

Prayer, Praise & Worship

David Gooding

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Purpose and Posture in Prayer

Let me at once confess that, in accepting your invitation, I am not claiming to be an expert in the topic that you have set me of prayer and then of praise and worship. I come along here very much as a learner in the school of prayer and one who must confess how little progress he has made in that important branch of spiritual life. I will share with you things that appeal to my heart and what God has taught me through his word and through experience.

I do look forward to hearing what you have got to say, so don't be afraid to use the time tomorrow, not only for questions, but for your comments and contributions. Here is a topic where we learn supremely from each other, and I repeat, I am not coming among you as one who professes to be the expert. Indeed, in the talks that I shall give, you will probably decide that there is much that I have left out that I should have said. The question time is there for you to make contributions in that direction and to emphasize the points where I have failed, for this is a vast topic, almost commensurate with the Christian life itself.

So for my part tonight, I hope to talk about *purpose and posture* in prayer; in the first session tomorrow on *proportions* in prayer; and in the second on the question of *persistence* in prayer; and then in the final session, you have asked me to talk about the twin topics of *praise and worship*.

Tonight then, let's begin our study by reading together, first of all an Old Testament passage to be found in the second book of Samuel chapter 7, beginning in verse 18.

Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, 'Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD. You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD! And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have brought about all this greatness, to make your servant know it. Therefore you are great, O LORD God. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people, whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt, a nation and its gods? And you established for yourself your people Israel to be your people for ever. And you, O LORD, became their God. And now, O LORD God, confirm for ever the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, and do as you have spoken. And your name will be magnified for ever, saying, "The LORD of hosts is God over Israel", and the house of your servant David will be established before you. For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, "I will build you a house." Therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. And now,

O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant. Now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue for ever before you. For you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed for ever.' (vv. 18–29)

And then one passage from the New Testament, to be found in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 6, beginning in verse 5.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (vv. 5–15)

May God give us good understanding of his word.

What is the point of praying?

I want to start by asking the simple question, why pray? I suppose the first answer that we ought to give is the very simple and direct answer—*because God tells us to*. It may well be that we don't understand the mechanisms of prayer, we don't understand why praying makes any difference; but nevertheless God tells us to pray and pray we must. One day perhaps, when we get home to glory, we shall be given to see how it was that our prayers were effective: by what kind of mechanism they produced their answers and had effect with God and with men. But if we can't see that now, and very often we can't, and we're not told, then that's not our business. What does it matter what the mechanism is? If God tells us to pray, then that's reason enough for praying.

Very often, when people are thinking of prayer as a means of asking God to do something for them, they say, 'Why should I pray to God and ask him to do this? Either, it was what he intended to do, whether I prayed or not, because he loved me—and if he was going to do it there's no point in praying; or else, he had no intention of doing it and he won't be shifted by anything I say—so what's the good in my praying?' Some people get themselves into difficulty and tie themselves up into knots, because they can't quite understand how praying works and what is the point of asking God for anything. Certainly there are some problems, and perhaps we shall come back to that point again.

Why pray? Because God tells us to.

What is prayer?

The first major point I really want to make this evening, in answer to the question, 'Why pray?' is to ask you to think what prayer is. Certainly it involves asking God for things, but prayer is infinitely more than just asking God for things. I suspect the simplest definition of prayer is this, *prayer is talking to God, talking to the Lord Jesus.*

I wonder how you would react if one of your close friends, a gentleman of normal intelligence, came up to you and said, 'You know, there's a problem that's been bothering me. Why should I talk to my wife?'

'Why should you talk to your wife?' That would be a slightly difficult one to answer, wouldn't it?

Or if someone else came up and said, 'Why should I talk to my friend?'

Why should you talk to your friend? You grin, but it strikes me that the question, 'Why should I pray?' is very much a question like that, for praying is talking to God. If it sounds funny to you to ask, 'Why should I talk to my wife or to my friend?', it must sound very comical or ludicrous to God for anybody to say, 'Why should I talk to God?'

Why should you talk to anybody? Doubtless, gentlemen, when you talk to your wife, you sometimes ask her to do this or to do that; to make sure that she gives you a handsome Christmas present and another present for your birthday, washes your shirts and does one hundred and one things. Yes, certainly, sometimes when you talk to your wife, you're asking her to do things, but not always. You occasionally talk to your wife even when you don't want her to do things, just for the sheer joy of talking to your wife, or talking to your friend, or talking to the boss, or talking to the children.

It would be a very dull world, if we never talked to anybody. In fact, it's the most natural thing in the world to do. When people get together, they talk. As a child, I used to get fed up with adults talking. It seemed as though it was all they could do. On a beautiful sunny afternoon by the seaside, they'd get the deckchairs out and, instead of playing football, rounders, swimming, or anything else like that, as sensible people of 11 years old did, all they seemed to do was to sit and talk. Now that I'm a few years older I begin to see the point of it.

Talking is one of the most wonderful gifts that human beings have. Animals do their best, but they're sorely limited in their vocabulary and what they can say to one another. Watch the lion talking to the lioness, his vocabulary is so limited. He'd like to tell her how wonderful she is, but he soon exhausts what he can say. God made human beings capable of talking, and what a wealth there is, even at the human level, of fellowship and sharing and enjoyment and interest and getting to know one another. In the very fact that we can talk to one another, God has given us a language and has deigned to tell us that one of the titles of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is *the Word*. He is the one through whom God speaks and talks to us.

What is Prayer? Prayer is talking to God, talking to the Lord Jesus.

Why pray?

It is one of the most natural and most glorious things of human experience. What a relief it is sometimes when worry presses, to be able to have somebody that you can talk to, and *God wants us to come and talk with him and he with us*, just as we would talk to our human friends. What a terrible thing loneliness is when you've got nobody to talk to. When you're standing

out in the open and seeing a beautiful sunset and you want to turn round and say, 'Isn't that beautiful?' but there's nobody to say, 'Isn't it beautiful?' to, and somehow it emphasizes your loneliness.

Why pray? Because God wants us to come and talk with him and he with us.

Different postures when praying

To illustrate all the different moods and talking that there are to God, I have chosen to remind you tonight of some of the postures that people in the Bible adopted when they prayed. We shall find all sorts of postures. Some people sat, some stood and some knelt; some lifted up their eyes to heaven and some cast them down on the ground. Some of them prayed in public, some in private; and some opened their windows and prayed through the window. The Bible is full of people praying, of course, and it's a very interesting thing to watch the different postures they adopted when they prayed.

Please let me explain. I'm not going to talk about these postures in prayer as a lot of rules and regulations, and suggest to you that whenever you pray you've got to kneel or stand; you've got to lift up your hands or cast down your head, open your eyes or shut your eyes. What I'm going to do is to quote these different postures in prayer to illustrate the fact that when people talk they adopt different postures. The man standing talking to the boss, explaining why he was late for work, will stand in a different way from what he will do when he's just come in from work and says to his wife, 'Dear, would you please make some coffee?'

If we watch the different postures that people adopted in Scripture when they prayed, we shall begin to get some idea of all the wealth that there is in prayer: all the different attitudes it can express, all the different things that God invites us to come and share with him and he with us, as we talk to him and he talks to us.

David sat before the Lord

First I take the example of King David in 2 Samuel 7. David was at a certain juncture in his life, and he went in and he *sat* before the Lord (v. 18). Some people conjure up the notion of prayer as a very rigorous thing. You've got to kneel when you pray; prayer is hard work and a kind of a rigid discipline. It can be hard work, it can be discipline and sometimes we shall have to kneel, but it isn't always that way.

David went in before the Lord, and he wasn't being irreverent when he sat as he prayed. Why did he sit? Well, consider what had just happened. David had been very successful and things had gone swimmingly. Then he proposed to build God a temple, but God said, 'No thank you, David, I don't want a temple at this stage.' David had been just a little bit put out because what he intended to do for God hadn't come off. But then through the prophet, *God began to tell David what he was going to do for him.*

'That was a very nice suggestion on your part, David, what you were going to do for me; but let me tell you what I'm going to do for you. I'm going to build you a house and give you a son and create a dynasty of kings. Look into the future, David, as far as you can, right over the horizon and the ages to come; I'm going to give you a man on your throne and establish your royal house for ever.'

As David listened to God telling him what God was going to do for him, right off into the future, the thing began to grow in his mind and become ever more wonderful. Here was the God of eternity talking to him. 'You have spoken of me and my house for a long time to come' (see v. 19). David was caught up into the great eternal purposes of God, and all the majestic things that God was going to do for him so overwhelmed him that he went into the temple and sat down, receptive, listening, relaxed, breathtakingly joyful, trying to take in the staggering words that God had spoken. He went and talked to God, because he couldn't do anything else.

What would you do, sir, if one of these days you came home to tea and there was a Rolls-Royce outside your door, and some friend of yours had given it to you?

You say, 'I'd go round and see the man.'

Somebody says, 'What are you going round to see him for?'

That would be stupid, wouldn't it? You'd go round to see him and thank him. You don't know how to put it, but you'd say, 'It's a marvellous machine, I've always wanted one of them. Look at the lady on the front and the electrical things that you push and the beautiful purring noise it makes.' You're so overwhelmed with the gift he's given you and all the glory and the beauty and the enjoyment that lies in front of you, that you go and tell him about it.

Why talk to God? Well first, to listen to what God wants to tell us about what he's going to do for us. And as we sit before the Lord, relaxed, receptive, openhearted, we begin to let our imaginations work, to take it in. The more glories we can see and the more we talk about it to God, the more we can respond and tell him all about it. Just like the man with his Rolls-Royce.

As David went in to talk to God, first he told God how marvellous it was, this thing that God was going to do. 'You've brought me thus far; you've spoken of me for a long while to come.' And then he said, 'What can I say more? I don't know what to say next.' (see v. 20). And so he fell to telling God how unique God is. 'What more can I say? There's no God like you and there are no people like your people. Look what you've done for them, and therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you' (vv. 21-27).

You say, 'It was all thanksgiving.'

Yes, but it was a prayer of thanksgiving. And then did you notice something very natural at the end? When it began to dawn on David the marvellous things that God was promising him for his future, being very human he said, 'Lord, you will do it, won't you? It's glorious, but you will do it, won't you?' (vv. 28-29).

My good friend, have you ever found yourself like that? *You've let God tell you something of the glorious future that lies ahead of you in Christ*, in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, and it's dawned on your heart that you have an eternal future of immeasurable glory. Presently the thing has become so big that, in the midst of your joy, you find yourself saying, 'Oh, I hope it doesn't go wrong. Do you really mean it, Lord? You will do it?'

So David felt it was safe perhaps to say that, and what was happening was that David was beginning to pray on the basis of God's revealed promise, and with what tremendous restoration and renewed vigour he came out from sitting before the Lord.

My brothers and sisters, I recommend it. In the hurly-burly of life, amidst all the chores of housekeeping and seeing after the children, find some time to sit before the Lord, receptive, relaxed, openhearted, and let God tell you what he's proposing to do for you. Let your imagination play on it until it looms large and becomes real.

But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:31).

David sat before the Lord and learned of God's great future plans for him.

Jehoshaphat and the people stood before the Lord

After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; and, behold, they are in Hazazon-tamar' (that is, Engedi). Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, and said, 'O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. . . . And now behold, the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgement on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you. Meanwhile all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. (2 Chr 20:1–6, 10–13.)

Oh, I love that bit at the end. What happened came as a great shock. Apparently out of the blue Jehoshaphat hears that the enemy is invading, and just as he finds these little nations invading he suddenly gets extra news that a vast horde is coming against him. One trouble piles up upon the other, and it doesn't take long for him to realize that he is in grave peril and it's utterly beyond his resources to meet this danger. There's almost a panic. What shall they do?

How like life that is. Suddenly something goes wrong and when you've turned round to try and meet the first thing that goes wrong, you hear of something vastly bigger still that's gone wrong. You sense you're out of your depth and you begin to panic and you are afraid.

Why talk to God? It was the only thing Jehoshaphat could do. The situation was beyond their resources and they set themselves to seek the Lord. So they came to the Lord to tell him their grievances. 'Look at this horde, coming to throw us out and we've not harmed them. We're utterly helpless before them. Lord, look on us and deal with our enemies, for we don't know what to do and we're at our wits' end.'

I suppose it was to show God how utterly defenceless they felt, that they gathered the little babies, their wives and children around them and stood to plead before the Lord. They pointed out their desperate situation and the injustice of their enemies. They reminded God that they were at their wits' end and they didn't know what to do. What a lovely telling gesture it was, then, and expressive of what they really felt, when they got the innocent little babies, their wives and their children, and in their weakness they stood before God, inviting

God to look upon them and have compassion on the defenceless and upon the innocent. They stood before the Lord.

Why talk to God? Well sometimes, my good friend, because that's all we can do. God lets us come to our wits' end and we don't know what to do. The difficulties are too big, the world is so unjust and we're threatened with imminent danger. When you are utterly at your wits' end, what can you do but come and talk to God?

Sometimes God lets us come to our wits' end so that we come and discover his resources. We're such big men and women, aren't we? So many problems we can solve that if we're not careful we think we can get through on our own steam and we forget God. God sometimes allows great difficulties and imminent dangers so that we discover our weakness and we come and find God's strength. In those moments God respects the gesture, doesn't he? When I've said all I can say and I can't say any more, I can do like Jehoshaphat and just stand before the Lord, point to my weakness, and without any words ask God to look upon my need.

Have you ever felt speechless in prayer and you don't know what to say or what to do? Just stand before God. My friend, you haven't got to argue the case with God in such circumstances, and what a lovely thing it is to be able just to come and stand before him. You don't have to literally stand; you don't have to literally bring the child, or get your wife to stand with you—though it's a good thing for your wife to be with you—but metaphorically speaking, to stand before God and call his attention to your desperately weak situation.

Jehoshaphat and the people stood before the Lord to ask for his help.

The people in Nehemiah's day stood to confess their sin

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the LORD their God. (Neh 9:1-3)

This time the people stood before God for another reason: *they stood and confessed their sins*. I have the greater admiration for them then, that they stood and did that. They didn't sort of bow their heads and mumble; they got up on their two feet, stood and confessed their sins. They were honest about it, weren't they? They were real men, who realized they had done wrong. No trying to brush it under the carpet, not just a few mumbles here and there. Manfully they stood and confessed it. That too is a lovely thing, isn't it? To use the phrase from Hebrews, 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (4:16). I know God, and I'm not afraid to come to receive mercy. The very fact that I come to seek mercy tells me I don't deserve it and I have sins to confess.

Oh, what a wonderful thing it is that I needn't be afraid to get up and stand and confess them. I'm not saying you've got to do that publicly in church or anywhere else. It's the attitude of the heart, isn't it? Not beating about the bush, not covering it up, not trying to brush it

under the carpet, but honestly and openly 'getting up' and saying, 'God, I was wrong and I have been wrong. God, forgive me.'

In industrial relations when folks have fallen out, you'll hear the politicians say, 'Well, the best thing you can do just at the moment is to keep the sides talking.'

Why talk to God? Because we've got sins to confess and we want to keep the relationship happy. If you don't talk to God, my friend, the gap will get wider and wider and wider. Alas, for believers who have fallen into some wrongdoing and then have become so ashamed of themselves that they've stopped praying. Therefore, the gap has got wider between them and God and they've gone into deeper sin, and some of them haven't talked to God for years. If we've sinned today, don't let the gap grow. Come and talk to God and we need have no fear. Let us come boldly to the throne of grace to find mercy. We can come and stand and confess it and know that God loves us just the same. Keep on talking.

Do you know that in some families sometimes there comes a little bit of a bust-up, even in the best regulated families? When these bust-ups come, folks don't want to start talking, do they? What a job it is. Sometimes they go away without talking and then they never manage to get over that, and they don't talk for the next forty years. Oh, if only they could have brought themselves to talk, break the ice, difficult as it is, the whole relationship might have been saved.

All the people stood together to confess their sins.

Our Lord knelt down and prayed

Ah, but not always did people stand to pray. David sat, and you will remember that our Lord knelt. Oh, what wonderful words.

And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation.' And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed. (Luke 22:39-41)

Our Lord didn't always kneel to pray. This time he knelt. Why? Well, it went with the words that he was saying, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done' (v. 42), and he knelt to pray. What was in the posture—why did he kneel? He wanted to tell God that, bitter though it was, *he wanted to be submissive to the will of God.*

Oh, it's a lovely story, I wish I could tell you it at length. About a week before, he had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds had cried around him, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!' (19:38). He had ridden into that city upon the donkey as Israel's King and Messiah, as Zechariah the prophet said he would. He had come as her King with a right to command, but the people had rejected him. And now Calvary was looming up and instead of a crown there was a cross.

What should he do? He didn't pretend that he enjoyed it. You'll mark that, won't you, that in true praying there's no pretending? He didn't rush into God's presence and say, 'I'm delighted to have this opportunity . . .'. Certainly not. But he told God honestly how he felt, 'if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matt 26:39).

You can always be honest with God. You can tell him that you don't want to do this; you don't enjoy doing it and you'd prefer not to do it. You don't have to pretend. Christ didn't pretend, he said exactly how he felt. He didn't want to take that cup, but in spite of his own preference he knelt to say, 'Not my will, but yours, be done.' There come times like that in life, don't there? God calls us to some sacrifice or suffering; we'd rather not go that way, but we find it is God's will.

Why talk to God? Well, to be honest about our emotions, to admit that we don't want to, so that we can be sincere and tell him straight. But if we do it, let's kneel and tell God that, in spite of our own preference, we are submissive to his will.

Prayer is an offering to God

Just to turn aside for a moment, we read in the same context how people who were rejecting Christ went to Pilate and demanded that Pilate release Barabbas and crucify Jesus (Luke 23:18). Pilate said that Jesus was innocent and Barabbas was a murderer, and to choose Barabbas was foolish beyond description, but the people wouldn't have it. They shouted and they insisted and they pleaded, and in the end Pilate gave them what they wanted. 'He delivered Jesus over to their will' (v. 25), and they got their own way. Do you know what our Lord said to those people? As he walked out of Jerusalem and the women of Jerusalem came round him, weeping and wringing their hands, saying, 'Poor young man,' he said,

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. . .
 . Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us', and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? (vv. 28, 30-31).

These people will one day cry to the rocks to fall on them, to try and escape from the consequences of demanding their own way. Prayer isn't a means of twisting God's arm so that I can get my way. Would I reign? Would I be exalted to the throne of the universe with Christ? Then the way to the throne is to kneel and tell God that you accept his will.

Oh, what a present that was for God, what a sacrifice, when his own Son knelt and, through his tears, did what God wanted him to do, though he would have preferred not to have to drink that cup.

Why talk to God? To offer him a sacrifice. Then get down on your knees, and say, 'I didn't want to do this or that, but if you want it then I submit.' That's why we talk to God.

Our Lord Jesus, in submission to his Father's will, knelt down and 'offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears' (Heb 5:7).

Christians lift holy hands in intercession for others

Timothy says, 'I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling' (1 Tim 2:8). Some dear Christians take it as a rule that that has got to be literally done every time they pray. So you will find some Christians lifting up their hands to God, and if they want to do it, as far as I'm concerned there is no rule in the book against it, is there?

Why talk to God? To make intercession for others, and it's natural to plead isn't it? Have you never seen a gospel preacher plead with the people to come to Christ and the way he

stretches his arms out? Have you never heard God speaking to the unconverted and pleading with them to come and be saved? 'But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people"' (Rom 10:21). So, in Timothy, these men stand to pray, 'lifting up holy hands'. Holy hands—if I'm going to lift up my hands to God in prayer and intercession, I'd better see they're clean, hadn't I?

We have a duty to intercede for others and our hands must be holy.

Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven

Should you shut your eyes when you pray?

You say, 'Yes, of course you should. I find it very helpful to shut my eyes when I pray.'

There are no legalistic rules. If you find it better to shut your eyes when you pray, then shut your eyes when you pray.

Christ didn't always shut his, did he? We read that our Lord Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven (John 17:1). Oh, what a lovely thing to be able to lift up his eyes into heaven and know himself Son of his Father, heaven his home and to have right of access. These gestures can be physical, if you like, but what's more important is the attitude of heart they betray.

We too can come, and what a lovely thing it is, while we stand with two feet on this earth, to be able to lift up our eyes to heaven, into the very holiest of all, and *know ourselves welcome in the divine presence.*

My brother, you're going home, aren't you? It's where you belong. If tomorrow took one of these young girls here away down to Australia, their parents would love to get a letter home or a phone call. Why bother to write a letter home or to ring up? It would cost a lot from Australia. Why write? Why talk? Well, it's good to keep in touch with our loved ones at home.

Why talk to God? While we're in this world we're on business for God, and *we're exiles away from home.* Short of being there bodily, it's the best way of being in touch with home. It's possible to talk to God in his heaven until you feel yourself veritably there.

Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven to speak to his Father and to keep in touch with home.

Daniel prayed towards Jerusalem

Finally, Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10). God bless the man; he was regular at his prayers.

You say, 'That was an irksome duty.'

No it wasn't. He came home, went up to his bedroom, opened the windows and prayed towards Jerusalem.

You say, 'What on earth did he do that for?'

It was for various reasons. Daniel once lived in Jerusalem. He was a prince in Jerusalem and God allowed the Babylonians to capture his city and take him off into exile. Daniel was an exceedingly clever man. He came through the university with top class degrees and rose to the highest pinnacles in the Babylonian and Persian civil service. As you may imagine for a man in that position, nearest to the king and the emperor himself, his life was full from one end of the day to the other with all sorts of responsibilities and worries and administrative cares. He was busy from morning to night with the high duties of state. So as not to be

submerged in the detail of life, he found it necessary to go up to his room three times a day, open the windows and look towards Jerusalem.

Why talk to God? Daniel believed God's promises. Why Jerusalem? One day Jerusalem, that now lay in desolation, would be restored and rebuilt, the Messiah would come and the whole world would be blessed; so Daniel liked to go up to his room, open the windows and look that way.

You say, 'That was only a gesture; he couldn't see Jerusalem. What is the benefit of looking towards Jerusalem, or any other way for that matter, when you pray?'

Well it doesn't matter which way you look, north, east, south or west, but what Daniel was doing was directing his own attention to God's great promises in the earth and what his plans and purposes were, and therefore what he himself should aim at and hope for.

You know it's true of us too. You may not be a statesman like Daniel, but I expect you find like me that it would be perilously easy to be so busy with cups and saucers, washing the clothes, getting the groceries, doing your job in this competitive world, to get so full of all the detail of life and what lies immediately at our hands, and forget the great purposes of God in life. The Lord is coming and he has purposes for us and for this earth. God has great schemes and it's a marvellous thing to remember it from time to time throughout the day and say, 'Lord, how is my life fitting into your bigger scheme?' If we don't, we shall lose sight of the goal and get so taken up with the little details of life that we forget the very purpose of living.

Why talk to God? To renew our vision and our goals, to buttress our hearts and faith with a renewed grip on the promises of God, to lay hold again of the glorious future that lies ahead so that we may work for it more intelligently.

Daniel prayed towards Jerusalem to remind himself of the great purposes of God and what life is really about.

So we have gone over just a few of the prayers and a few of the postures in prayer. I do hope you won't misunderstand me. I'm not telling you that you must do all these things: that you must kneel or sit or stand, keep your eyes open or keep them shut, open your windows in a certain direction, or close them. No, we've been studying these postures because they show us the different attitudes of heart when men and women pray and the things they're saying to God, the reasons why they're praying and what it means to them and what it means to God. The whole gamut of life is there. There isn't anything that you may not come and talk to God about.

Why talk to God? Because God loves us to talk to him and there's so much to talk about.

Proportions in Prayer

Our topic for the weekend, as you know, is the topic of prayer. Last night we thought of the *purpose* of prayer and of the various *postures* people rightly adopt when they pray to God, expressive of the needs of their hearts and of their situation.

This afternoon I want to think with you about *proportions* in prayer: the way in life we express our sense of proportion by the things we pray for, and the way we ought in turn to think about what life's true proportions are, so that we make sure that in our prayers we pray more for the most important things. For that reason, I want to base our lesson on the Gospel of Luke from chapter 10 onwards, because it seems to me that here our Lord is addressing himself to the question of life's proportions.

But first, let's read a passage from Matthew.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (6:5–15)

So, let's add the parallel passage from Luke:

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.' And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and he will answer from within, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything"? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend,

yet because of his impudence [shamelessness] he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (11:1–13)

And finally some words from the Epistle to the Ephesians, first in chapter 1.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (vv. 15–23)

Now in chapter 3.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (vv. 14–21)

May God give us good understanding of his word.

When things get out of proportion

This section of Luke begins in 10:38 with the well-known story of Mary and Martha, and how Martha came to the Lord Jesus complaining about Mary. 'Lord,' said Martha, 'speak to my sister' (see v. 40).

When you come to 12:13 you meet a man and, if you please, he is saying something very similar. 'Lord,' he says, 'speak to my brother.'

Life is full of men and women saying, 'Lord, speak to my sister, speak to my brother', for they've got things all out of proportion.

Martha and Mary

Martha was entertaining the Lord, and so was Mary meant to be, but Mary left all the work and went and sat at the Lord's feet and heard his voice. Martha felt it wasn't fair, Mary going off and getting all the spiritual benefit, while she still had to see about the soufflé and the pavlova in the kitchen. Martha wanted to treat the Lord to such wonderful meals that weekend. Any woman would, wouldn't they, when the Lord came visiting? She had got such elaborate cookery going on that it was taking all her time to get it ready.

I'm glad the women give a lot of time to the pavlovas, aren't you? I love them immensely. But the question was that the Lord was visiting them perhaps for just a few hours, and there wouldn't be many times when he came that way and stayed in their house. It was a question therefore of how they should apportion the time.

It was a lovely thing, making the Lord's bed, doing the dishes, cooking the food for him to enjoy, but there needed to be some sense of proportion. To put the Lord in the best room of the house, set him comfortably down on a seat and then say, 'Excuse me a minute,' and be lost for the next three hours while you're getting the pavlova ready, with no time to speak to the Lord, only time to bring in the meal, gobble it up and then the Lord departs. What a sad misuse of time. What a sad lack of sense of proportion that would be.

I'm sure the Lord enjoyed the meal, but what do you think he would have loved more? A tremendously elaborate dinner, or something simple with the chance to talk to Martha? I think I know which he would have preferred. Much as he loved all that Martha was doing, he loved Martha more. He would have gone without the sweet at that meal in order to have the extra time to sit there and talk to Martha and enjoy her company.

When Mary left all the work in the kitchen and sat at the Lord's feet and heard his voice, and Martha came complaining, 'Lord, speak to my sister,' he gently corrected Martha. 'You know, Martha, you're busy about many things, and they're all good, but if you strip it down to the bare necessities, only one thing is necessary' (see vv. 41-42).

What are the essential things in life?

In this life, when we can't always do everything that we'd like to do, we've got to choose, haven't we? We've got to select the most important things in life and put them first, and make sure that we spend the maximum amount of time on the things that are of maximum importance. If we're not careful we shall get busy about ten thousand and one things, and the little things will squeeze out the time and energy that ought to have been given to the bigger things.

Luke reminds us that the Saviour at this point was on a journey (v. 38). He was passing through this world, going home to glory. You know, we too are on a journey, and there's a difference between being on a journey and being settled down.

This is the time of the year when folks are thinking of their holidays, getting those beautiful brochures from the travel agents and looking for where they can go. Shall it be Bangor or Portrush? Can we rise to a holiday in Spain this year? That's a beautiful hotel! Will it have to be a caravan holiday or even perhaps a tent? If it's got to be a tent, you'll have to revise your list of the things you can take with you. If it's a cruise you can take four or five great trunks in your cabin, but if it's a tent in Donegal it will have to be the bare minimum. What are the essential things?

The man and his inheritance

It's the same with that other man, isn't it? He said, 'Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me' (Luke 12:13 KJV). His brother was taking the lot, and the man was getting things seriously out of proportion.

Our Lord said, 'Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?' (v. 14). He needed to be careful himself, so our Lord told a parable to them.

The parable of the Rich Fool

There was a rich farmer once, and his fields brought forth an impossible harvest until he hadn't got anywhere to store his goods. He said to himself, 'What shall I do? I've got so many goods and I've nowhere to store them.' So, to solve his storage problems he built bigger barns and there he stored his goods. And when he'd done it, he said, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry' (v. 19).

And a voice said, 'You fool! What a stupid solution to your storage problems. You've overlooked one very big fact that you're not going to be here much longer. This very night your life is going to be required of you and then whose shall the goods be, when you must out of necessity go and leave them? What a fool, when you could have sent them on in advance, home to glory.'

We do need to get our sense of proportions right, don't we? And it seems to me that there's nowhere on earth that reveals our sense of proportions more than our prayers, for we pray for the things that we think are most important. Have you checked up on yourself recently? What are the things that you ask the Lord for most? For obviously they're the things that you regard as most important.

We would be wise people therefore, to listen to the Lord himself. The disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples' (Luke 11:1). Our Lord taught them, not just a pattern to repeat in parrot fashion, but a pattern of praying that gets the most important things in life first, so that by constant habit we might begin to get our sense of proportion right.

In a minute we're going to look at that pattern prayer as it is given in Luke, but first I want to consider the similar passage in Matthew and what it has to say about purpose in prayer. We didn't get time last night and we ought to look at it now.

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (6:5–15)

Why should we pray?

Because there is a reward for praying. So our Lord says, when you pray be careful to see that you pray in such fashion as to get the true reward of praying. Some people get the wrong kind of reward for praying, so let's listen to what he says:

And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

The hypocrites love to stand praying in the synagogues and at the street corners. They offer such long, beautiful prayers, but they've one eye half-open to see whether people are admiring what they say. While they seem to be talking to God, actually they're talking to their fellow men and wanting to be seen, so that men shall say, 'What a marvellous prayer; what a tremendous man he is to be able to pray like that.' So they've got the reward they went in for, the praise and admiration of men, and that's all the reward they're ever going to get. They have their reward and that's the end of it. They prayed to be seen of men, and they were seen of men; they prayed to be admired of men, and they were admired of men.

What is the true reward of praying?

Answering that question will involve us in another question: why pray?

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Says our Lord, 'Don't be like the Gentiles when you pray.'

'What do you mean, don't be like the Gentiles?'

Well, they think that they are heard for their many words. The way to get things out of God is to pray; and the more you pray, the more you get. The more words you use, the more times you pray, the more you'll get. It's a kind of putting of pressure on God; and the more pressure you put on God, the more he'll give you. Two prayers, two benefits. Three prayers, three benefits. Ten prayers, ten benefits. Thirty-five prayers, thirty-five days' indulgence. The more prayers, the more benefits. A kind of mathematical business calculation. To the Gentile, prayer is putting pressure on God—the more pressure, the more benefits.

'Don't you be like that,' said our Lord—though we are sometimes, aren't we?

Of course we make a mistake that's very easily made. We say that we should pray more, and so we should. If we prayed more we should get more blessings. Then it creeps into our heads that somehow it's by the praying that we get the blessing: the more pressure we put on God, the more we extort. That isn't so, and I'm glad it isn't so, aren't you? If I had to twist God's arm before he blessed me, I don't know that I'd want to go to heaven. If he's a God who wasn't thinking of blessing me at all, until I said that he ought to be doing a bit better than

this. 'Let me see if I can wake God up to his duty and suggest ways that he could be blessing me a bit.' If I had to do that by my prayers, I'm afraid I should be disappointed when I got home to heaven. 'God could have done more than this; let me make a few suggestions to improve heaven.'

Oh, no. That won't do. When we pray, we pray to a God who is both all wise and all loving. Prayer isn't a refined form of twisting God's arm to get something from him. Neither is it to give him any information. 'Don't pray like that,' says our Lord, 'for *your Father knows* what you need before you ask him.' He's not waiting for information, 'Oh, I didn't know you needed that. Now you've told me, of course I'll give it.' We are to make known our requests to God, but not because he doesn't know already.

'Well, why then?' you say. 'If God already knows what I need and he loves me, why should I have to ask at all?'

An illustration

I don't know whether I'm right to compare the Almighty with humble human beings, but have you ever been in a house where mother has prepared a most delightful party for her child's birthday? The other infants around the area all come into this birthday party, and they know that everything she's put on the table is for them. They haven't got a clue about the marvels of cookery that mother has set her mind to producing. So, there are all these marvellous things on this table, and the little boy wants to grab something.

'No,' says mother, 'no you don't. You ask first.'

'You ask first? But I thought everything was there for me.'

'Yes, it certainly is.'

You say, 'Is it the asking that persuades mother to give to the little boy?'

No, she intended to give it anyway.

'Then why does mother make the child ask?'

Firstly, to teach good manners, and secondly, to get it across to the infant's mind that he's not to take these things for granted. How easily children do, don't they? And how easily grown-ups do too. Ten thousand and one things: our health, our food, our clothes, and sometimes only when the supply dries up does it dawn on us that all these years we've been taking them for granted. It's a sad thing when a child takes everything it's given for granted, and in the end ceases to be grateful for anything.

It's more than that, isn't it? There are those goodies on the table, but there's mother who provided them. They didn't just drop out of the sky, and the child is taught to ask mother so that he might come to see that it's by mother's gracious giving that he enjoys the thing, and so gets to know mother. When the child is grown-up, and is as bald as can be and his mother is 96, he doesn't want little jelly babies on top of a cake any more, but the impression of mother as a wonderful mother remains. 'She slaved for us when we were kids, and what birthday parties she gave us.' He doesn't want jelly babies, but he loves mother and the memory of her will go with him to eternity.

Why pray? Why ask? Not to give God information, but to be taught that our good things come from God, and in the taking of them to get to know God himself.

So now we come to what both Matthew and Luke are talking about, *proportions in prayer*. When you pray — well now, that's a point, *when you pray* — what would you put first and what would you put second? If you could only ask the Lord for, say, half a dozen things, what would you ask for first?

'Lord, I need a job; I need a husband; I do need a new car; help my daughter, she's ill.'
What would you put first?

What are life's most important things?

God first: 1. Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name¹

Why should I pray that first? The most important thing for me in life is that God's name becomes something sacred and holy above all else. Why's that? Well, what is the most valuable thing you can think of in life? What, after all, is the most valuable thing in praying anyway?

Degrees of reward

Let me use another illustration. Here's a mother and she thinks it's a very good thing for her boy to learn the piano, so she starts him bright and early when he is seven years old, much to the grief of the next-door neighbours. It's difficult to persuade him to see the point of practising for half an hour every day when he could be out kicking a ball around the street. That's his idea of importance. So mother has to give him a little box of sweets as a reward for playing the piano. He diligently practises and gets his box of sweets. That's the reward you get for playing it, he thinks.

Then he grows up a bit, gets to the age of, shall we say 13? He has 'Now the night is over' and a little bit of Tchaikovsky here and there, much sorted out. Of course, when mother has her friends in, the boy is summoned in his best clothes. He has to sit down at the piano and show the assembled guests how well he can play. All the guests say, 'He's a genius, it's marvellous, we've never heard playing like it,' and the boy's head begins to swell. So he's found another reward for playing the piano. Not sweets, but the admiration he's getting from all the guests.

Now the young gentleman has grown to the age of 45 and he's manager of a factory. Coming in at 10:30 at night, worried out of his wits with all the pressures of life, he sits down at the piano. There's nobody about, and he plays the piano. Is he expecting some sweets as a reward? The applause? What is the reward of playing? The reward of playing is the playing itself, and the pleasure of the music, and knowing why Tchaikovsky wrote that bit like that, and what he was trying to say. Before you know where you are, the man is in fellowship with Tchaikovsky and with some of the most brilliant minds that ever wrote music.

Sacred values

Why pray? What reward are you getting for it? The first reward is God himself. To meet God, and for God to become something superlatively wonderful and glorious, and his name becomes sacred. Some of the sacredness of heaven begins to fill my soul, because there are

¹ KJV used, as it is the best known version for 'The Lord's Prayer'.

sacred values in this universe, you know, and the most sacred thing of all, the most wonderful, is God.

'Hallowed be your name.' *Hallowed* means 'set apart'. Set apart as something that is valuable; something you wouldn't want to spoil, that you want to keep and treasure and guard.

Looking after valuable things

I dare say you've got various kinds of cups in your house. You've got cups like I have, a bit chipped at one corner, but they have to do. Mugs without any saucers. We use them on ordinary days. Then you have another kind, china cups perhaps, that you get out when you've got visitors. But in one of your rooms, in the corner there is a beautiful china cabinet, perhaps with a glass door, with cups the like of which you never saw. They don't come out; it would have to be a visit by the Queen for them to come out.

'Why don't you have them out?'

'We don't want them getting broken.'

So you have them in a china cabinet, just for the joy of sitting down and looking at them.

Life has all sorts of things, and the most valuable things are sacred. If I might use the term 'thing', the most valuable in all of life is God himself. For my own sake, if I want to be wealthy, I've got to be made to see that true wealth and value is in God. In this life, how easily sacred things get trampled down, holy things are transgressed and become cheap. Some would 'blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called', says James 2:7, and God's name becomes in the dust.

I expect you know that where I work we've got nice lawns in front of the building, and at the back as well. When we invite mums and dads to come and see Jonny take his degree and things like that, of course the visitors can walk on the lawns and enjoy them, and the strawberries and the cream and all that kind of thing. We want a decent lawn for the parents.

Shall I tell you another thing? So that these lawns look decent for the parents, on ordinary days we don't walk on the grass, we walk round it on the paths. If five or six thousand of us walked across them every day there wouldn't be any lawn, so we've got paths to keep them as something valuable that we don't want to trample down.

Shall I tell you a little secret, if you tell nobody else? In this last four or five years, we've had students who are so important that they'll walk right over the lawn, and make great paths across it. Well, they're in a hurry and it doesn't matter to them that they're ruining the lawn. Who's to say that they've got any idea of its value, and the thing gets trampled.

It's not just the green grass, but how easily in this world life's sacred things get trampled as we lose the idea of sacredness, and him from whom sacredness comes, God himself. Therefore, our Lord said, 'When you pray, what's the most important? — "Father, hallowed be your name."' If we lost the sense of its sacredness, life itself would become cheap, for what are we apart from God? If this is just a materialistic universe and there is no God, then we're just a few pounds' worth of chemicals, and that's all we are, to be thrown out on the scrapheap of eternity. My whole value of a human being is that I'm made by the creator, who is my supreme value. God and his sacredness come first.

2. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven

What comes second? You say, 'I come second.' No, no, God is second as well. We do like our own way. I know, because I do myself. We are full of suggestions, aren't we, how God can improve things? How would you like the job of inventing heaven? What would you do? Go on, invent a universe, have a go. Run it, store it with angels, and archangels too. Do you know, it suddenly comes to my head that many of the notions I've had have come unstuck and they wouldn't be good anyway. Just imagine the responsibility of planning eternity.

The question therefore is, by whose will does the whole thing run? Whose will is it, whose design and whose purpose is it geared to fulfil? I'm a very late comer on this planet, you know. I won't tell you how long I've been here, but it's a remarkably short time compared to how long the place has been about. It wasn't my idea that invented it and all the good things have come about by somebody else's genius, namely God's. I'm here by his mercy, by his sufferance, by his will.

If you won't mind my saying it, I was his idea. Perhaps you don't think it was very good, but I was his idea. It was his idea to have human beings and I dare to believe it was his idea to have a David Gooding and a Joan Smith, and all the rest of them, and the heaven I read of in his word for forgiven sinners was his idea too. I should be a very wise man to say, 'Let me find out what the Creator's idea is for the running of things, the purpose it's meant to achieve, and what the Redeemer's will is, and then pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done.'

Place God first, and when you've done it don't pat yourself on the back and say, 'What a self-denying person I've been.' Of course not; it is in our own interests to put God first. Just like a compass, when it's left it will go back to the north, so with fallen men and women. The compass point of their lives will turn back to their own selves, and even the redeemed must train themselves in their praying to get things in their proper perspective and put God first.

My needs: 1. Give us this day our daily bread

We're not meant to be stoics and pretend we don't have any needs. Of course we've got needs and God loves to hear them. Why should I pray for my daily bread? We've already considered that it isn't that God wouldn't give it to us unless we asked, but he wants us to ask him so that it might rivet our attention that we do not get it automatically, but from him. Of course we work for it; he gives us the strength to work. The farmer has to go out and sow the field and reap the corn, but it's God who gives it, isn't it?

You say, 'I wish I'd been living in the days of the wilderness.'

'Why's that?'

'I shouldn't have to work because the manna just came down from heaven.'

Well so it did, but even then they had to go out and gather it and cook it. And the miracle that puts a bit of wheat on the end of a stalk every year is no less a miracle. Our scientists can't do it themselves yet, any more than the manna coming down out of the sky. I do well to remember it is by God's grace and his miraculous workings in nature that I get my food. The food doesn't come to me impersonally as a battle against the forces of nature, but my food comes to me as a result of a cooperation with the creator, as a son would cooperate with his father.

It isn't just with the forces of nature that we have to contend as we go about getting our daily food. But we have to contend with market forces and all sorts of political theories and economic conditions. What a sorry thing it would be, if we were dependent on them, and only them, for our daily bread. What a lovely thing it is to be able to bow and come to the source of the daily bread, and know that ultimately I get what is given from his hand. It would begin to undercut envy and greed and instil more gratitude, to realize that the very sausages I eat come from the divine hand.

2. And forgive us our debts

Along with my daily bread the very next thing I pray for, almost in one breath, is forgiveness, for I need that every day as well. Two absolutely indispensable necessities: daily bread and daily forgiveness. During all the years I have lived and all the multitude of days, I haven't lived one day perfectly yet, have you? There has never been one day in all my long history, but at the end of it I needed forgiveness, and I don't get it automatically. I have to pray.

'Ah,' says a theologian, 'surely this passage is for the Jews? You don't have to pray for forgiveness of sins: when you first trusted Christ you were told that you have forgiveness. By just one sacrifice for sin Christ has put away your sin forever, and there is no condemnation. What are you doing asking for forgiveness?'

But surely, Jews don't get forgiveness by merit, do they? They get forgiveness on the same terms as I do, if we get forgiveness at all. It's only through the blood of Christ that anybody ever got forgiveness.

And secondly, I'm not going soft on my theology I hope. Yes, for the believer there is no condemnation; there is no penalty. In that sense, the believer does not come into judgment. But there is such a thing as a father's discipline, and if as a believer I misbehave and don't repent of it God will discipline me. So I should be a wise man to come and confess my sin and ask for his forgiveness.

That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Cor 11:30-32)

Judging myself will mean that I come and ask for forgiveness and God will spare me because I've seen sense and admitted the sin, but I shall need to do it every day.

3. as we forgive our debtors

At the same time, I'm required to be able to say not merely, 'I will forgive,' but, 'I have forgiven everyone who is indebted to me.' If I don't do it that's a very bad thing, isn't it? It will displease God if I don't do it.

Our Lord told a parable once of a servant who had offended his master who threatened to discipline him by prison, the man appealed to his master and he forgave him. And then that servant went out and found a fellow servant, who owed him a miserable little pittance, and he demanded payment from his fellow servant. He couldn't do it and begged for time, but servant number one wouldn't listen and he thrust servant number two into prison. When his

fellow servants saw what had taken place they told their master. Then the master called servant number one and he said, 'I forgave you all that debt, didn't I, and I let you off the discipline, and you wouldn't forgive your fellow servant? So now you yourself will go through the discipline' (see Matt 18:23–34.)

'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart' (v. 35).

These are the important things in life to pray about. And there's one more thing.

4. And lead us not into temptation

Why do I need to pray that? Someone will tell me that the Bible says that God doesn't tempt anybody. He is not tempted of evil, therefore he doesn't tempt anybody (see Jas 1:13).

That is perfectly true; God doesn't tempt anybody, but he allows us to be tempted, doesn't he? He allowed Job to be tempted by the devil. It's a comfort to my heart that the devil wasn't able to do it just how and when he liked, and in what proportion he liked. Satan had to ask permission of the heavenly court before he could tempt Job (Job 1:6–12), and before he could tempt the twelve apostles and try to sift them as wheat (Luke 22:31). But he was allowed to do it, and God will sometimes allow circumstances to come so that Satan is allowed to tempt us.

Therefore, when I pray 'lead me not into temptation', it's not because I want to object to, or frustrate the will of God, but because I know my own heart. I don't say to God, 'I'm ready for any examination you might like to put upon me. Try me in anything, I'm ready and very confident.'

Peter did, didn't he? When our Lord said to him, 'Peter, you're going to deny me,' Peter said, 'you are mistaken there, Lord. There were times before when I've had to put you right, and you are mistaken this time again. Should all deny you in fact, I wouldn't. I'm ready for anything, even maybe the risk of death.'

How different our Lord, sinless Son of God that he is. He said to his disciples, 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation,' and he himself went and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done' (22:40, 42).

Peter thought he was so big, but he would have done better to say, 'Lord, yes I am weak. Don't lead me to temptation, for I shall only survive by your supernatural grace.'

So then, proportions in praying. You say, 'What about the new settee I wanted? Where's that got to?' God is interested in settees you know. He made us the exact shape so that we can sit on them, and he intends that we shall have such things to sit on. We needn't be afraid of asking for the settee. I suspect it comes under the clause, 'Give us this day our daily bread.' But let's get it into proportion. It is in our prayers that our sense of proportion gets sorted out.²

² Continued at the beginning of the next session.

Persistence in Prayer

I promised last evening that in this third session we would think together on the topic of persistence in prayer, which is a problem that besets many people, and that we will do presently; but for the moment we ought to continue a little with the topic that we were talking about earlier.

Proportions in Prayer

To introduce that, let us read again the parable that we read from Luke 11 and add one or more suitable passages.

And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and he will answer from within, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything"? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (11:5–13)

And in that same Gospel, chapter 18:

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, "Give me justice against my adversary." For a while he refused, but afterwards he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (vv. 1–8)

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he enquired what this meant. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.'

And he cried out, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' He said, 'Lord, let me recover my sight.' And Jesus said to him, 'Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.' And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. (vv. 35-43)

In our first session this afternoon we found that the section of Luke's Gospel that begins in 10:38 is devoted primarily to a discussion by our Lord on the true proportions and priorities of life. That applies of course not only to the pattern of prayer that he laid down in 11:1-4, but also in the parable that he proceeds to tell in verses 5-13, which is likewise devoted to the topic of prayer. It is a prayer in which we ask for the Holy Spirit, but that will depend upon what I have here for the time translated our 'shamelessness' in asking (v. 8), and this will depend on how urgent a priority we consider the thing to be for which we ask. The urgency, the necessity with which I regard the thing for which I am asking, is an exceedingly important point in prayer. Now I am aware that two difficulties face us when we come to interpret this parable, so let us go through it slowly.

A linguistic difficulty

The one difficulty is in this word in verse 8, 'shamelessness'. In the Revised Version, which I have in front of me, the verse reads like this, 'I say unto you, though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his *importunity* he will arise and give him as many as he needeth.'

Many people therefore have taken this parable to be a parable saying that if only you are insistent enough, importunate enough, you will get what you ask, as though God wouldn't give it to you if you didn't insist. But then come the learned linguists and they point out that the word in Greek does not mean importunity, but strictly it means *shamelessness*. Therefore, people debate, as they have always done of course, but more so nowadays, as to what indeed our Lord was saying and what he meant by this particular word.

So let's look at the parable itself. Our Lord envisages an ancient town in the Middle East. If a friend came to your home in those days you'd feel honour bound to provide him with as best a meal as you possibly could, whatever hour of the day he came. So if he arrived at two o'clock in the morning you'd get up. You wouldn't say, 'Let's have just a cup of coffee and go to bed and have breakfast in the morning.' That would be a very serious offence against their code of hospitality. You must give him as sumptuous a dinner as you possibly can provide, and if you don't you would be ashamed of yourself and you would get a bad name. Indeed, the whole village would get a bad name. If a stranger or a friend could come to that village in the middle of the night and not be welcomed with generous hospitality, there would be a mark placed in people's memory against that village, as being an inhospitable, and therefore a bad, village.

The friend in the parable arrives in the middle of the night and the house to which he comes hasn't enough food, so the man who owns the house goes down the street to a friend

of his, knocks on the door and through the door he shouts to the man, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.'

At that point, our Lord asks a question, and his Eastern audience would know the rules of hospitality because they belong to that part. 'Which of you has a friend who would say, "Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything"?'

'Would you ever have a friend like that?' says our Lord. No, indeed they wouldn't, for if it would be a shameful thing for the first man not to feed his unexpected guest, it would also be shameful if the second man refused to get up. That would also gain the village a very bad name. So says our Lord, 'the man would get up and give the loaves.'

Why would he? Well, not so much because the man who asked is his friend. He mightn't do it in the name of friendship, but he will do it because of the man's, and here comes our word, *shamelessness*. I take the liberty to translate it literally. What was it about the man and his request that made the other fellow get up out of bed and give him what he asked for? It wasn't just because the man standing outside the door was his friend. When the linguists differ I take liberty to translate it literally – it was because of his shamelessness.

What does it mean, shamelessness? Well, in common parlance, does it mean his *cheek*? Well, there wasn't a blush on his face – if you could have seen it in the middle of the night. When he knocks on the door, he isn't apologizing, 'Oh, I'm sorry to come at this hour of the night. I'm sorry to disturb you, and I didn't want to disturb you really.' None of that. It was utter shamelessness; no sense of embarrassment whatsoever. He thinks it is the most reasonable thing to do, to get somebody up in the middle of the night to give him loaves of bread to put before his guest.

Let's use a modern illustration because perhaps your attitude to guests who arrive off the M1 at 2:30 in the middle of the night is slightly different. I shan't be trying it on you, at least not tomorrow night anyway! Let's think about the way we treat doctors and expect them to treat us. Here's a mother, and in the middle of the night her 6 year old is violently sick and has a high temperature. Now what shall she do? Shall she ring up the doctor and get the doctor out of his bed to come, or not? It's a difficult decision sometimes, isn't it? Suppose she rang him up and got him out of his bed while there are six inches of snow outside, and by the time he got there the 6 year old has gone back to bed, sleeping very well and healthily. Upon examination, it turned out to be no more than he'd eaten four plates of strawberries at teatime when he should only have eaten one and was violently sick and after that he recovered. Wouldn't she be covered with confusion and dismay, and feel ashamed of herself for having got the doctor out of bed at that hour of the night? Yes, I think she would.

So mum ponders this. Is little Johnny sickening for appendicitis or something? Does he urgently need the medic, or has he gorged too many strawberries or something and will be perfectly okay tomorrow? Ah, that might be a difficult decision.

But suppose in the middle of the night her husband takes a heart attack. He's gone blue in the face and the sweat's standing out on his forehead. Immediately she picks up the phone, and the doctor comes. Now it's a very different woman summoning the doctor. There's no, 'Would you come, if you please?' and, 'Perhaps you ought to come.' It's 'Doctor, my husband's had a heart attack. Come.' In Ulster, they've got an ambulance standing ready every hour of the day and night. The woman whose husband's had a heart attack would ring

up utterly unashamed, and when the man came to the door through six inches of snow, she wouldn't be the slightest embarrassed and ashamed because she'd called him in the middle of the night. What is more, he wouldn't be angry either. Why wouldn't she be ashamed? Well, it's the urgency of the case. She must act. She wouldn't be ashamed to ask him to come in the middle of the night. Her shamelessness in asking was because of the urgency of the need; not to ask would be a terrible disgrace and a dereliction of duty.

Because they have different ideas of hospitality, the man in the parable wouldn't be the slightest ashamed. Not to feed a guest would be such an unthinkable failure of duty, so the man would have no shame in knocking up his neighbour, and his neighbour would agree with him. If it were just a question of friendship, he'd say, 'Wait until tomorrow,' but nobody in that village would hesitate to feed a guest who had come. The man in bed will rise, not because he is his friend but because of his utter *shamelessness*. He probably recognizes it in the tone of voice.

When the doctor answers the telephone and hears, 'My husband's had a heart attack, come quick,' he picks up the tone of your voice and he comes.

And you say, 'What would be so urgent for me that I could ask of God with such utter shamelessness and expect God to give it?' Well, the conclusion is in the last verse of the paragraph, 'How much more shall your heavenly Father give his Holy Spirit to them that ask?'

A theological difficulty

But here we get our second difficulty. This time, it's brought in by the theologians.

'That was a very good verse when it was spoken and applied to the people who were living in our Lord's day, because they were living before Pentecost. Therefore, it was right and proper for them to ask for the Holy Spirit. But on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and now every believer has the Holy Spirit. We don't have to ask for him. Indeed, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." Every single believer has been baptized in the Spirit and has been made to drink of the Spirit' (see Rom 8:9 and 1 Cor 12:13).

That is gloriously so. Every believer, baptized in the Holy Spirit, having been made to drink of the Holy Spirit, is in the Holy Spirit and the Spirit is in him. In that sense no believer needs to ask for the Holy Spirit. But then, is there no sense in which believers who have been sealed with the Holy Spirit need to ask for the Holy Spirit?

To answer these theologians and to remind you that it is in the Bible, let's read from Ephesians chapter 1 and then chapter 3. Here Paul tells us that he had heard of these people that they had believed.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. (1:13–16)

'I have heard of your faith,' he says, and secondly he tells them that, upon believing, they had been 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit'. They have the Holy Spirit; there's no doubt about it. He tells them further in chapter 2, 'For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father' (v. 18). So it is very clear then that they have the Holy Spirit. They are believers exactly like you and I are, and yet on both occasions he prays for the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened. (1:17-18)

Paul is praying for the illumination of the believers' hearts by God's Spirit. And in chapter 3, he tells us:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (3:14-17)

Two operations of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers who already possess the Holy Spirit, for which Paul prays and prays insistently. We need to pray it too, even though we are believers, for these things are not just once and for all things, but continuing processes.

- 1. 'A spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.'

Not just our minds being informed, but our hearts: the deep well of our being illuminated by God's Spirit.

Why do I need to be enlightened by God's Spirit?

In the first place, *that I might know what I am saved for*, what is 'the hope of his calling' (see 1:18). I do need to know why I'm saved, don't I?

Fancy a man going to the trouble to buy a car, and when he gets it home he says to himself, 'There's a car here, I've forgotten what I got it for. What do I want this thing for? What do I do with it?'

What are we saved for? What's the object of the exercise? What is the hope in the plan and purpose that God holds beyond me; the reason why he saved me, and the hope which I should be stretching toward? The hope has not just got to be a thing in my head that I've heard of, but a thing that somehow gets right down into my heart by the Holy Spirit's illumination, so that it becomes a reality to me: a vivid and a wonderful thing that takes control and directs my energies.

Secondly, I need *God's Holy Spirit to illuminate my heart and begin to change my value systems*, so that I may know 'what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints' (1:18). All of us are infinitely more wealthy than we think we are.

You say, 'How am I wealthy?'

Have you never pondered your brother or sister who's sitting next to you? They are a bit of God's inheritance, you know. 'The LORD'S portion is his people' (Deut 32:9). When I'm saved, I like to think what I get out of it, but I ought to stop and consider what God is getting

out of it. What is God getting out of this vast creation, and what is he getting out of it now that he's redeemed it? Well, amongst other things, he's getting that fellow Christian of yours. Do you find that a kind of an anti-climax? 'Well, that's nice of God, because he's a very loving God, but I want something more than that myself.' Yes?

Do you know, without the slightest exaggeration, if you could see your sister as one day she will be, you'd fall at her feet. John fell at the angel's feet, and angels are not even redeemed (see Rev 22:8-9). It wouldn't be the right thing to do, but if you could see now your brother and sister as they will be when God's inheritance has been perfected and they are conformed to Christ, you'd be down on your knees. Do you believe it, or does it all sound fantastic and unreal? It does, doesn't it? That's why we treat one another shabbily sometimes and Christians get at loggerheads with Christians, because their eyes aren't really enlightened yet as to the wealth of God's inheritance in the believers. They don't really believe it. Oh, how it would transform our human relationships and relationships in the church, if the eyes of our very hearts were enlightened to perceive the exceeding riches of God's inheritance in that dear believer who sits by your side. Why, some of us scarcely believe it about ourselves. 'I pray for it,' says Paul, 'that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened by God's Spirit.'

- 2. Then to know 'what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe' (v. 19).

That power has already operated and secured that every believer is seated with Christ in heavenly places. It has brought us far along the road towards eternal glory already.

What a wonder it would be in life if, instead of thinking of the blessed Lord Jesus merely in heaven, we were really 'strengthened with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts' (3:16-17). In that sense, Christ is in every believer. In another sense, for Christ to take up his dwelling in all the rooms of our personality, it requires first an operation of God's Spirit, then a continuing strengthening of our inner being by his Spirit, to make it possible.

I was living in a little backstreet in London last year, doing some work. When I wanted to go to my place of business and elsewhere, I had to go past Buckingham Palace and sometimes stupid thoughts came into my head. 'Suppose I was invited in, what should I say and do?'

If you had to spend two and a half hours this afternoon with the Queen, how would you manage? It's all right to stand on the pavement and wave your Union Jack when she goes by, but to have to spend time with the dear woman, what on earth do you talk about? Would you dry up suddenly and not be able to think of anything more to talk about? How would you have real, practical fellowship with somebody so exalted? To do it, you'd need a bit of strengthening, wouldn't you? I should anyway.

What about the Lord of glory, who's dwelling in our hearts and wants us to converse with him? I need to be strengthened by his Spirit in the inner man, and to that end Paul himself prays for the believers. They're already believers, but he prays for these two operations by God's Spirit in their hearts, and if I had any sense in my head I should pray too. To get an answer will *partly* depend on how serious I am and whether I think I can get on without it.

Consider the man in the parable. An unexpected guest suddenly arrives and he invites him in, but he's no bread left in the pantry nor meat either; not a sausage. So now he's got to

make a decision. 'Well, let me see, it's 2:30 in the middle of the night. Is it worth making a fuss about it now, or could we get by until breakfast time and the shop's open?' Whether or not he goes and asks his neighbour for bread will depend on how important he thinks it is. And whether or not he keeps on asking until he gets it, will depend on how urgent he thinks it is.

It is so in this matter too. It's easy for us to get our emotions stirred in the meeting and say, 'Lord, I would like that,' and go away and forget it. But these things are not, sort of, sudden experiences that happen all of a moment, although they can involve such experiences. They are the work of a lifetime, for who would say that his eyes have already been enlightened enough, or his heart strengthened enough? And whether I keep on asking, expecting to get it, will depend on my *shamelessness*, my sense of urgency, and the sense in my heart that as I come to God, God himself would agree, 'Yes, you are right, you do need the Holy Spirit's work in your heart. You have every right to come and insist. I agree with you that this is a thing that must be attended to.' If you have any doubts that you will be heard, our Lord seeks to silence them with two further remarks.

1. The utter necessity of my need

The statement of spiritual laws: 'Everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it will be opened' (see Luke 11:9–10). That is an invariable law in the kingdom of God.

Sometimes we get discouraged in our praying, don't we? I do, because I ask and nothing seems to happen at once, and then I get discouraged. It's not good, is it? Because when I get home to heaven and the Lord says, 'Gooding, why did you give up praying for five or six weeks on end?' and I say, 'Because nothing happened, Lord', the Lord shall say, 'You mean, nothing appeared to be happening. Didn't you believe me when I said that everyone who asks receives?'

At this level, we're not asking for a brand new motorcycle. We're asking for God's Holy Spirit to be working in our hearts, and everyone who asks receives.

2. The character of God

'And you can know further,' says our Lord, 'if you think for a moment of *your own attitude to your children*.'

What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (vv. 11–13)

Human fathers are far from being perfect and can be very selfish and careless of their children, but if they have that milk of human kindness, how much more does your Father who is in heaven? And so as I come, I think of the urgency and the utter necessity of my need. Then I think of the character of God. He would be less than perfect if I could come and ask for this kind of thing and he failed to give it, and so we may come and ask for the workings of his Spirit.

I'm going to utter a grave criticism, and it might not yet be a criticism of you, but it is of me. I've been in many a prayer meeting and I've heard many requests for prayer, but I can't

remember the last time I heard anyone asking us to pray for brother so and so that he might be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. Do you? When did you last hear it prayed for the church that God would give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him? We don't have to use those words, but according to our Lord this is one of the great priorities that should be in our prayers at all hours of the day and night.

Persistence in prayer

For the time that is left, let's pass on to the topic of persistence in prayer. Ought I to pray and go on praying and insist I get what I ask for? Or have I to be content to ask and then leave it with the Lord, saying, 'If it's your will,' and just leave it and not mention it again? Can I come and claim, or must I just ask and leave it to the Lord whether he gives or not?

It seems to me that the simple answer to that matter depends in part on what it is you're praying for. What are the things that I must always pray for, keep on praying for, and never give up praying for? Let's take the example our Lord gave in Luke 18:1: 'And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.' Pray for what? This time it's a prayer for justice for his elect who cry unto him day and night. 'Will he delay long over them?' he asks (v. 7).

This parable in Luke follows our Lord's sermon on what things shall be like at the end of the age just prior to the second coming (17:20-37). He has just told us that at the end of the age the world will be pre-occupied, like they were in the days of Noah and Lot, with their 'eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building' (v. 28). They were so pre-occupied with their daily occupations that the Lord will come before they know where they are, and they are not prepared for some of the terrible conditions that will happen.

To tell us that we must not give up praying about this matter of God's avenging his elect, he told the parable about the widow and the unjust judge. And then our Lord asked, 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (18:8). Will he? Was he suggesting that there is any doubt? Consider the situation in the world as it's ever been since the day that Cain killed Abel. Oh, what great wickedness there has been, how terrible the persecutions.

We remember our dear brothers and sisters of a bygone age, tarred, feathered, put on poles and lit as lights to lighten the gardens of His Imperial Majesty Nero, so that his ladies and gentlemen could dance in the light of it. Remember our dear brethren and sisters thrown to the lions, despatched to the catacombs. We think of them eliminated in Albania now, and we think of them in Russia and in so many lands where they are persecuted. We also think of the man at work who won't idle his time away and insists on working properly and doesn't cheat, and gets into trouble with some of his fellow workmen who don't want to work, and perhaps loses his job. And of the principal of a firm who goes under and is dismissed or demoted or suffers loss because he won't cheat. It's a wicked old world, isn't it? Why doesn't God intervene and put it all right? Doesn't he care? Is it worth praying? That's what some people say, isn't it? 'If there's a God, why doesn't he put the world right?' Therefore, the believer is faced with a problem. '[People] ought always to pray,' says Christ, 'and not lose heart' (v. 1).

It is the fact that one of these days God will intervene, the Son of Man shall come and put the world right. One day he shall avenge his elect, no more believers will be persecuted and sin will be put down; but in the long, long waiting we must carry on praying.

Why must I carry on praying?

So our Lord said that there was this widow in the city and there was a judge. The widow had suffered at the hands of unscrupulous men in her town and they'd cheated her. She goes along to the judge to try to get redress from these unscrupulous businessmen, but the judge won't listen; he 'neither feared God nor respected man' (18:2). I suspect he was in the pay of the businessmen, so he won't listen to her. She came again and he wouldn't listen, but she kept coming until she nearly 'beat the man black and blue', as the Greek has it. Metaphorically speaking, she gave him a few black eyes, until even this heartless, unprincipled judge said to himself, 'Dear me, this woman is pestering me. I expect I shall have to give in, for I shall get no peace if I don't.' So, just to get peace, unprincipled rogue that he was, in the end he gave the woman what she asked. It's a good job she didn't give up asking, isn't it?

Will you give up praying? Do you see what it would imply if you were to stop praying? One day, God will intervene and put this world right. If you give up praying, you are implying that God is worse than that judge, and it isn't worth praying because God is so heartless that he couldn't care less. You don't believe that, do you? Your praying has important implications. Is it worth praying for 'kings and all who are in high positions' (1 Tim 2:2)? Is it worth praying in response to the Lord Jesus' word, 'Surely I come quickly' (see Rev 22:12)? Is it worth praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' (v. 20)? Is it worth praying, 'Your kingdom come' (Luke 11:2)?

Many folks have grown up and they've lost their hope; they don't believe the professed prophecies of Scripture anymore and they've given up praying. It implies that God is so indifferent and hard and unsympathetic and unprincipled that he doesn't care about the difference between right and wrong. That would be so, of course, with any promise in any area.

Where God has given his promise, I am to pray; and if in his wisdom God delays the answer I mustn't give up, must I? If it's a promise of God, to give up would mean to imply that I've abandoned the idea that God will keep his promises. In our praying, we are showing what we think of God. I have God's promises, I have the invitation and the command, and when I pray I can pray in the name of the Lord Jesus. There are some things that I can come and ask because they are explicitly indicated in God's word, and I know that this is the kind of thing that Christ himself would ask. Then I may come and ask as though it were Christ asking: I may ask in the name and authority of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus curses the fig tree

There's another way I can be insistent in prayer, because it would seem that prayer is not simply asking for things. All the Gospels except John record that on one occasion, passing up and down on the road to Jerusalem, our Lord saw a fig tree in leaf. When he saw that there was no fruit on it, he said 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' As they passed by the following morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. When his disciples were astonished, he said to them, 'Have faith in God . . . I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours' (Mark 11:12-14; 20-25).

Divine energy exerted

Had I been there when our Lord Jesus cursed that fig tree, I wouldn't have thought that he was praying; rather that he was commanding. He just said to the fig tree, 'Be cursed, wither!' It was a kind of a prayer, however: a prayer in which he put forth the energies of God. I don't know how you look at it. I suppose that when the Holy Spirit prays, as he prays within the believer, it is a form of God the Holy Spirit putting his divine energies within the believer. And I suspect when our blessed Lord prays for us at the right hand of God, it is not that he holds a different view from his Father and must persuade him to do something that his Father wasn't considering doing. It is a form of the Godhead putting forth their divine energies, and we are invited in the name of Christ thus to pray that God's will shall be done.

We do not pray only for ourselves but for the world

I come back to the passage in Luke 10 with which we began, to the consideration of what things are urgently necessary and how our Lord had to adjust Martha's concept of what is essential in life. In all our proportions we mustn't forget to be concerned not merely for ourselves, but for the world outside.

The woman in the synagogue

That part of Luke ends about two thirds through chapter 13 where we are told about an occasion when our Lord was in a synagogue. It was the Sabbath, and there was a woman who had been bowed down with an evil spirit for eighteen years, and couldn't lift herself up. Our Lord healed her, but the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the woman, 'There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day' (v. 14). It was a criticism of Christ, wasn't it?

Then the Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?' (vv. 15-16)

If it's essential to untie the donkey and bring it to water, even on the Sabbath, is it not the number one necessity that this woman should be released from her bondage to Satan?

Therefore, we not only preach, but we pray. '[Pray] for me,' says Paul, 'that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, . . . that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak' (Eph 6:19-20).

When it is not God's will

Proportions in prayer and persistence in prayer, but then of course there are other things where we may not persist, are there not?

Paul's thorn in the flesh

There are things that Christ has not guaranteed he will give us, nor God either. We ask for them and if it pleases him and it is for our good, he grants it. If it isn't, we must take no for an

answer, mustn't we? He is pleased sometimes to hear our prayers and raise the sick, but sometimes he doesn't. We've no guarantee he will always cure the sick and we must learn to do like Paul did. He had a thorn in the flesh and he thought his service for the Lord would be improved if he were relieved of it. Three times he asked the Lord to remove it, but the Lord said to him, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,' and Paul was left with his thorn (see 2 Cor 12:7-9).

The Lord Jesus in Gethsemane

The supreme example is the one who is Lord of all, as he kneeled in the garden. It wasn't the length of the prayer; it was its eloquence. He knew the love of God and his Father's heart, but he also knew God's power: 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me' (Mark 14:36). 'You love me; you could do it.' That was sincerity itself, but how we rejoice tonight that he didn't leave it there. He said, 'Yet not what I will, but what you will.'

Shall not we in our circumstances come with a child's confidence and say, 'Father, you love me and you could do this thing that I ask. But it's not one of those things that is guaranteed, therefore not my will, but yours be done.'

The Lord, bless his word for his name's sake.

Praise and Worship

Shall we pray.

Our Father, who knows our hearts, while we cannot boast of our love to thee and we hesitate to tell thee that we love thee, yet it is so. So, by thine infinite grace, we pray now that thou wilt take these next moments, as we think together and review our problems and questions and think in thy word, and use them for our deepening of gratitude, for increasing our awareness of thee and our understanding of thee, until, seeing thee that little bit more clearly and more fully, our admiration may deepen to love and our love to worship, that while we are engaged with thee we may be transformed into that same image from glory to glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The topic of worship

For our final study, let's begin to read in Matthew.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."' Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."' Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. (4:1-11)

Our second passage is in the first Epistle by Peter.

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but

in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' (2:1-6)

The topic of worship that has been set for our study this evening is a glorious topic and yet one that is a little bit complicated, for two reasons. The one is that, even in Scripture, the word itself is used in two or three different senses. It's one of those big words that includes a rather large array of ideas.

Both the Old and the New Testament tell us that when Israel went up to the temple they could be doing various things in their worship of God. They could be giving thanks for the things that God had given them, and they could, of course, be praising God for his glory. They could be bowing in what, using the term strictly, we sometimes call *worship*: bowing down in reverence before God. In all those senses the word 'worship' is used, and therefore we shouldn't always narrow it down to one particular meaning.

The second little complication is that, for many people in their Christian experience, worship is very often peculiarly associated with what happens when they celebrate the Lord's Supper, and let it be said at once that worship is a very natural thing for any believer to do at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. How could you possibly remember the Lord Jesus—really remember how he died for you—without being moved to bow down and worship him? It is an appropriate thing to do on that occasion.

And yet of course the fact is that when the Lord Jesus gives us directions about keeping the Lord's Supper, and when the Apostle Paul repeats them in 1 Corinthians, nowhere do they command us to worship on that occasion. The Lord Jesus tells us to do these things in *remembrance* of him, and Paul repeats the Lord's own command:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (11:23-26)

We are to take bread and eat it, wine and drink it, and to do it in remembrance of the Lord giving his body and shedding his blood for us. We're not necessarily told to worship the Lord. We're not even told to give thanks, but how you could possibly do it without giving thanks I know not. Where God has not made rules and regulations, we mustn't either.

Amongst other things that our Lord Jesus said about the bread and the wine is this: 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20), and certainly we should be remembering that at the Lord's Supper. It's a time when we recall how he has covenanted that he will write his laws on our minds and on our hearts:

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and

write them on their minds', then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (Heb 10:15–18)

This is a time therefore for us to examine ourselves:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself. (1 Cor 11:27–29)

Wouldn't it be a grievous contradiction for somebody who is a believer to come to the Lord's Supper if they're living carelessly? When they come to take that cup, reminding them that the Lord shed his blood to obtain forgiveness for sin, for them to be living deliberately and unrepentantly in sin? 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord' (v. 27).

As I say, it would be a grievous contradiction for a believer to be doing those things that cost the Lord his life's blood, and to come to the Lord's Supper and take the cup of the covenant, the very covenant that says, 'I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds', and all the rest of the week to have no intention of keeping his laws, nor actively to be cooperating with God to make progress in holiness. In our celebration of the Lord's Supper we certainly must keep in view the things he tells us. The fact that he gave his body and shed his blood for us; the fact that he is guaranteeing and covenanting to write his laws on our hearts; and we are to remember too that one day he's coming again and we do it until he comes.

Whatever else we do, we're under no rules and regulations. Shall someone give thanks? Well, they're free to do so if they wish. Shall someone praise the Lord? Well, he's free to, as far as I'm aware. Shall someone read a Scripture and comment? As far as I know, there's nothing against it. Shall someone worship? Well, why not? 'But all things should be done decently and in order' (14:40)—and with due concern for each other and the time.

As we mature, spiritual instinct will tell us what things are suitable for when. But we ought to consider one another. If one man who's just recently been saved exuberantly praises the Lord, and says, 'Thank you for dying for me, Lord Jesus,' how marvellous. Do you expect him to expound Leviticus 5? I hope you don't either! But if you've seen a lot more in Christ and you want to tell the Lord, carry on my brother and God will be delighted. We shall be edified and learn how much more there is in the Lord than ever we dreamed of by listening to you as you praise and worship the Lord. Don't be hard on those who haven't seen quite so much yet, but want to say a little 'thank you' as well.

What is the point of worship?

So let me talk a little bit more about this topic of worship. Why should anybody worship? What's the point of praising? Well, I nearly said, 'Can you help it?'

I remember an older preacher, the late Montague Goodman, and it fell to my lot as a very much younger man than I am now to be with him once at a conference that was aimed at

young folks. I suppose it was to help the thinking of the young folks on how to get going in the Christian life that he related this little incident to me. He said he met a young gentleman at one stage, who said that he found it very difficult to speak, very difficult to praise the Lord.

So Mr Goodman left it for a while, and then presently he came back and said, 'I believe you're interested in motorcycles?'

'Oh, yes, yes.'

'Tell me about your motorcycle,' he said,

'Oh, my motorcycle has wheels like this, and gears like that, and there's a lever here and the clutch goes that way, and it has this kind of gear change, and an overdrive.'

He went on and Mr Montague feared that he wouldn't stop. Presently, Mr Goodman said, 'You can speak then, sometimes?'

It depends what you're interested in, doesn't it, and what you happen to know about? The chap loved motorbikes. They're beautiful, aren't they? They make a lot of noise and when they go quickly, some people like them immensely, so why shouldn't he talk about them? He knew all about motorbikes. If you had asked me to talk about motorbikes, I could talk about motorbikes. They've got two wheels and a handlebar and a seat! What else have they got? Well, let me think about that. A tank? But that's about as far as I should get. This chap knew all about motorbikes and he loved motorbikes. What couldn't he say about motorbikes?

Why can't we talk about the Lord? Some of us have no gift for public speaking, but why can't we speak about him in private? We talk about the carrots, we talk about the settee, we'll talk about the children. Why can't we talk about the Lord? Sometimes could it be that we don't know the Lord very well, because if we knew him wouldn't we want to talk about him? Why should I praise the Lord? He commands me to. Why should I praise him? Well, surely because I can't help it.

What is worship?

Reverence and respect

One of the words for worship that the Hebrews used is similar to a word that the Greeks used, and therefore it occurs in the New Testament, and has the meaning simply of *bowing down*. Like in the East they do a *salaam*, and they bow down to the ground. In the ancient world, if you came into the presence of the king you would bow down and worship him in the limited sense that you bow down, and by doing this you are paying him the reverence and respect that is due to his office. You recognize his power and his authority.

It is in that sense that the devil said to our Lord Jesus, '... if you will fall down and worship me' (Matt 4:9). The devil was realist enough to know that the Lord Jesus would never admire or respect him. That wasn't what was in his heart; the devil wasn't expecting the Lord Jesus to praise him. The devil was saying that the Lord Jesus should bow down and recognize his authority.

Of course, there is authority and worship of various depths. In my home town we talk about the mayor as 'His Worship'. We don't offer him worship in the Christian sense, but if he comes into the room we stand up out of respect. He's 'His Worship the Mayor', meaning that we ought to reverence him. But there is a reverence that is due only to God, and when we offer that kind of worship we are offering the total surrender of ourselves to God. The utter,

unquestioned, unreserved loyalty of our hearts, bowing down to the authority of God and recognizing God to be God, that's worship.

Unreserved loyalty

To worship the Lord Jesus is, first of all, to bow down at his feet and yield him the unreserved loyalty of our hearts. In the ancient world, *worship* was very often a word tinged with political meaning. From time to time there have been emperors of great empires, who have said to themselves, 'How shall we get the people to obey us and support us?' They realized that merely putting laws on the statute book wouldn't necessarily control the crowd, nor would getting large armies. So these emperors instituted worship of the emperor, trying to make sure that the people give to the state that unreserved and absolute loyalty that is God's alone.

Nebuchadnezzar tried it, didn't he? (Dan 3). He tried to make everybody bow down and worship the golden image that he had set up when they heard the sound of the music. Nebuchadnezzar was claiming absolute loyalty and obedience to himself. Out of loyalty to God the young men refused, did they not? To give worship in that sense and the absolute loyalty of our hearts to any other than God is to break the very first of all commandments.

The Roman emperors tried it, didn't they? The early Christians obeyed the powers that be; they prayed 'for kings and all who are in high positions' (1 Tim 2:1-3). But, because the Roman emperors wanted to wield their great empire together, they instituted *emperor worship* and demanded that their subjects come and offer incense before the image of the emperor as an indication of their absolute loyalty to him. The Christians wouldn't do it and they got thrown to the lions.

The Bible tells us that there's coming a day when the man of sin shall seat himself in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God, exalting himself above all that is called God or is worshipped (2 Thess 2:3-4). He will demand that everyone takes his mark on their hand or forehead and that they bow down and worship his image (see Rev 13:15-17). Satan, who will inspire that man, knows right well that the final citadel of the human heart is its worship, and to have a person's worship is to have their obedience. There is no more practical and vitally important thing under the sun than the worship of the human heart, and that's why God puts so much emphasis on the worship of the believer.

As I say, the word *worship* often has political overtones in the broadest sense of the word 'political'. When we think of it, we're thinking of Christ as King. For that reason, the theologians will have noticed that the word worship occurs prominently in two books in the New Testament. The one is the Gospel of Matthew and the other is the Revelation. You should go there for your study of worship. So let me turn aside, because I can't resist it. It's easier to tell you about the Lord and let the Holy Spirit move you to worship him than it is to theorize about what worship is.

What does Matthew show us about worship?

How does God propose to lead our hearts to worship Christ and yield to him the absolute loyalty that he seeks?

Three kings

1. Herod the Great (ch. 2). He was determined to be king. If he could, he would be king for the benefit of his subjects. If he couldn't, he'd still be king. A message came that there had been somebody born king of the Jews. Fearing lest he should lose the throne one day, Herod ordered the slaughtering of the innocent babes up to 2 years old. He was determined to be king, and he would keep his kingship even by shedding the blood of the innocents. That's *power politics*, isn't it?

2. Herod Antipas (ch. 14). Matthew lets half his Gospel go by before he tells us about another king, another Herod. What kind of king was he? Well, he had a prisoner in his prison. His name was John the Baptist, and he had rebuked Herod for his adultery with his brother's wife. Because the people thought John was a prophet, Herod decided that it wouldn't be good to kill John, so he put him in prison. That would stop his preaching and stop him talking all over about the place about Herod's adultery. So that's how it was: John was in prison and Herod had decided not to kill him.

But then came Herod's birthday and his adulteress wife sent in her daughter to dance. Herod was half-drunk, and he got so carried away that he swore on oath that he'd give the girl whatever she wanted up to half his kingdom. Just imagine the irresponsibility of a monarch on the throne promising a seventeen-year-old girl up to half his kingdom for one dance. Some king!

So she went out and asked her mother what she should choose, and her mother suggested the head of John the Baptist on a dish. The king was sorry and he didn't want to, but he daren't lose face so he ordered the execution of John the Baptist. Some king: he had control of the life and death of his citizens and he couldn't control his own passions.

3. Pilate (ch. 27). Towards the end of his Gospel, Matthew comes to Pilate. Pilate was not a little petty king; he was the official Roman governor, representative of the emperor. Matthew tells how they brought the blessed Lord before Pilate, and Pilate examined him and found him guiltless and washed his hands, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' (v. 24). The crowd clamoured for his death. 'He's innocent,' said Pilate, but the crowd persisted, and in the end Pilate took the water and washed his hands.

It wasn't their job to see to it. What do we have kings for? What do we have governments for? We have governments to protect the citizen from the unruly mob. It was a denial of his political authority for an established government to hand over an innocent man to a raging mob and say, 'You see to it'.

So three kings, who shed the blood of their innocent citizens.

What kind of king was Christ?

What keeps us back from worship, the yielding of absolute obedience to Christ and handing over to his authority completely? I fancy it is the fear of what he will do if I give him my life.

'Let me show you this king,' says Matthew. 'To gain the obedience of his subjects, he too shed blood. But it wasn't their blood, it was his: "... this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"' (26:28).

Why is it that, when believers gather to remember the Lord and they take the cup in memory of their absent King, they're moved to worship and sometimes say to the Lord, 'King

of my life, I crown thee now | Thine shall the glory be?³ It's because they can't help it; it's the kind of King he is. He's not like vain Herod. Rebellious sinners before God, the King gave his life for them. That's how he brings us to worship, in the sense of bowing down and yielding him absolute submission and obedience.

Does worship not mean more? Yes, it means more than just bowing down and acknowledging the Lord's authority. It will mean enjoying God, praising God, and in the end so admiring God in Christ that one's spirit is overawed and one wants to bow down in recognition of the merit and the glory of Christ.

Why do some people find religion and worship boring?

They do, don't they? As our Lord Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, the very first condition of all worship is this: 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:24). Therefore, if we're going to worship the Lord, that is the prime condition. We must let God give us his Holy Spirit, for if we don't there will be such a lot in God that we shall never begin to understand or even enjoy, and we shall find worship a bore.

'No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.' Just like when it comes to human things, 'For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?' says Paul (1 Cor 2:11).

You can bring the dog into your dining room, if you'd like to do such a thing, and get him to watch you eating a nice beefsteak. The dog will wag his tail and come around in hopes that you will share the steak with him. You have a stomach, he has a stomach and he understands exactly what is going on when he sees you eating a beefsteak. His mouth starts watering, because he does share that with you, doesn't he? After that you take him into your lounge, and show him the picture you've been given for Christmas. You say, 'Fido, have a look at that.' Fido immediately comes to have a look and he's a little bit nonplussed quite what to make out of this and what all the fuss is about. You say, 'Look at it,' so he comes and looks at it. That's not yielding any result, so he licks it and sniffs it and smells it, and that doesn't yield anything either. You can see there's nothing going on in his canine head. He hasn't understood; the whole thing is a bore. Give him beefsteaks any day of the week, rather than Rembrandt.

Of course you can enjoy God when walking out on the golf course, because he made the grass and he made the wind. You can enjoy God in the garden, because those flowers were God's idea. What a lovely mind God has to invent flowers like that. Of course you can enjoy God in the wonders of nature and feel overawed as you peer down your microscope and cyclotron and anything else, to the make-up of an atom, because God has put a mind in you, and by his grace you have a brain. But you know, when you put all that kind of thing together, you're like a dog with a beefsteak. There are higher things in God than that you know: things of his Spirit.

You say, 'But it bores me. Why should I come together in church and remember the Lord and worship the Lord, because I could enjoy him more out on the golf course?'

Perhaps you could, sir. To know the secret of enjoying that other thing, you'd have to have God's Spirit. 'No one comprehends the things of God except the Spirit of God,' and 'true

³ Jennie Evelyn Hussey (1874-1958), 'Lead me to Calvary' (1921).

worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him' (John 4:23). Oh, my friend, let's be honest with God. It's no good pretending, no good mouthing a lot of expressions—'Oh, God, you're marvellous'—when in my heart I don't believe it and don't feel it. Let's tell God that we find him a bore, if that's what we do find. Let's tell Christ that you don't see anything in him; he knows it anyway. But if it is true, let us cry mightily to God that he will reveal the Saviour to us by his Spirit.

I sometimes visit art galleries and I find people enthusing about a picture, but I don't see anything in it. I wish I did. The fact I don't see anything in it shows I haven't got an artist's understanding. Here's somebody raving about Beethoven and the *Emperor Concerto*, or something else, and I don't see much in it. I wish I did. Why don't I? Well, I'm not much of a musician, nor do I have much of an ear for music.

You hear people talking about Christ and they're obviously genuine, and you don't see much in him. Don't you wish you did? If you don't, tell God honestly. He knows it anyway. If you've not yet been born again, come and ask the Saviour to give you the gift of that 'spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4:14). Let him give you the very life of God, the Spirit of God, so that you may begin to know the things that are freely given to us by God.

Worship: how do I go about it?

'I had a temple once in Jerusalem made of ordinary stone,' says God, 'but in the end it didn't succeed too well. So now I'm building another kind of temple. It's a spiritual temple and it's going to be built on a foundation, and the chief cornerstone of that foundation is my Son, Jesus Christ. I should like you to come into that temple to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to me.' (See Eph 2:19–22.)

How can you do it? Well, by coming and being built up as a spiritual temple, a spiritual house built up around Christ. In an ordinary temple in the ancient world they put in the big cornerstone and then they got other stones. 'Oh, that'll never fit,' said a workman. So they got that stone and they chiselled it a bit more until it did fit, and then they fitted all the other stones around the chief cornerstone. So it is with us.

If I want to come and worship God, I shall have to find out what God likes. When I come to offer spiritual sacrifices to God, they've obviously got to be acceptable to him.

When you're giving presents you want to give what the other person likes. Woe betide you husbands, if your wife asks for tulips on her birthday and you bring her daffodils because you like daffodils. I speak of things beyond my depth, but I imagine that if you were a perfect gentleman, your prime consideration would be not what you like, but what your wife likes.

If you say, 'I don't see much point in the Lord's Supper, and I didn't get much out of that meeting for praise,' is that what you came for, or did you come to see that God got something out of it? It's like the husband who says, 'I never saw anything in those tulips myself, but they pleased her.' The secret of worship is finding out what God likes. It's so incorrigibly selfish, you know, always looking for what I enjoy. 'I'll do it if I enjoy it, and if I don't get something out of it, then I won't do it.'

God has to convert us from that attitude before he gets us to heaven. Sin has left a terrible mark on us that has made us utterly self-centred. God's Holy Spirit will try to turn us inside

out until we find God our chief joy, and what God likes is the thing we're setting ourselves to provide.

How will I find out what God likes? Says God, 'There's the cornerstone, that's my Son. Come and look at him. Don't you think he's wonderful?'

Have you thought recently about going to heaven? I suppose you have. What are you going to be doing when you get home to heaven? What will you talk about when you get up there? There'll be the weather, I suppose, but I don't really know whether they have weather up in heaven, do you? You won't have your aches and pains to talk about and your rheumatism and your last operation. That won't be there to talk about. What will you talk about, then?

What if God said, 'What did you think of what my Son did, in the Gospel of Mark, how he healed that woman?'

And you say, 'Sorry, I don't really know what you're talking about.'

'Oh, you don't? How long have you been converted, just last night or something?'

'No, I've been converted for ten years.'

'And you don't know what the Bible says about the Lord Jesus?'

How will you talk to God? What do you suppose we shall be discussing? Says God, 'If you want to come and offer praise that's acceptable to me, first of all let your life be conformed to my Son (see Rom 8:29). Find out what my Son is like and let my Holy Spirit conform your way of living to his way of living. As he does that, you'll come to see the lovely things about the person of Christ, and you can come and talk to me about him.'

That's a lifetime's job, isn't it?

Is worship practical?

And finally, you say, 'But, Mr Preacher, surely there are more practical things in life than worship meetings?'

I don't know what you mean by 'practical'. Yes, there is a sense, of course, that worship isn't just singing hymns. Our Lord told a parable once, and it wasn't very flattering to the priest and the Levite who were going up to worship in the temple (Luke 10:25-37). They saw a man by the roadside in need of their help, and they couldn't be bothered to stop and help him so they went on.

'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world' (Jas 1:27). It's easy to sing hymns and not let it affect the way we live. God is looking for practical expressions of our love and kindness to men and women in our service of God.

When the people sinned, a sacrifice had to be offered

But that being said, worship itself is practical, isn't it? In Old Testament days, God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. At Passover time, all they had to do was to kill this lamb and put the blood on the doorposts, get behind the blood and shelter in the house, and the destroying angel passed by and didn't touch them. They were saved by the blood of the lamb. That was simple, wasn't it?

And when they got out into the wilderness, God had them build him a sanctuary. God came down and presenced himself there, and when he was in that sanctuary he invited the

people to come near and meet him. When they came near, God gently said, 'I want you to bring me a sacrifice, for you're not worthy to come near yourself, so bring such and such a sacrifice.' So they brought the sacrifice and the priest put it on the altar; it was offered to God and the people were accepted.

So here's an Israelite, and he's sinned. Maybe he's a priest. And the Bible says, 'if any one sins, a priest, the common people, a leader sins . . .' (see Lev 4).

You say, 'That's very interesting, because I was asking the same question myself the other day: what happens if a believer sins?'

Says John, 'My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin . . .' (1 John 2:1). What happens if a believer sins?

I can tell you what happened in those far-off days if a priest sinned, or suppose the nation sinned. First of all, the sacrifice was brought and the blood was shed, and then the priest was told to put the blood into a basin and to come right in, as far as he could get, to the very presence of God. Being an ordinary priest, he could only come as far as the veil; he could never get any further. So he came in as far as the veil and sprinkled the blood before the veil. What a lovely veil it was. The nation had sinned but now, with the sacrifice being offered, the priest can come into the presence of God and stand before the veil.

So, what happens when we sin?

Did you ever have the experience, you'd been going on well with the Lord and enjoying the Lord's presence, and then you did something wrong and your conscience was defiled? You felt miserable because you let the Lord down and messed things up. You've repented of it and confessed it, but it's left that unsatisfactory feeling and you don't feel like coming to worship the Lord on a Sunday morning.

'I'll go easy a bit now,' you say. 'I won't sing the hymns too loudly for a while and let the days go by before I come too near the Lord again.'

You know what it's like when people have a huff in the house. If you've fallen out with somebody and had some very strong words, there's like a thundery atmosphere for a while, isn't there? You don't speak and let things quieten down before you get back on talking terms again. Some dear believers feel like that with the Lord when they've sinned. Perhaps they oughtn't to come too near just yet a while, keep at some distance.

But not God. When a nation sinned, the sacrifice was brought and the nation's priest was asked to come right in, as near the presence of God as he possibly could. Why was that? Well, my brother, if you've confessed your sin the safest place for you to be is as near God as you can possibly get.

So, here's this priest coming with the blood and he sprinkles it before the veil. Look at that lovely veil: it's blue, purple, scarlet, fine twined linen, with cherubim all over it. It's a beautiful thing. Fresh from his sense of guilt and sin and his own unworthiness, the priest is standing before this beautiful veil. The light of the lampstand is shining upon it on one side and the Shekinah glory is shining on the other.

He says, 'God, I don't feel worthy.'

Says God, 'You've told me that before. Look at this beautiful veil.'

'But I don't feel very worthy,' says the man.

'I know that. Don't keep saying it, we've heard enough about you. I know that you are unworthy, but isn't this veil lovely? Do you know what that veil represents? It represents the Lord Jesus in his humanity: look at that.'

When we sin and we've repented, God's Holy Spirit will want to bring us into the presence of God and show us Christ. The devil will do the very opposite. He'll get you grovelling in the mud of your sins: 'Oh, what an unworthy and terrible person I am. I am terrible. I am terrible,' and he'll so fill your mind with your terrible self that you'll become terrible. You will really! What a man constantly thinks of, that's who he becomes (see Prov 23:7 KJV).

God will say, 'My Son died for you. Could you please change the subject and let's hear a little bit less about you? Come and look at my Son. Fill your mind with the Lord Jesus and what he did and how marvellous he was when he lived here on earth, until you forget about yourself.'

Questions & Answers

Questions from seminar 2

1. *What is your image of the invisible God, when you focus on him in prayer, since we worship an invisible God?*

DWG: I don't have any image and I think I ought not to. If I want to know what God is like, as a Christian I think of the way the Lord Jesus behaved, how he spoke, what he said, how he acted and what he's done. But as for having a mental image of God, I don't have one and I think we're not meant to try and have an image of him. He goes beyond all our imaginations. We know of him through his word, through what he has done, and supremely through Jesus Christ our Lord. We don't even have a picture of the Lord Jesus, and that I think is deliberate.

2. *Do you consider that there is a difference between entering into the holy presence of God, and coming to the throne of grace in prayer? Is there a difference in your mind?*

DWG: Not in my mind, there isn't.

AUDIENCE: I think this person would like confirmation of something they have in their own mind.

DWG: Well, I'm not sure what the question means, but there is a sense in which we're always in the presence of God, for 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). In that sense we are in the presence of God. But if we come into the holiest of all, as Hebrews 10 puts it, I take that is in the sense of coming into the divine presence (vv. 19–22).

3. *Keeping on the same subject, coming into the presence of God, we approach through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; he's made the way available, and we have the Holy Spirit who helps us to pray. The Lord Jesus told us in his instructions to address the Father. Is it in any way wrong to address Jesus Christ in prayer, rather than the Father? We don't address the Holy Spirit; is it also wrong to address the Second Person?*

DWG: I notice that in the days of his flesh, people addressed requests to the Lord Jesus. If he's the same today as forever, then it can't be wrong to address requests to him now. Moreover, our Lord says, 'whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you' (John 16:23), and 'If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it' (14:14). Admittedly that reading depends on a variant reading in the manuscripts, but I believe it is correct. I wouldn't say that it is wrong to address prayer or worship to the Lord Jesus now.

Certainly, after his resurrection Thomas addressed worship to the Lord Jesus in the highest possible terms. He said, 'My Lord and my God!' (20:28). In John 5:23 our Lord says, 'that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father,' because he and the Father are one (see 10:30).

4. A change of direction now. Concerning listening to God, a two-way conversation where we speak to God in prayer and we also listen, this listening is quite a problem to some of us. How would you advise any assembly, any church, to listen to God? Not just as individuals but as a group of people, how do we listen to God?

DWG: I take your point and the difficulty of it. I for one cannot speak of 'hearing a voice from the blue', but I think there are various ways of listening to God. One is through his word. We need minds that are filled with it, so that God can use his word that is stored in our memories and his Holy Spirit can bring it to our minds. I think also that the Holy Spirit himself communicates with our spirits: 'The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom 8:16). If you ask me how it's done, I can't tell you, but Romans 8 affirms that the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirits and has spiritual communication with us.

Another way that God speaks to us is through prophets. Please don't throw me out, I still believe that God has prophets. Not that you can go down the street and consult one as Saul did, and get an answer, but God does speak to us through our fellow members of the Body of Christ, and a word comes sometimes as a word to our hearts without their knowing it. I myself think it is important to observe what the Lord Jesus said before he went away, 'I will . . . manifest myself to [you]' (John 14:21). I take that literally but I don't think it means that we see visions and hear voices.

On the other hand, after the resurrection, before our Lord ascended to heaven, he spent forty days appearing to his own, and I think he gives us in those occasions literal examples of what he will do spiritually. To the two on the road to Emmaus, there came near a stranger. They didn't even know it was the Lord, but there was something about him as they talked about the Bible with him that moved their hearts very strongly. They discovered eventually that it had been the Lord. I think our Lord still does that. Not every day of the week, but there are times when he comes, and very often we recognize only when it's finished what has happened.

Similarly, with Mary. She didn't get a long theological exposition on the Bible. She loved the Saviour, and in the garden the Lord appeared to her and made her relationship with God so very real. And similarly, for those who were working in the boat, our Lord so interposed that when the miracle was over they realized it had been the Lord.

I think very often it is beyond our powers of explanation, when believers sense that God has spoken and they have had a very real approach of the Lord Jesus.

Questions from seminar 3

1. In 1 Corinthians 14:13–17, Paul speaks of praying in two ways. He prays in a tongue with his spirit, and then he prays with his mind, and he says that praying with the mind is more beneficial to the church. Would you suggest that the gift of praying in tongues is for private use, or would you suggest that it could be for public use?

DWG: 1. I do not possess this gift. 2. I would be guided by what I regard as the authoritative direction of the Holy Spirit, who is the one in control of gifts. Paul says, 'I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue' (vv. 18–19). Also, 'But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God' (v. 28). So from my point of view that settles it, because in the church it's absolutely necessary that people understand what is being said, and no one is to say the Amen to anything they haven't understood (v. 16).

Paul does say, 'The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself' (v. 4), so I believe that, because Paul says it. 'He edifies himself' (KJV). And if he speaks to God in a tongue, 'he utters mysteries in the Spirit' (v. 2). I'm not proposing to dispute what Paul himself said. On the other hand, I take your point, sir, because I think it is Paul's point that, when it is possible to pray with the intelligence, that is, with the intellect, as well as in the Spirit, it is always preferable.

2. Let's jump into another area of prayer in connection with the doctrine of election. If God has already chosen to do something, what's the use of us praying about it? Two questions on this point have come up and I'll mention them together. We pray for the salvation of people, our friends, our relations, and then they die without Christ, and the question immediately arises, could God not have done it? Surely he is able to do everything? Has he slipped up? How do we reconcile the ability of God to save, and the fact that our prayers were not answered concerning our loved ones?

DWG: I trust I talk with great feeling and respect for people who have unsaved relatives. I say that not as a 'get out', because I believe we must be very careful what we say.

In the first place, some people die unsaved—the Bible says they do; but I don't think it is left to us necessarily to say that such and such a person is lost. We can say, 'as far as we know they died unsaved'. What may happen in the closing moments of a person's life, I think we'd better leave that for God, and then for himself one day to tell us. I'm not thereby minimizing the seriousness of dying unsaved. People do die unsaved, but in particular cases let's leave it for God to say.

Next, when it comes to God's sovereignty and man's free will, I confess I am not able to offer you any explanation that would reconcile the two. I will add that I've never heard of any explanation that reconciles the two and I should think that any theory you come across that does is wrong, because in this matter we are dealing with something that by definition goes beyond our powers of understanding. If anybody should tell me they have understood it, I would have the gravest of doubts. Very often, we think of God on one side and us on the other, as though we were cogwheels at the same level. That is not true. God acts at altogether different levels from us; but the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's free will is an enormous thing. You rightly said that I shouldn't be able to answer it within the time tonight, so I shan't begin to try. All I would observe is, I'm not aware that Scripture preaches that, in order to get somebody saved, God bypasses their own free will and decisions. To take away a person's free will would reduce them to something less than a human being. I don't think God ever does that. Not even to get somebody saved.

3. *For God to preserve the life of a Christian or a non-Christian may involve changing the laws of nature. If in a war situation the person is to be preserved, there may be many miracles that the person is unaware of that the Lord has 'engineered' on their behalf. Is it wrong to pray that the Lord may bring about circumstances like this to change his own laws of nature perhaps, to preserve life, such as calming the sea and the raging storm? Is that an abuse of prayer or a use of prayer?*

DWG: There ought to be a word in the English language, 'yes-no'. As from this moment tonight, I invent it. It is for application to questions that deserve both answers at once. The one answer says, yes, all prayer is thus asking God, and I'm reminded of what happened to Zechariah. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth prayed for a child. Then, when they got very old, they stopped praying for one and when the angel came and said, 'You're going to have a child,' Zechariah refused to believe it. I suspect he was troubled by that kind of question. When he thought that all God needed to do was give nature a little bit of a jog to do the job she normally does, Zechariah thought it quite reasonable to pray. But to ask God to do something that would involve changing the laws of nature, that was too much for Zechariah's faith, and when the angel said it was going to happen he refused to believe and was struck mute for his unbelief.

So, on the theoretical side, yes, we all ought to be supernaturalists and believe that God can overrule the laws of nature. Not break them, but overrule them if it so pleases him. If God answers our prayers only to do what nature would do anyway, then something's gone out of our faith. We ought to be good supernaturalists.

Having said that, then I think on the other side. The 'no' bit of the question is that we should not expect God to be performing miracles for us every other day of the week. You see, miracles are miracles and God can do them; but if he did them every day of the week they'd cease to be miracles, wouldn't they?

4. *First Corinthians 11:5 speaks of sisters praying. Should sisters in the meeting be robbed of the joy of participating in prayer?*

DWG: Oh, the language is a little bit difficult to answer there. The verb 'to rob' presupposes the answer, so it's a very difficult question to answer, because it presupposes that they have the right so to do, and anybody who says they haven't is robbing them of their right. But that is the point at issue, isn't it? Is it their right? Godly people who have careful concern to interpret Scripture seriously and responsibly have come to different points of view on the matter. First Corinthians 11 gives direction as to the women being veiled when they pray or prophesy, and I presume that means pray and prophesy in the presence of men. Chapter 14 finishes that part of first Corinthians that begins in chapter 11. It starts by talking about the women and it ends with talking about them, and not by accident either. It says that it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church (14:35).

The question arises, how do you resolve the apparent contradiction that chapter 11 gives direction for how they are to pray and prophesy, presumably in the presence of men, and chapter 14 gives direction that it is a shame for them to speak in the church, even for the purpose of asking a question?

Now, as I say, responsible exegetes and elders of churches have differed in how they resolve that apparent problem. As a rather elderly rusty old bachelor, brought up in various

traditions, I've done my best to try and understand these things. I've come myself to the conclusion that the distinction is between the church and the home. What women are said not to do in the church, for it's a shame for them to speak, so let them not ask questions, they are encouraged to do at home, and Paul begins that particular paragraph in chapter 14 with the words, 'As in all the churches . . . the women should keep silent *in the churches*' (vv. 33–34). What they do elsewhere, not in the church, is another thing.

Secondly, in my understanding Paul calls upon the law to support him, and I take that to be not just a restrictive verse or two in Genesis 3, but the whole Old Testament law. In Israel, under that law the custom was that they had prophetesses, and they exercised their ministry sometimes in the presence of men.

Anna was such a prophetess and when Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus into the temple, 'coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem' (Luke 2:38). Quite clearly that was in the presence of Joseph, if no more men. So women did pray and prophesy in the presence of men. What they did not do under the law, as far as I'm aware, was to lead the congregation in prayers and praises in the temple. Nor, as far as I'm aware, did they lead the prayers and praises in the synagogues. I take it Paul is saying that, as in Judaism, that kind of order should be followed in the churches.

I say that sincerely, and I hope the sisters don't say, 'There goes another thief and robber.' I didn't write these verses. This is my simple, sincere effort to understand them. Other people hold differently and I respect their view. It is, I think, for the elders of any church to decide before God what they feel that he means, and therefore it is godliness on the part of church members to submit to the elders in these matters.

5. In 1 Timothy 2 we're encouraged to pray for and on behalf of kings and those in authority over us. Bearing in mind our own situation in Northern Ireland, when we pray in such a way can we expect peace, tranquillity and quietness as a result?

DWG: 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way' (1 Tim 2:1–2).

There would be no point in God telling us to pray, unless he was prepared to hear those prayers. However, I don't think he has told us to pray for these things as a guarantee that at all times there will be peace. This is a complicated world. We're to pray for peace, but let us help ourselves by remembering what happened to Daniel.

Daniel chapters 10–12 are exceedingly instructive and illuminating on this matter. Daniel prayed for the peace of Jerusalem and for the fulfilling of God's purposes. Presently the angel—perhaps even the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus—came and explained to Daniel that the purposes of God had been, so to speak, held up and frustrated for a while by the opposition of great spiritual powers in heavenly places. So Daniel had to wait for the answers to his prayers. That doesn't mean therefore that the moment Daniel set himself to pray there would immediately be peace. On the other hand, it doesn't mean that Daniel's prayers were of no use. I will quote you one other thing that you might care to consider.

In Revelation 8 John was given to see a scene in heaven, and it's put before us in picture language:

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.
(vv. 3-4)

An angel came to the golden altar of incense, the altar of prayer, and we're told that at this particular juncture, when he offered the incense, things began to happen. Here are prayers that had been asked and asked and asked and asked again, perhaps, and there came a point when God remembered them. Incense was added and the prayers were answered.

So, we are to pray. God isn't saying that he's going to answer our prayers at once. But I think the world owes a lot more to the prayers of believers than it realizes. It's important to add that when we pray we are to pray for all men, all kings, all rulers, all that are in authority. When Paul urged the believers to pray for all the rulers, at that particular time they had to pray for none less than Nero Caesar. Of all the horrible brutes that ever were, Nero was one of them, yet they were told to pray for him. We are to pray for all in authority, and may God help us to be wide hearted in our prayers.

6. Let's be realistic about who we're referring to when we talk about rulers. What would you suggest would be an appropriate prayer that believers here could pray with regards to someone we are not inclined to pray for with great fervency?

DWG: Well, you'd pray for their salvation, first and foremost. And I hope we love folks enough so that we wouldn't care who owned Ireland, so long as men got saved. Think of the grace of God in Paul. He was a true blue Jew, but he was prepared to leave his sheltered Jewish quarters and come out to us Gentiles to tell us about the wonder of Christ.

When I was in Nazareth the other year I asked a dear Arab who translated for me how the Jewish authorities treated the Christian church there. Some of them have had their land taken away from them by the Jews, and they find it very difficult when starchy-eyed folks come there and say, 'Isn't it wonderful how God has restored the Jews to their land?' So I asked this Arab how the Jewish authorities treated the assembly that I was in, and he said, 'They treat us very well, for they know that here we teach Arabs to love Jews.' I marvelled at the grace of Christ in him.

So, yes, we too should love all our fellow men and women, green or orange, red, yellow, black or blue, and to seek primarily their salvation. And secondly, that God would so guide them and give them wisdom, so that all that shall be done is for the maximum good of everyone.

7. We've been thinking this whole weekend about persistent and persuasive prayer and our sheer helplessness at the task. The question arises, does this persistent prayer change God's mind, or how should we view it?

DWG: That's a very serious question that troubles many people. In one way, it seems almost an impertinence of us to suppose that what we say is going to change God's mind; and what's the sense of praying if God was going to do it anyway? It seems to me that we must allow for the fact that by his own decision God himself has left a lot of things open so that we may ask. He has given us a genuine choice. He is prepared to listen to our prayers and he's not changing his mind in that basic sense, because it was part of his decision to leave it open so that we may ask.

Secondly, I commend to you the story of Moses and his intercession when Israel sinned so grievously over the matter of the golden calf (see Exod 32). God said, 'Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you' (v. 10). Moses pleaded on their behalf, and God 'relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people' (v. 14).

On the surface at that level it looks as if God had changed his mind. Having said that, I am aware that when we talk of God we're not just talking of God on our level. When God comes down to meet us at our level, there's an infinity of levels and there is a sense in which God never changes. Sometimes, in order to explain his ways with us, he has to put it in such terms as it appears that he has changed his mind. We would be wise people therefore, to take encouragement from the way God speaks. Here was God threatening discipline upon Israel, and he would have proceeded but Moses interceded and the people were spared.

The same thing is said in 1 Corinthians 11 about us. When we have sinned and deserve God's discipline, if we confess our sin he won't have to discipline us and he's prepared to listen to our entreaties.

Our Lord encouraged us in the same sense with the parable in Matthew 18, where the man was in debt and would have been put into prison, but he implored the king to forgive him, which he did.

For our practical purposes, I think we should not worry too much about the mechanisms. We should come and pray, and who knows what apparent changes may take place in God's mind. Though of course, from another point of view we're well aware that he knows everything from beginning to end, and it was in his gracious plan that we should come and ask.

8. A last brief question then, perhaps from a younger person, about our subject for this evening on worship and praise. Sometimes the hymns that are used do not identify with what is in our own hearts to praise the Lord. (I speak on behalf of the person.) Are we limited in our praise and worship to the hymnbook that is supplied, no matter where we are, or could you give direction as to how to express our praise in song without being limited to the words of someone who lived years ago, and experienced that then?

DWG: Should you be limited to the hymnbook? Well, in the church of which I'm a member, we're not necessarily. If some good brother wants us to sing a hymn that isn't in the hymnbook he says 'Do you know this one?', and if a number of people do, we sing it. It's no good asking us to sing a hymn we don't know, but we don't limit ourselves to the hymnbook. If there's a nice hymn that somebody wants us to sing and some of the rest of us know it, we sing it

without the hymnbook. If we're all going to join in as a congregation, most of us will need to know it, or learn it. That is merely a practical point.

Perhaps the questioner means, 'do we have to use the antiquated language of one hundred years ago?' Well, not necessarily, if you'd like to make up your own. I'm no good at making up hymns, but if you are then let's get on with it. We could do with some good modern hymns that say something; not hymns that just repeat words a hundred times over, or sentimental sloppy things; and if I may say, not hymns and choruses with sexual overtones either. We could do with some really good hymns, born out of people's experience of God, to help the rest of us. Has anybody here got the gift?

There have been some famous Irish hymn writers. The bishop's wife outside Londonderry, who wrote 'There is a green hill far away' (Mrs. C. F. Alexander), and Joseph Scriven's hymn, 'What a friend we have in Jesus'. So it's open to anyone who has the ability to write some more. As to our own personal expressions, so long as you are reverent, use whatever language you find best to express yourself sincerely to God.

You see, we do have to draw a distinction sometimes between our private praise of God and public worship. I heard of a man once who had just got converted. He was so delighted he threw his cap into the air, and said, 'Three cheers for Jesus.' Well, I don't know a hymn to that effect, but I'm sure that when the angels heard it, they rejoiced over that sinner who repented as much as they did over a well-trained choir. It was the expression from the heart of an individual who'd been saved. Doubtless the man progressed in his knowledge of the Lord, and found himself able to see even more lovely things about the Lord. When it comes to a whole congregation singing, then I think we've got to choose words that are suitable for the majority in the congregation.

Questions from seminar 4

1. How would you engage in praise or worship? Is worship an event that can be confined to a given time, or is it a lifelong process?

DWG: It is both. When Abraham was asked to take his son Isaac and offer him on an altar upon Mount Moriah, Abraham said to the young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you' (Gen 22:5). In that sense, yes, the worship was confined to that moment. He was talking about an act that he was about to perform on Mount Moriah and after it was over he would come back.

Or Leviticus talks about certain set times of the year when the Jews went up to worship at the feasts. These were the special ceremonies of praise and ritual at the temple, as prescribed by the Old Testament on the occasions of the great national holy days and the service of God. So there were times when the worship was organized: it started and it finished.

On the other hand, the questioner is right in saying that to be true worship, as the hymn says, it cannot properly be of the lip alone: 'Not for the lip of praise alone, | nor e'en the praising heart, | I ask, but for a life made up of praise in ev'ry part'.⁴ It must be made up of the life, because worship has to do with our attitude of heart. If the way we live contradicts the attitude that we adopt in worship, then our worship is not much good.

⁴ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'Fill thou my life, O Lord my God' (1866).

2. *Can we be aware of success in worship by a physical sense of elation?*

DWG: Very frequently when we worship our emotions are involved. Moreover, sometimes another thing gets involved, and that's sensation. I have friends—I shan't tell you who they are, but when they listen to a particularly moving bit of music their skin goes up like gooseflesh. It's funny how you get the same sensations from different kinds of emotions. I've noticed that when some people get afraid their flesh goes up in goose pimples. The emotion of fear and the emotion of deep enjoyment and wonder have both led to a sensation of the body.

It very often happens that if people are moved to worship, it will affect their emotions and sometimes their sensations. I've seen people shed tears, genuine tears, for joy as well as for grief, when they have been at their worship of the Lord. Now we must make a very important distinction. Worship that is acceptable to God must be in spirit. It should start that way round, with the emotions. Then what we feel comes next, and if there are going to be any sensations, afterwards. Sometimes we get confused about this and try it the other way round. The whole thing is artificial, and in the end barren and carnal.

So let me use an analogy. Do you like paintings? Perhaps not. Some people do. If you go into a picture gallery and see a beautiful painting for the first time you're overwhelmed, and before you know what you're doing your emotions are being aroused. Why? Because you enjoyed the painting and saw the wonder of it, and that in turn began to affect your emotions. When you go home you say, 'I really enjoyed that. I wonder if I could work up those feelings and enjoy that picture again.' So you try to work up the feelings. But that's stupid, you know you've got to look at the picture to enjoy it again. Suppose the next time you see it, you enjoy it but it doesn't produce quite the same emotion, does it matter? The picture is still as good as it was, but now if you're going to move further into the enjoyment of it you might have to study it quite hard and begin to think of what the artist was doing when he painted it.

That might exercise the old brain, and you might come away quite tired and exhausted by your study, and your emotions wouldn't have been moved. But you've come to understand the picture a bit more. So perhaps the next time you see it, it will be even more wonderful and, who knows, you might get more emotions. But whether you get the emotions or not, it's the picture that counts.

When we're worshipping God, if we're really worshipping him, it's God that counts. It's the glory and the wonder of God, and if it moves my emotions that's a very good thing. If it doesn't, that can't be helped. It's God I'm meant to be concentrating on and not my own emotions. We need to watch that, because sometimes, though we know we shouldn't, we go rather for the emotions and judge whether our worship has been good by how we've enjoyed our own emotions.

Let's come down to smaller things, the matter of giving of thanks. You've been given a lovely Christmas present and you feel like a young gentleman I met just recently, who said, 'I feel so bad; I wanted to say thank you in a proper way, and then I didn't really say it very well.' He was all worried about this. Some people get so worried that they can't say thank you the right way round, so they never say 'thank you'. But does it matter how you say it, so long as you are grateful? When we're giving thanks, what are we trying to do?

So you say, 'I'm going to give thanks for the beautiful present you've given me. Now watch me. Don't you admire the way I'm thanking you?'

To talk like that would be stupid. 'I thought he was meant to be thanking me, not admiring himself and the way he did it.'

Then you say, 'I didn't do that thanks well. I don't feel satisfied.'

That isn't the point. Did you get the sense that you're grateful across to the other person? One of the things that genuine worship does is to begin to break that endless self-centredness that we are so often guilty of. It's our feelings that we're cultivating; wanting to feel that I'm a success even in my prayers. Whereas, the secret of worship is that it's not about me and what I say, it's about God. Is he wonderful, and does he deserve my gratitude?

Please beware of trying to work up sensations. Some people feel that they've had such a blessed time if their sensations get moved and one or two people cried a bit, and so on. I'm not saying anything against tears and emotions, but be careful.

Isaac's sensations

The Bible has a very interesting story warning us about sensations. There was a man called Isaac and God blessed him with two sons. There came a point in his life when Isaac had to bless his son. He intended to bless Esau, but Jacob came and stole the blessing. Do you know how he managed to do that? Well I'll tell you.

His father, being an ordinary human being, had five senses. Two of them were a bit dim. So, taught by his mother, Jacob dressed himself up and put some animal skins on his hands so that they felt hairy like his brother Esau. Then his mother cooked a dish and spiced it up to make it taste like venison, when it wasn't. All the time it was just ordinary plain mincemeat. Jacob went in to his father and his father said, 'Who are you?'

'I'm Esau,' he said. Because his father couldn't see very well, and that eliminated his sense of sight.

'The voice sounds to me like the voice of Jacob. Are you sure you're not Jacob?'

'Oh, no, I'm not Jacob. I'm Esau.'

'Let me touch you. Yes,' he says, 'you're Esau all right. I can feel you're hairy.'

Isaac didn't trust his hearing, poor man, so he let himself be guided by his other senses. He said, 'Give me that venison,' and it tasted like venison. He got such a good feeling inside. Then, still thinking it was Esau, he said to Jacob, 'See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed!' (Gen 27:27).

So he relied on his touch, his taste and his smell, and was horribly deceived. What ought he to have relied on? He ought to have relied on the word of God and the Spirit of God to guide him.

We do well to watch it in our estimation of God's blessings. They can be material things, but when we're thinking about worship we must think particularly of spiritual blessings. We receive them by God's Spirit and through his word. The order is therefore, that God communicates his word by his Spirit to my heart. I believe his word and I have the blessing, whether the emotions come or not, or the sensations come or not.

Why am I pressing the point? In some families, I'm told that very, very occasionally husband and wife fall out and they have an argument, and then of course, in all well-ordered

households they make it up. I've no way of knowing, but I'm told that the making up is marvellous. The joy and the relief and the sensations are beautiful. So here's a man and wife who have made it up and they've enjoyed it. A week later, the good lady finds the man sitting on the settee, and she says, 'What on earth are you doing, Bertie?' 'I'm trying to recapture that feeling of when we made it up,' he says.

That's very stupid, and yet you'll find believers trying to recapture feelings, perhaps repeating lines from hymns: 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I sought the Lord?'⁵ 'Oh happy day! when first we felt our souls with sweet contrition melt'.⁶ Yes, you did. It was very appropriate at the time, but you can't regain and rehash old emotions. What you need to do is to go on further with the Lord. Was it marvellous when he forgave your sin and you found something of his forgiveness? Praise the Lord for that, but what about now going on and finding something further about the Lord, and letting that move you?

Well, here's a man who's just sat down to have dinner. He's very hungry and it's not just doing him good, he's enjoying the lovely, delightful feeling of this food going into him. What would you think if he's still sitting there an hour later, and he's long since finished his dinner? So his wife says, 'Are you finished? Would you like some more?' No, he doesn't want any more. 'Why are you sitting at the table, then?' she asks. He says, 'I was just trying to keep that feeling.' Stupid man. The feelings only come as the result of being hungry and being fed. It's only a side result of actually enjoying the food, and he would be an even more foolish man who tried to work up the feeling without the food, wouldn't he?

And so let it always be God's word made real to me; his person made real to me by his Spirit. Let me believe it and let me thank him for it. Let me open my eyes to see how wonderful God is and let me tell God how wonderful I find him. If I feel emotion, praise the Lord for that; and if I don't, never mind. If I get sensations, I can't help it; and if I don't, don't let me try and manufacture them, for our worship of God also is a matter of faith.

3. If we are to worship in spirit and in truth, can the use of time honoured clichés be justified?

DWG: Well, it depends. If they're good clichés, yes. Again, I quote the Psalms: our Lord used the Psalms, generations of Israelites used the Psalms, and we use them still, don't we? 'The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want' (23:1)—beautiful, is it not? It's been around for thousands of years, and nothing the worse for it. So there's nothing wrong in using phrases that have been around for thousands of years, if you can sing them and they mean something, and you can sing them intelligently and meaningfully.

Of course, there are bad old clichés, mumbo-jumbo phrases that get used. Let's do the best we can, but let's not be unduly critical, however, of other folks. Some people find it easy to express themselves and some find it very difficult to find words, so they borrow words from somebody else and they use them. The real thing that matters is how sincere they are being.

On the other hand, for public worship in the church, let's see to it, if we can, that we're talking realistically and not just mouthing a lot of phrases that, really, when they're analysed, mean nothing. Let's talk from our hearts, and if you find it difficult to think of words you need

⁵ William Cowper (1731-1800), 'O for a closer walk with God' (1772).

⁶ James George Deck (1802-1884).

never be ashamed to use the words of holy Scripture. 'I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth' (Ps 34:1).

4. Is the singing of hymns in any way even remotely related to praise?

DWG: Well I should hope it is. The Psalms are a kind of hymn, aren't they? Israel, in their singing of hymns, were praising God. Yes, of course hymns are a form of praise. At the Last Supper, didn't our Lord sing a hymn just before they went out? Of course, we can sing hymns mechanically with our hearts and our minds far away, but we're talking about people doing things seriously, so of course hymns are a form of giving praise.

5. Now about the Lord's Supper. If this service is considered to be one of remembrance with the emphasis on our Lord's death, is the idea of praise and rejoicing out of place? These two things at the Lord's Supper — the remembrance of his death, and praise — are they mutually exclusive?'

DWG: Well no, surely? When the nation mourns and commemorates its dead who died in the war, are there not very often people who officially on behalf of the nation praise the courage and devotion of the men who gave their lives? The fact that it is a sorrowful thing doesn't stop people very sincerely praising those who died for their sake. And so, surely, with our Lord? Even though we remember his sorrows, do we not do well to praise him for the love that took him to Calvary?

I see the point that, yes, it was a sad thing; and yet Calvary was a tremendous triumph, wasn't it? The Bible tells us that when Christ gave himself for our sins, it came up to God as a sacrifice of a sweet smell (Eph 5:2). It delighted the heart of God that here on this earth there was someone who was prepared to do his will to that extreme, and do it perfectly. So it isn't inconsistent with praise.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.