

THE REALITY OF PRAYER

FOREWARD

During the last 25 years of the nineteenth century and a score of years of the twentieth, there lived and died three great men of God whom I knew--men whom God has doubtless numbered among the foremost of His heavenly host. The first was Edward McKendree Bounds, author of this present volume and the other "Spiritual Life" Books. The second was Claud L. Chilton, minister for many years in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and a musical composer of religious music of considerable note. The third, Clement C. Cary, preacher and editor, lost his life in an automobile accident in 1922. The fourth was Dr. B. F. Haynes, minister, editor and author, who died in Nashville, in 1923.

What Dr. Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, was to Strong, Arrowsmith and Sparstow; what John Wesley was to Whitefield, Fletcher and Clark, Bounds was to Chilton, Cary and Haynes. What David Brainerd's Journal did for Cary, Martyn, McCheyne, Bounds' books can do for thousands of God's children. He was a man who lived ever on prayer ground. He walked and talked with the Lord. Prayer was the great weapon in his arsenal, his pathway to the Throne of Grace. None who read what he has written can fail of realising that Edward McKendree Bounds talked with God, as a man talketh to his friend.

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I. PRAYER--A PRIVILEGE, PRINCELY, SACRED

I am the creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf; till a few moments hence I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing, the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God! Lord, is it not Thy word--"If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God? Thou givest liberally, and upbraidest not. Thou hast said, if any be willing to do Thy will he shall know. I am willing to do; let me know Thy will."--John Wesley

The word "Prayer" expresses the largest and most comprehensive approach unto God. It gives prominence to the element of devotion. It is communion and intercourse with God. It is enjoyment of God. It is access to God. "Supplication" is a more restricted and more intense form of prayer, accompanied by a sense of personal need, limited to the seeking in an urgent manner of a supply for pressing need.

"Supplication" is the very soul of prayer in the way of pleading for some one thing, greatly needed, and the need intensely felt.

"Intercession" is an enlargement in prayer, a going out in broadness and fullness from self to others. Primarily, it does not centre in praying for others, but refers to the freeness, boldness and childlike confidence of the praying. It is the fullness of confiding influence in

the soul's approach to God, unlimited and unhesitating in its access and its demands. This influence and confident trust is to be used for others.

Prayer always, and everywhere is an immediate and confiding approach to, and a request of, God the Father. In the prayer universal and perfect, as the pattern of all praying, it is "Our Father, Who art in Heaven." At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father." In His sacerdotal prayer, Jesus lifted up His eyes to Heaven, and said, "Father." Personal, familiar and paternal was all His praying. Strong, true and touching and tearful, was His praying. Read these words of Paul: "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with strong crying and tears, unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared" (Hebrews 5:7).

So elsewhere (James 1:5) we have "asking" set forth as prayer: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."

"Asking of God" and "receiving" from the Lord--direct application to God, immediate connection with God--that is prayer.

In John 5:13 we have this statement about prayer:

"And this is the confidence that we have in 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 that we desired of him."

In Phil. 4:6 we have these words about prayer:

"Be careful for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God."

What is God's will about prayer? First of all, it is God's will that we pray. Jesus Christ "spoke a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"

Paul writes to young Timothy about the first things which God's people are to do, and first among the first he puts prayer: "I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1).

In connection with these words Paul declares that the will of God and the redemption and mediation of Jesus Christ for the salvation for all men are all vitally concerned in this matter of prayer. In this his apostolical authority and solicitude of soul conspire with God's will and Christ's intercession to will that "the men pray everywhere."

Note how frequently prayer is brought forward in the New Testament: "Continuing instant in prayer"; "Pray without ceasing"; "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving"; "Be ye sober and watch unto prayer"; Christ's clarion call was "watch and pray." What are all these and others, if it is not the will of God that men should pray?

Prayer is complement, make efficient and cooperate with God's will, whose sovereign sway is to run parallel in extent and power with the

atonement of Jesus Christ. He, through the Eternal Spirit, by the grace of God, "tasted death for every man." We, through the Eternal Spirit, by the grace of God, pray for every man.

But how do I know that I am praying by the will of God? Every true attempt to pray is in response to the will of God. Bungling it may be and untutored by human teachers, but it is acceptable to God, because it is in obedience to His will. If I will give myself up to the inspiration of the Spirit of God, who commands me to pray, the details and the petitions of that praying will all fall into harmony with the will of Him who wills that I should pray.

Prayer is no little thing, no selfish and small matter. It does not concern the petty interests of one person. The littlest prayer broadens out by the will of God till it touches all words, conserves all interests, and enhances man's greatest wealth, and God's greatest good. God is so concerned that men pray that He has promised to answer prayer. He has not promised to do something general if we pray, but He has promised to do the very thing for which we pray.

Prayer, as taught by Jesus in its essential features, enters into all the relations of life. It sanctifies brotherliness. To the Jew, the altar was the symbol and place of prayer. The Jew devoted the altar to the worship of God. Jesus Christ takes the altar of prayer and devotes it to the worship of the brotherhood. How Christ purifies the altar and enlarges it! How He takes it out of the sphere of a mere performance, and makes its virtue to consist, not in the mere act of praying, but in the spirit which actuates us toward men. Our spirit toward folks is of the life of prayer. We must be at peace with men, and, if possible, have them at peace with us, before we can be at peace with God. Reconciliation with men is the forerunner of reconciliation with God. Our spirit and words must embrace men before they can embrace God. Unity with the brotherhood goes before unity with God. "Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to 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" (Matthew 5:23).

Non-praying is lawlessness, discord, anarchy. Prayer, in the moral government of God, is as strong and far-reaching as the law of gravitation in the material world, and it is as necessary as gravitation to hold things in their proper sphere and in life.

The space occupied by prayer in the Sermon on the Mount bespeaks its estimate by Christ and the importance it holds in His system. Many important principles are discussed in a verse or two. The Sermon consists of one hundred and eleven verses, and eighteen are about prayer directly, and others indirectly.

Prayer was one of the cardinal principles of piety in every dispensation and to every child of God. It did not pertain to the business of Christ to originate duties, but to recover, to recast, to spiritualise, and to reinforce those duties which are cardinal and original.

With Moses the great features of prayer are prominent. He never beats the air nor fights a sham battle. The most serious and strenuous business of his serious and strenuous life was prayer. He is much at it with the intensest earnestness of his soul. Intimate as he was with

God, his intimacy did not abate the necessity of prayer. This intimacy only brought clearer insight into the nature and necessity of prayer, and led him to see the greater obligations to pray, and to discover the larger results of praying. In reviewing one of the crises through which Israel passed, when the very existence of the nation was imperilled, he writes: "I fell down before the Lord forty days and forty nights." Wonderful praying and wonderful results! Moses knew how to do wonderful praying, and God knew how to give wonderful results.

The whole force of Bible statement is to increase our faith in the doctrine that prayer affects God, secures favors from God, which can be secured in no other way, and which will not be bestowed by God if we do not pray. The whole canon of Bible teaching is to illustrate the great truth that God hears and answers prayer. One of the great purposes of God in His book is to impress upon us indelibly the great importance, the priceless value, and the absolute necessity of asking God for the things which we need for time and eternity. He urges us by every consideration, and presses and warns us by every interest. He points us to His own Son, turned over to us for our good, as His pledge that prayer will be answered, teaching us that God is our Father, able to do all things for us and to give all things to us, much more than earthly parents are able or willing to do for their children.

Let us thoroughly understand ourselves and understand, also, this great business of prayer. Our one great business is prayer, and we will never do it well without we fasten to it by all binding force. We will never do it well without arranging the best conditions of doing it well. Satan has suffered so much by good praying that all his wily, shrewd and ensnaring devices will be used to cripple its performances.

We must, by all the fastenings we can find, cable ourselves to prayer. To be loose in time and place is to open the door to Satan. To be exact, prompt, unswerving, and careful in even the little things, is to buttress ourselves against the Evil One.

Prayer, by God's very oath, is put in the very stones of God's foundations, as eternal as its companion, "And men shall pray for him continually." This is the eternal condition which advances His cause, and makes it powerfully aggressive. Men are to always pray for it. Its strength, beauty and aggression lie in their prayers. Its power lies simply in its power to pray. No power is found elsewhere but in its ability to pray. "For my house shall be called the house of prayer for all people." It is based on prayer, and carried on by the same means.

Prayer is a privilege, a sacred, princely privilege. Prayer is a duty, an obligation most binding, and most imperative, which should hold us to it. But prayer is more than a privilege, more than a duty. It is a means, an instrument, a condition. Not to pray is to lose much more than to fail in the exercise and enjoyment of a high, or sweet privilege. Not to pray is to fail along lines far more important than even the violation of an obligation.

Prayer is the appointed condition of getting God's aid. This aid is as manifold and illimitable as God's ability, and as varied and exhaustless is this aid as man's need. Prayer is the avenue through which God supplies man's wants. Prayer is the channel through which all good flows from God to man, and all good from men to men. God is the Christian's father. Asking and giving are in that relation.

Man is the one more immediately concerned in this great work of praying. It ennobles man's reason to employ it in prayer. The office and work of prayer is the divinest engagement of man's reason. Prayer makes man's reason to shine. Intelligence of the highest order approves prayer. He is the wisest man who prays the most and the best. Prayer is the school of wisdom as well as of piety.

Prayer is not a picture to handle, to admire, to look at. It is not beauty, coloring, shape, attitude, imagination, or genius. These things do not pertain to its character or conduct. It is not poetry nor music. Its inspiration and melody come from Heaven. Prayer belongs to the spirit, and at times it possesses the spirit and stirs the spirit with high and holy purposes and resolves.

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