discourage her. But eventually he does grant her request exclaiming "Oh woman your faith is great". Clearly Jesus had been testing her faith. He did not answer right away and grant her petition immediately so that he might see if her faith would rise to the challenge, and she came through the test wonderfully.

Now it is true that in this instance the woman did not have to wait long, and most times we are thinking of prayers that are offered and perhaps months and even years later they seem to have received no answer; but the principle pinpointed in this incident is the same. God does test our faith, and he often does so by not answering our prayers, at least not at the time when we think they should be answered. He sometimes makes us wait long for an answer

because he wants to see how persistent our faith is. Two well known parables in Luke's gospel point out the need to persevere in prayer. In Luke 11 there is the parable of the man who seeks a favour from his friend at midnight. But the friend has settled down for the night, he doesn't want to be bothered with the needs of the first man, But the petitioner keeps on knocking, keeps on asking, and Jesus says (v-8)."..because of his persistence he will rise.." Because the man kept at it, didn't give up, he got what he was after.

The other parable in Luke 18 makes the same point. A woman petitions a judge; the judge does not really want to be bothered by her, but she is persistent! So the judge concludes he had better grant her request is rather than be wearied by her continual seeking. In giving these parables Jesus was not conveying the idea that God was reluctant to answer prayer. The spotlight is not on the judge or the friend who was settled down in bed; it is on the one who comes with the petition. It is their persistence that was met and their prayer was answered. Faith will make a Christian persistent in prayer. Though God withholds the answers from us, and though He might withhold it for a long time, yet faith must persist in seeking the blessing. The Bible says "he that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

We must have faith in God, and faith in His promises, and we must understand that our faith will be put to the test. Nothing glorifies God more than faith. For one of His children to maintain trust and confidence in God even though they are being led through a dark and difficult way is something God delights to see. A faith which comes through testings and trials strong and triumphant is of great worth and value in the sight of God.

It may well be that someone reading these words is experiencing a situation where prayers seems unanswered. God may well be trying your faith, refining it putting it through the furnace that it might be the more valuable and beautiful. My friend continue to seek; continue to knock; continue to ask. Persevere in prayer and do not be discouraged.

Motivation

Sometimes prayers are not answered because they are offered with a wrong motivation. James puts this before us very plainly:

You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your own pleasure. (James 4:3)

In an earlier article I said that we ought to pray from a heart which desires before all else the glory of God. We must not think that prayer is a wonderful instrument intended to fulfill our every whim and fancy and provide us with everything that enters our heads and which we think we would like to possess. The question of motivation is a very difficult one to deal with. We have to really examine ourselves and search our hearts to see that we are truly God-centered in this area. It is far easier to make our outward behaviour conform to certain Christian standards than to keep our hearts, minds, thoughts and motives subject to the Lord Jesus Christ. You may pray for financial success, but you may pray for it because you covet luxury and possessions. In the history of the church there have been people whom God has blessed with great business success and financial regard. I imagine they have made their business ventures a matter of prayer, and the cause of Christ has benefited substantially because of them. But if a man prays for that kind of success because he has a worldly minded hankering after luxury and self-indulgence, it is unlikely that that prayer will be answered. Indeed for such a man to receive his request would be more accurate to understand it as a judgment rather than an answer to prayer.

Again, a man may pray for gifts and abilities. The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians to earnestly covet the best gifts. There is nothing wrong with desiring gifts and abilities from God if you have a genuine desire to glory the Lord and bless His church. The trouble is that many pray such a prayer simply because they crave attention and a reputation. They want to be admired; they want other Christians to hold them in repute; they want to bask in the limelight and in the admiration of their fellows. But that is a wrong motive for prayer and God will surely not respond to such a prayer.

Even in our prayers for the church and for the salvation of souls and the prosperity of a church we must guard our motives. It is possible to pray for those things - and who could argue with church officers praying for God's blessing upon the church where they labour. But be careful that you don't pray like that because we want to boast in your success and in that wonderful progress being made in your particular corner. Too much of that goes on in Evangelicalism these days:- "our church had so many professions of faith, and so many backsliders restored, and so many of this and that and the other thing". And there is a terrible boasting over other churches: there is a glorying in themselves, and it is sinful and horrible before God. You may be praying for more workers, and yet he praying for more workers because you are too lazy to do the job yourself.

Motivation is important in prayer. We must pray for God's glory, with true concern for the cause of Christ and good of souls. We must guard against allowing "self" to push its way in as it so often does. Sometimes God does not answer because our motivation is wrong.

What is best.

Sometimes God does not answer our prayers because he sees that a "no" answer is the best for us. The classic passage is 2 Cor.12 where Paul tells us that three times he asked God to remove the "thorn in the flesh". God never did answer that prayer in the way Paul had wanted when he had offered it, because God knew that that would not have been best for Paul. If Paul had not had this thorn in the flesh, whatever it was, it appears that he would have been lifted up in pride because of the amazing revelations which God gave him. And if he had become proud his usefulness in the cause of Christ would have ceased. Now there was nothing that Paul wanted more than to serve Christ well, and therefore God in His wisdom did not answer Paul's prayer.

This is seen in every day life. Parents don't grant every request of their children. They refuse many requests, not because they do not love the child, but rather because do love the child and know what is best for it. A good parent is not about to give his or her child something which will ultimately hurt that child. Most children go through the stage of wanting to play with matches; they have seen the pretty flame which flares up when Mommy strikes the match. There would be nothing more wonderful to their childlike mind to play with matches and make lovely flames all day! So they ask Mommy if they can have the box of matches. If Mommy has any love for the child and any wisdom at all she will say "no". The child might cry; he might think that Mommy is hard and uncaring, but the truth is just the opposite. You sometimes cry when God doesn't grant your requests, and you are sometimes tempted to think that God is hard and uncaring. But that is far from the truth. God sees far more than you do; He sees things ahead that you have never considered. You must trust him to do what is right and best for you if you are His child, You must believe the many declarations of His word that tell you that He cares for you and is working all things together for your good. You must believe that His wisdom and love are perfect and that He will not make a mistake. Realize that sometimes the answer must be no, or at least "not now", and be content. Don't fret, but leave it with Him knowing that He does all things well.

God or gifts?

Finally, God leaves some prayer unanswered to see if we love God Himself or simply what he gives us. We know how parents sometimes say to Grandma and Grandpa, "please don't bring gifts every time you come to see the children, because we want the children to appreciate you for what you are in yourselves, not just for what you bring them". There is wisdom in that. We are all apt to be that way. Adults want their children to love them for what they are not just because of what they get from them. Have you ever considered that God has thoughts like that too? It is possible to have your attention taken up with the gifts rather than the Giver. God wants you to avoid that. This was in essence the accusation of Satan against Job - "does Job serve God for nothing"? Satan was insinuating "he is in it for what he can get out of it". That is why God permitted Job to go through the trials that he did. God does not want us to love Him simply for what we can get out of Him, He wants us to love Him for what He is, to desire fellowship with Himself, so that even if we were deprived of all earthly goods and comforts we could still rejoice in Him and praise Him because we love Him for what He is.

Have you been more taken up with the gifts than the Giver? It could be that that is why God has not answered some of your prayers; He wants to wean you away from an over-attachment to things. He says "I am all you need; fellowship with me can make life truly worthwhile even without some of those things you think are so necessary. Get to know me some more".

Unanswered prayer can have a real ministry in our lives. If they make us more aware of God Himself; if they exercise our faith and confidence in God; if they make us aware of our motives and inner thoughts; if through the discipline of unanswered prayer we grow in spiritual stature, then we can even thank God for them.

Let us trust and not be afraid and have confidence that Jesus does all things well.