

Three Studies on Prayer

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Reward for Prayer and Renewal of Strength

Reading: Matthew 6:5–15; Isaiah 40:27–31

Why should we be interested to study the topic of prayer? Is it because we have had such wonderful experiences that we want everyone else to come into the blessing of prayer? Or is it perhaps because in the rough and tumble of life we have become discouraged in prayer? We have asked for things and not received them and become disturbed because we wonder why our prayers have not been answered.

‘Ask whatever you will, and it shall be done unto you’ (John 15:7). In good faith we have tried to put that verse into operation, only to find that it was not done. Therefore it has raised very big questions over the validity of such promises. We have come across verses like Luke 17:6: ‘If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, ye would say . . .’—and summoning up all the faith we possessed we made our request, to no avail. Instead of helping, this has simply added to our discouragement. Life is a great enough burden by itself. In difficult circumstances, if getting answers to prayer depends on exercising super-human effort to work up prodigious faith (which few if any believers can manage) then instead of such prayer taking away life’s burdens it may lead to a sense of defeat and failure. Obviously I have not so much faith as a grain of mustard seed, or my prayer would have been answered, we say; so we stand rebuked and depressed, thinking our faith must be infinitesimal.

In these studies I thought we might look at some of the difficulties of prayer, and why it is that people get discouraged. One thing that will help us to sort out such problems is to notice when and where our Lord’s promises about prayer are made. If we do not distinguish the contexts we are liable to be discouraged.

1. Children coming to God as Father, to ask for their needs.
2. Scholars in the school of God’s holiness, persevering in a different kind of prayer.
3. Fellow-workers, where we must learn to exercise the authority of the Lord Jesus in our work for the Lord.

So, let’s begin in the context of children coming to the Father and think first of the reward of prayer as promised by our blessed Lord in Matthew 6. He tells us how to pray. Not as others who get a very inadequate reward, but he guarantees that if we pray as he tells us, then our Father who sees in secret will recompense and reward us (v. 6).

The very idea of reward for prayer raises the question, why must we pray at all? Presently our Lord is going to guide us by telling us that our Father knows what things we have need of before we ask him. But that simply reinforces the question, if he knows what we need and he is the loving God he makes himself out to be, why doesn't he give us the things we need without waiting for us to pray for them? Why do we have to pray, and what is prayer's reward?

In talking to us about this our Lord warns us against two false attitudes in prayer. The first is that of *the hypocrites* (v. 5), then the *Gentiles* (v. 7). The Greek word *hypocrite* means a play actor. These are men whose prayers are play-acting, they are doing it to put on a show. As they stand there with their eyes shut they are ostensibly praying to God. If you were so irreverent as to watch them, every now and again you would see one of their eyes opening to see who was looking at them! Was Mr Smith suitably impressed at the knowledge of all the Bible verses, and the intricacies of theology that he managed to bring in, and all the wonderful technical terms he has been able to muster? Not to mention the length at which he has been able to do it and the pious look upon his face, suitably interlaced with sighs and holy groaning! These hypocrites are doing it to be seen of men.

In Jewish synagogues before the service starts people gather for their own devotions and there is room for personal exercise. One man will be praying here, and another there. In his attendance at the synagogue our Lord had observed some who were doing it for mere show. 'Don't be as the hypocrites, for they have received their reward.' They went in for the praise and estimation of men—What a beautiful prayer he offered; he must be a holy man! They have their reward, and the Greek word means that it is the only reward they are ever going to get. We are not told what requests they made for particular things, but I doubt whether they got them either. Their whole exercise was play-acting. Some of us might need to re-read the warning from time to time, lest in the holiest moments of the church, when we get up to address the Father (at the Lord's Supper, maybe) a similar sentiment should sneak into our hearts. No man can pray with one eye on God and the other on the congregation for the reward he is going to get.

But in another sense, when you pray in public you must have one eye on the congregation as well as on the Lord. That is, you must pray in terms that they can understand. You mustn't be carried away with such obscure language that nobody in the congregation knows what you are talking about. That doesn't profit them, and our prayers are meant to profit the congregation. Not to get their acclaim and esteem and the reward of their praise, but that as we pray to God our prayers may edify our brothers and sisters. That also is a command of the Lord.

Let's pass from the hypocrites to *the Gentiles*. Their trouble is more deep-seated. It rises not from vanity in their hearts but from their false concept of what God is like. Says our Lord: 'They think they shall be heard for their much speaking' (v. 7). So they use empty repetitions, constantly saying the same thing and pleading with God, supposing it is by the constant repetition of their prayer that eventually they will prevail upon God to give them what they ask. Therein lies a danger for us, because there are certain promises given to prayer that encourage us to persist in praying. We shall, God willing, be thinking of that

kind of promise next time, when we are told that it is the persistence of our prayers that will count, and we must not misunderstand either the context of that promise or what it means. It does not mean that the Father is not prepared to listen to us if we only ask once. Nor does it mean that if we really put the pressure on God and keep on asking, and asking, and asking, and asking, at last he will consider the length and persistence of our prayers and give us what we ask.

Why would that be wrong? We are coming to God as children before a Father. Do we have to bring pressure before he will give us what we really need and what we ask for? Ponder for a moment the concept that God knows in advance what we need, yet he wouldn't consider giving it to us unless we keep on asking, and in the end we bring such pressure to bear on him that he feels obliged to give in and grant our requests. If that were true, life would be hideous. Just imagine a God who is supposed to be all-loving and knows what we need, but wouldn't give it unless we twisted his arm by our endless asking. He would be less noble than human parents. If a child came in at teatime and said, I'm hungry, please can I have something to eat, what parent would say, certainly not—unless you stand there and ask a thousand times, and then I will consider giving you something to eat? The child that bothers his parents so much that in the end, for sheer weariness, they give in, is not a happy child. And they are not happy parents either!

If God had to be pestered into giving us this or that, then heaven would not be worth going to. We should come to the conclusion that we knew better than God and our happiness depended on our taking the initiative and driving God to give us things that he had no intention to give. But that is not true. Don't let our prayer life contradict what we believe about God in the gospel. 'Ponder anew what the Almighty can do, if with his love he befriend you.'¹ Think what he has already given you without being asked. It wasn't at your request that God sent his Son to be thorn-crowned and nailed to a cross, to bear your sin in his body. Was it your suggestion that in raising him from the dead he raised you too, gave you life and seated you at his own right hand in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus? Or was it your idea that he planned a whole eternity of bliss and promised to put into your hand a share of universal government with Christ? All these things he gave unasked: 'Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures' (Jas 1:18). Out of the sheer goodness of his heart he has determined to bless us. He conceived these majestic and gigantic blessings, and gave them to us all of his own will:

What will he not bestow!
Who freely gave this mighty gift unbought,
Unmerited, unheeded, and unsought,
What will he not bestow?²

There would have been a strange change in his character then, if for these other things that pertain to life (our health, our jobs, our homes—big things for us but little in comparison with God's eternal purposes) we have to twist God's arm or else he won't give

¹ Joachim Neander, 1650–1680 (Praise to the Lord, the Almighty).

² Horatius Bonar, 1808–1889 (Blessed be God, our God).

them to us. Don't be like those Gentiles, and think that by your much asking you shall get. You don't need to pray long prayers to inform God. He knows already.

Hold on a moment, that isn't true! says someone. You do have to inform God. Philippians 4:6 says, 'let your requests be made known to God'. Surely we do! But why is that? Is it because God doesn't know? Has he been asleep for a little while and doesn't know the difficulty we are in, so he needs to be woken up and brought up to date with the modern news? No, of course not! Put that way we can see how absurd it is. We are to inform him, as a mother likes to see a child come to her. The child has just fallen over on the road, his shins are cut and he is feeling shocked. He comes to tell mum. She had already seen it through the bedroom window, but it is taking the load off the child when the child can come and pour out his heart before the mother.

So we don't ask in order to inform God. Well, that presents a very big problem, you say, for if God knows in advance what I need why do I have to ask? Why doesn't he give it automatically? The best I can do is to think of an analogy with mother and Johnny. Johnny likes ice cream and mother knows he does. She is of the view that a little ice cream every now and again is a good thing, and at this very moment she has several packets in the fridge for him. She knows he will come asking, Please Mum, can I have some ice-cream. It may be that he doesn't ask and at teatime she gives him some. If he should ask halfway through the afternoon she has already made provision for that possibility and decides whether it would be good at that particular hour of the day for him to have ice cream or not; and if so, she is delighted to give Jonny his ice cream.

Why doesn't she always take the initiative and not wait for him to ask? Well, Mum wants the boy to come and ask her, for in asking and eventually being given it Johnny is getting a great deal more reward than ice cream. Ponder it a moment. Along with the ice cream he is collecting an impression of that lovely lady who is his mother and building up in his childish mind a sense of what a mother is. She is somebody who cares, and when he needs something and comes to ask she gives it. In fact she had already anticipated his need and there it is in the fridge. The impression of what a mother is will stick with him in life. Long after he has lost the taste for ice cream and prefers smoked salmon, he will still remember that charming lady, now silver-haired, and his heart will go out in gratitude to her for the marvellous mum she was. He began to learn it when he came and asked for ice cream.

Of course Johnny's requests for ice cream did not always meet with success as far as he was concerned. Sometimes mother said No, and in those five minutes she was the worst woman on earth! He stamped the floor, cried his eyes out and denounced her. What a mother, who has ice cream in the fridge and doesn't give it! But as the hours and years go by he learns a little bit more about this mother who so loved him that when he asked for something that wouldn't be good for him she was prepared not to give it, in spite of all his misimpressions. That is a strong love. Sometimes, when asked for the one hundred and fifth time, a mother who is tired in the midst of a busy day will give in for the sake of peace. God will never do that. He loves us so much that he is prepared to endure for the time being our disappointments and our resentments. Ten thousand years from now we will bless him for it, and discover the depths of the love of God that had our good as its aim and object. What,

then, is the reward of prayer? It is not merely the actual particular things we get, the reward of prayer is God himself. We are invited to come and ask, lest we receive all the gifts from God automatically and in the end we neither value them or him. We come to ask because God wants us to know him as a person. Whether he gives or not, when we come and ask we discover what he is like, and that is the supreme reward of prayer.

At the end of our study let us think of that aspect of prayer that is so prominent in the Old Testament. In our older versions it is described as waiting upon the Lord. 'They that wait upon the LORD shall *renew* their strength'—shall *change* their strength (Isa 40:31). Those words were spoken as a comfort for the Israelite exiles. They had gone to Babylon under the chastisement of God, but with the gracious promises ringing in their ears that one day God would have mercy and restore them to their land, their homes, their temple, and to Jerusalem city. There would be a virtual paradise on earth when God restored the Davidic throne. The time would come when the Gentile kings and queens would bring Israel back to their land and be their servants. Thus encouraged, the godly among them had waited. But as the years went by the questions naturally arose. Why do we have to wait so long? Why doesn't God fulfil his promise? What has gone wrong? The seventy years of God's discipline of his people that Jeremiah talked about had expired, only a tiny few had gone back, and they were in trouble! It was nothing like the paradise they were promised. Back there in Israel with all the enemies and shortages of food it was worse than Babylon. Why does God wait? Why doesn't he fulfil all his glorious promises?

God's answer through the prophets was that he would fulfil all those glorious promises one day, but for the time being he was asking them to *wait* on the Lord. (The Hebrew means to *hope* in the Lord.) Great emphasis is on the verb to hope. Hope means not getting it now; it is hoping for something we don't see, still trusting God and being prepared to wait until it is God's good time. When faced with that advice many Israelites found it difficult to take.³ After the passing of so many years that kind of hope seems to become sickeningly unreal, and some of them decided that God had forgotten about them. 'Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment (my case) is passed away from my God?' (Isa 40:27). He is no longer interested in the case I have presented before him, he is not taking any notice. I have prayed so many times and he still hasn't answered.

That is an impossibility. He that keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep (Ps 121:4), he doesn't get weary and he forgets nothing. The delay in the answering of our prayers and our hopes forces us back on the character of God, to reconsider what God is like. Is it true that he doesn't forget or get weary? Does he know exactly where I am, all that I suffer, all I hope for and all my disappointments right at this very moment? Why does he ask me to wait? The answer comes back: 'Those who wait on the LORD shall *change* their strength' (Isa 40:31). Notice again that the Hebrew for renew is *change*. Change their strength—like a person takes off a worn-out garment and puts on a new one. Their circumstances may not have changed: the changed strength comes while the difficult circumstances remain and the

³ In synagogues they still pray, 'this year in Moscow (or wherever), next year in Jerusalem.'

prayers appear not to be answered. It is in those circumstances that they who wait on God still hoping in him find that he changes their strength not their circumstances. The waiting makes us stronger, rather than our circumstances easier.

How I would have rejoiced if my parents had now and again heeded my request and allowed me to miss school. My school wasn't the delightful place with pleasant teachers like nowadays. My school was full of old dragons who kept not their beating-sticks in vain, and seemed to rejoice in using them at every possible moment! There were big boys at my school, and I was only a little fellow and they put us through endless misery. Ragging was the done thing, and if you blurted it out to the teacher it was woe-betide you, both from the teacher and the boys. How I would have loved that my parents had heard my prayers and said that I didn't have to go to school. But they made me go, and now I can see what a weakling I would have been (worse than I am now!) if my parents had let me stay in the warmth of the nursery playing with my toys, rather than sending me out to face that bad old world of school. It was while the circumstances were difficult that the strength was changed from that of an infant to a growing boy; and as the years have gone by from a raw juvenile to somewhere near a mature adult.

God has such designs for us. Hear the exhortation of our Father: 'Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these, that brings out their host by number: he calls them all by name; by the greatness of his might, for he is strong in power, not one is lacking' (Isa 40:26). In the quietness of the night look up and consider the planets, millions upon millions. Stand and be overawed at God's wondrous display. He asks you to go and do it! Take your eyes off your circumstances for a little while. Survey the quiet infinities of space, the near immeasurable numbers of the stars, and ask yourself who keeps all that up and calls their names. Is it true that at this very moment he knows me—he counts the hairs of my head, knows the throbbing of my heart, and perhaps of my head as well? Is it true that he designed salvation and eternal life for me? Is it true that he has designed a future for me and I shall share universal dominion with his Son? This little bit of clay, designed by God to rule the ages and the great eternity along with God? The thing I've asked for doesn't appear to be given—is he asking me now to wait and hope so that my strength will grow? Instead of the circumstances being different, I shall get more power to cope with them and learn to rise up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint. We need to learn these lessons, for if life's responsibilities seem large now bigger things are ahead. With what consternation would you hear your reward, if Christ gave you a whole galaxy to look after tomorrow? And as for judging a few angels! We desperately need our strength to be changed, and these are changes that will last eternally.

As we learn to do what God says, there will come new courage, healing and balm. Survey the wonders of his creation, the marvels of the night sky and let its grandeur put life's difficulties in their true perspective and remind us of our eternal destiny. So we shall find new strength, hope and courage to face tomorrow's difficulties, until such times as the Lord is pleased to answer our prayers—either here or when the Lord Jesus comes. In waiting upon the Lord, God himself is the reward.

Perseverance in Prayer

Reading: Luke 11:5–14; 18:1–8; Revelation 8:1–4

I want to deal, as best I can, with a problem that befalls many a believer in this area of prayer. When is it right to persevere in asking God for something, and when should we take No for an answer and cease praying?

There are many passages in Scripture that seem to encourage us to persevere, and all the handbooks on prayer will tell you that it is not for the faint-hearted. Prayer is for those who are prepared to persist in asking, and God will answer your prayer and honour your faithful persistence. Yet, on the other hand, some will tell us that that was not Paul's way. When it came to the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor 12:7–10), he tells us that he besought the Lord three times that his difficulty should be taken away from him. The Lord did not remove it. 'The Lord has said to me' says Paul,⁴ 'My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.' After having asked the Lord three times and receiving the answer No on each occasion, it appears Paul desisted from praying.

Then along come our very solemn fellow-believers and they wag their warning fingers in front of our noses and say, be careful—you can ask too much! There is a verse that says, 'He granted their request; but he sent leanness into their soul' (Ps 106:15). We can't deny it. The psalm is referring to that famous occasion when the Israelites came to Moses and said, we are fed up with this manna, morning, noon and night—breakfast, lunch and dinner. We were better off in Egypt with cucumbers and garlic. If you can't do better than this we are not going on. Give us flesh to eat (Num 11:4–6). God gave them flesh, but while it was yet in their mouths he smote them (v. 33). There's a warning for you, say our solemn brothers and sisters. Don't keep on asking lest God should give you what you ask for, and then you will wish he hadn't.

So what do we do? I shall attempt to answer that by taking two major passages of Scripture that talk of persistence in prayer, and considering the context in which these exhortations are given. But having done that I shall have only begun to answer the problem.

Last time we thought of prayer as between us and God, with ourselves as children coming to make requests of our heavenly Father. We listened to the Lord Jesus assuring us that our

⁴ Putting it in the perfect tense and repeating it, as though it were the Lord's final decision on the matter, and that decided it for Paul.

Father knows what we need before we ask him. When we come as children to a father it isn't to inform him—though he likes us to tell him what we want. He knows in advance what we need and loves to give it when it is appropriate. We are to come and ask him so that we might get the reward of praying, which is fellowship with him. This may not be the particular gift we have been seeking, but God himself is the reward of our praying.

Now we move on to speak of prayer in the context of ourselves as men and women who are 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God' (2 Cor 7:1). As scholars in the school of God's holiness we are exhorted to persevere in prayer.

Let me remind you again of the pattern and the proportions in the prayer that our Lord Jesus gave us in Matthew 6:9–13. Surely our Lord does not mean us to constantly repeat those phrases in parrot fashion, though if we repeated them more often perhaps it would do us no harm. The prayer gives us a pattern, and part of that pattern is the proportion we ought to learn in our praying. It starts with three requests concerned with God's interests:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven

How easy it is for us to get our proportions and priorities somewhat different. We rush into God's presence: 'O God, remember granny's arthritis, and I have the toothache, and I need a job because I am out of work!' Like children burst in on their parents with their unpremeditated requests, God smiles when we come with the things that are so pressing upon our hearts. But as mature sons and daughters of God it would be good for us to grow up and begin to develop a true and proper sense of priority in our prayer life. What ought to come first in my order of urgency? According to the pattern the first three requests are for God's concerns.

Then come three requests for my own concerns:

Give us this day our daily bread
Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us
Lead us not into temptation

The first request concerns the material things of life: '*give us this day our daily bread*'. You can put everything that goes with our material and physical wellbeing into that bracket. If Granny's arthritis doesn't improve she won't have any appetite for eating; and if the tooth is not dealt with you won't be able to chew the crusts! All those things that concern our physical wellbeing and loom so large, of course we are encouraged to pray for them, and of the three things that concern us this comes first. You can't get to heaven without cornflakes! You can be as spiritual as you like but if you don't eat your food you will die, and you won't have any strength left to start embarking on your spiritual and moral education. God is realistic. How shall I give myself to prayer for spiritual things if I have had no food this last week?

But having said that, the proportion is 1:2. One for physical things but the other two for moral and spiritual things: '*forgive us our trespasses*'. That prayer is not for good Christians,

says someone, it is for the Jews. We don't have to ask God to forgive us our trespasses. He has forgiven us already through the blood of Christ. 'We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins'; we don't have to ask God for forgiveness.

So, if I drive my car carelessly and can't brake and run into your car, I don't have to ask you for forgiveness? God has already forgiven me so I don't have to ask you for forgiveness? That would be plain nonsense. We have to learn to distinguish between the forgiveness that God has given us through Christ—'their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more' (Heb 8:12) (his forgiveness at the legal level)—and forgiveness at the level of God's family and day to day life in the kingdom of God. That is a different thing, for which I need to ask the Lord's forgiveness. If I carry on sinning, and don't confess it and seek his forgiveness, Scripture plainly tells me that the Lord will chastise me. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9). If we judge and discern ourselves and, where we have failed, seek the Lord's forgiveness, he will not chastise us. But, like the good Father and Lord he is, if we don't confess our sins and if we don't repent and seek his forgiveness he will chastise us until we come to a better frame of mind.

If I need to constantly show my dependence on God for my daily bread, I need with equal frequency to ask God's forgiveness. Can we ever bow before God and say, 'Today Lord, I don't need forgiveness for I have done everything one hundred percent well?' There won't be a day like that until we get home to glory. The sensitivity that it develops in my spirit will make me aware that my brother and sister also need forgiveness, and if I expect the Lord to forgive me I must forgive them. That's life in the family of God.

If I need forgiveness for what I have done wrong in the past, I need God's help not to do wrong again in the future: '*Lead us not into temptation*'. That shows a proper attitude. There are times when God by his Spirit and in his wisdom does lead us into situations where we shall be tempted (as he did with his own blessed Son). What should my attitude be to that? Not that of Peter. When our Lord warned him that temptation was coming and he was liable to fail Peter with his foolhardy courage said, It will be all right, Lord. I would never break down. He would have been better to pray, O Lord, don't let me come into such a situation. I am not strong enough to face life's great tests by myself and I could become unstuck. I need God's protection, so lead me not into temptation, if it is possible in your will to keep me from the severe tests.

Two requests then at the moral and spiritual level against the one request for my physical needs. It is on those spiritual and moral areas of our lives that we are encouraged to persist in prayer. The first parable our Lord gives us on the topic is in Luke 11, where he paints a delightful picture of an ancient Eastern village. Oriental villagers are a little bit different in their standards and behaviour to us. Our Lord pictures a man who had an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night. It can be an embarrassing thing to have to go to your next-door neighbour and ask for a can of soup or Heinz beans for an unexpected visitor! Ancient orientals wouldn't have had such inhibitions. If an unexpected visitor arrived in the middle of the night and there was nothing to put before him we might say, 'It's nice to see you, let's get to bed now and have a decent breakfast in the morning!' Not in the ancient East. You had to put some food before them or else you would never recover from the shame of not

entertaining them to a meal. So the visitor would be left to sit down on a lovely carpet or something, and the host would go off to his friend and hammer on the door with his woeful tale.

Our Lord envisages the possibility that when the man knocks on the door his friend is already snoring his head off in bed with his children. Being wakened by the hammering on the door he says, Go away, I am in bed with my children. I can't be disturbed at this time of night (v. 7). Said our Lord, if you had a visitor, and you knocked on your friend's door and he replied in that fashion, would you give up, even in the middle of the night? No! You would keep on hammering on the door until he got up and gave you the necessary bread.

Our Lord tells us what would be the secret of the thing. The fellow in bed would eventually get up and give the man what he asks not because he is his friend, but because of 'his importunity' (literally translated, that means 'his shamelessness', v. 8). You ought to be ashamed of going to your neighbour in the middle of the night, but this man is absolutely shameless and determined to have this bread. In the end, because he is determined to have it and keeps on knocking and will not be ashamed, his friend gets up and gives it to him. He gets it because of his shamelessness—he did not give up.

There would be situations in modern life where we would act like that. Here's a mother and her three-year-old has been violently sick and is running a high temperature. She doesn't know what to do. Is it the onset of cerebral meningitis, or has the child eaten too much chocolate? If it is only a little stomach upset she daren't call the doctor at two o'clock in the morning. She would feel too ashamed. But if it were the onset of meningitis she would never forgive herself if she didn't call the doctor. Suppose it was grandfather who had a heart attack at two o'clock. Mother wouldn't wait two minutes, she would pick up the telephone immediately and ring the doctor. No matter how much the doctor complained she would insist that he came right now. She would be utterly shameless! In her scale of values this is of absolute importance, and she wouldn't take No for an answer.

The parable is telling us that there are situations in life where we must be prepared to pray with that shameless insistence and determination never to take No for an answer. What are these circumstances, and what would we be praying for? Our Lord gives us the answer: 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' (v. 13) It is in our asking for the Holy Spirit that we are to show that persistence, that shameless perseverance, that refusal to take No for an answer.

I hear somebody murmur: I think our preacher would do well to take a course in dispensationalism! He has fallen into a second error in the course of one short evening. Ask for the Holy Spirit, indeed. Doesn't he know that we are living after Pentecost and every believer has the Holy Spirit? We don't have to ask for the Holy Spirit, we have the Holy Spirit! The Jews before Pentecost had to ask for the Holy Spirit, but the prophets had promised them that God would one day pour out his Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28). It happened on the day of Pentecost. Before Pentecost the Jews rightly asked for the Holy Spirit, but we don't have to do that. Upon believing, each one of us is sealed with the Holy Spirit.

So does that really mean we don't have to ask for the Holy Spirit in any sense whatever? That can't be right, for in two famous passages Paul tells us that he prays constantly and perseveringly for his converts in the various cities of the Roman Empire.

I cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. (Eph 1:15–17)

Who can that spirit be except the Holy Spirit? Then again he tells us:

For this cause I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he would grant you according to the riches of his glory, that you may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner man. (Eph 3:14–16)

Twice over in this one epistle Paul tells the Ephesians that he makes unceasing mention of them in his prayers—and what he is praying for is the enlightening and strengthening of God's Spirit in their hearts.

Do I need to pray for those things? If Paul prayed for them I surely should pray too—for myself and for others. But why do I need to pray? Because, to start with, what Paul is talking about is a real, practical process: 'I pray that God may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation'. They have already been sealed with the Holy Spirit; but now he prays that God would give them the spirit of revelation, and that is a practical process, it is not automatic. Paul does not say, I don't need to pray because God will give it to them anyway. This is a spiritual goal that needs constantly to be aimed at. It is a process constantly needing to be performed, and therefore a process constantly to be prayed for.

I cannot tell what you pray for in your prayer meetings, but I am trying to remember the last time I heard somebody praying this prayer. Why do I need a spirit of revelation? So that I may know what is 'the hope of his calling'. We know that we are all going to heaven; but what we are praying for is for the hope of his calling to become so real, as though God took a veil away and to our heart's eye the glorious goal of heaven becomes that more vivid and real, that its realities begin to transform our sense of proportion. The hope of his calling will become so real that it will alter even our sense of priorities in prayer.

Perhaps you are rather proud of your garden, but there is one little patch where the grass won't grow properly. You wonder what you will do about it; it occupies your attention and assumes a great proportion. Then comes a letter from your aunt in America saying that she would like to give you a present, so she is going to send you and your wife on a world cruise for six weeks. The boat leaves on January 1st and you will need suitable clothes. So you have to get moving and, do you know what, the little patch of the lawn gets forgotten! Now it is a dash to get ready for the cruise. The calling has become real and it is altering life's proportions. With it there comes a new sense of worth. When you have seen around the world somehow the lawn slides into its proper proportion and life becomes wealthier.

How do we get dragged down by life's petty details, and there drains out of us the sense of wealth that we have been called to share the reigning of the universe with Christ? In

1 Corinthians 7 Paul gives advice to the married and unmarried. He says, 'as God has called each' (v. 17). When God calls you it doesn't mean that you have to change your lifestyle. If you are a slave you will still have to serve the Lord, if you are married it doesn't mean that you have to get divorced. You can stay where you are but the call of God will alter life's proportions. Time is short and soon the temporary will be gone. How much time, energy, thought, and even prayer are spent on what is only temporary. We have lost the sense of proportion that we have a calling to incalculable riches and responsibilities. I shall need to be strengthened in my heart, rooted and grounded in life, so that I shall be able to bear life's difficulties.

The man who wrote those words was a man who served the Lord twenty-four hours of every day with his travels, writings, preaching, tent-making, persecutions, imprisonments, shipwrecks. If you had found him as he was floating in the Mediterranean, holding on to a bit of wood, and said, Paul, 'Look at you now. After all you have done for the Lord, surely he could have done better for you than this!' —he would have said:

I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)

We shout loudly to God in our prayers sometimes, for the simple reason that we are not grounded in his love and we can't take the pressure. If our hearts were more deeply rooted in his love we would be more like Paul, able to take the pressure and the persecution unmoved and with perseverance. We need the operation of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and therefore we need to pray for it.

So how shall we pray? First of all with that same shamelessness that took the oriental villager down to his friend's house and kept him hammering on the door. What made him do it? For him it was unthinkable that he should go back empty-handed with nothing to put before the visitor. As we come to pray for the great operations of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we had better first make up our minds if we could do without him. If we can do without him then we probably will.

The idea appeals to me of being an Olympic gold medallist in swimming, standing on that top box with the National Anthem playing and the medal being placed around my neck! Can you imagine me going to a trainer and saying: 'I would like you to take me on. I want to be an Olympic gold medallist so can we have a chat about it next Monday morning?'

He would say, 'What do you mean, next Monday morning? If you want to be an Olympic gold medallist you will have to come every day of the week for the next ten years.'

'That's surely taking it to extremes,' I reply. 'I can't come on weekdays, and I have to be at work at nine o'clock.'

'Never mind,' he would say, 'come at 5.30 and you can do twenty lengths before breakfast!'

'No, I can't do that!'

'Well, there's no gold medal then.'

What fool would ever imagine that he could become an Olympic gold medallist by one practice session? I would have to persist.

'Exercise yourself unto godliness,' said Paul to Timothy (1 Tim 4:7). And if I am to know the ongoing work of God's Spirit in my heart, of revelation and strengthening, I shall have to come constantly with that predetermined decision that I can't do without it.

Our Lord's assessment of human nature was not very high. He held that we all are basically evil:

Of which of you that is a father shall his son ask a loaf, and he give him a stone? or a fish, and he for a fish give him a serpent? . . . If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? (Luke 11:11-13)

So we must constantly come and persevere in our coming, always with the attitude that still we have not received enough; nor will we cease our knocking until we are perfectly conformed to the image of God's Son. 'Ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you' (v. 9). This is the unfailing law of God's kingdom, and God does not mock our faith.

If it is sickness of my body I may come as a child to my Father and he may give me healing; or, like Paul, he may not. Whichever he does he will do for the furtherance of my moral and spiritual character. If it would be better, he may grant me the healing I ask for. But if it would be for my spiritual good not to grant me that healing but to call upon me to bear the difficulty—and thus to have deepened my faith, my moral fibre and my spiritual character, God may be pleased to leave the difficulty. But of this we may be sure: the God who has called us to his kingdom and his glory never loses sight of the major goal. He will work all things together for that ultimate good, the kingdom and the glory to which he has called us. Happy are those men and women who have heard his call to co-operate with him persistently in their prayers for the development of their character.

There is another area in which we are called upon to persist in prayer. Our Lord Jesus referred to it when he told the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8). In his introduction he said, 'that they ought always to pray, and not to faint'—not to give in or give up, but to persist in prayer.

The parable runs as follows. In a certain city there was a widow, and the men of that city had treated her unjustly. She came to the judge to plead with him that he would take up her cause and avenge her of her adversaries. For a while the judge refused to do anything. (I suppose he may have been in league with those businessmen.) But he had reckoned without her persistence. She was not going to give up and she came, and she came, and she came again. It was always the same plea, 'Avenge me of my adversary (v. 3). I have been hard done by and unjustly treated. It is a matter of justice. Please avenge me and see that justice is done.' In the end the judge said to himself, 'I suppose I shall have to do something for she troubles me by her persistent coming.' So, not because he had any respect for the principles of justice that he was supposed to care for in his office but to relieve himself of the

sheer botheration of the woman constantly coming, he got up and avenged her. A striking example then of someone who pleaded and prayed and persisted, and would not give in.

When our Lord came to apply the parable he said, 'shall not God avenge his elect, which cry to him day and night, and he is long-suffering over them? I say unto you that he will avenge them speedily' (vv. 7–8). Therefore, we too are encouraged to persist in prayer that God will avenge us of our adversaries. But surely as Christians we are not to ask God to avenge us of our enemies? We are to follow the example of our Lord. We are not Jews, praying to God to bring down his judgment on their enemies, to dash their heads against stones!⁵ We are followers of him who, even when he was being crucified, prayed for his enemies that God would forgive them. I observe however, that this is a parable told by the Lord; and if our Lord tells us that we ought always to pray and not to faint, surely he is not teaching us to do anything un-Christian! How could Christ ever teach anything that wasn't Christian? He tells us that we are to pray and persist in prayer, and not to faint.

He was not telling us to pray for revenge. He was simply telling us that the judge was asked to avenge the woman so that she might receive justice. Her cause was just, and all she was asking for was her money, her property, or whatever it was that these evil men had cheated her of. She wanted justice to be done to her, and not necessarily that she should seek revenge upon her enemies.

Not only do we have our Lord's teaching on the subject but his own example as to what attitude he took to those who persecuted him. You say, he prayed for his enemies! And so he did. As the soldiers drove those terrible spikes through his wrists and staked them to the tree, he prayed, 'Father, forgive them'. He was talking about the soldiers who were driving the nails through his hands—'they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). And indeed they didn't. They were Roman soldiers merely carrying out their duty. The claims and the counterclaims, that he was or was not the Jewish Messiah, would have been meaningless to them. They were not Jews; they were soldiers of the Roman army detailed by their general to carry out this among many other executions. They were doing their duty, and they knew not what they were doing. Christ in his mercy pleaded forgiveness for them on the ground that they didn't know what they were doing. It would be altogether unauthorized on our part to extend that to say that our Lord prayed forgiveness for those who did know what they were doing. Peter tells us what his was attitude to them:

Christ also . . . left us an example, that we should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: when he was reviled, he reviled not again; and when he suffered he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judges righteously. (1 Pet 2:21–23)

We do well to ponder those statements. We picture in our mind's eye our blessed Lord standing before those unjust councils and courts. They scourged him and led him away to his place of crucifixion. What a terrible thing it would have been for all concerned, and for planet earth indeed, if in those moments he had reviled again, or if in those excruciating moments of his torment he had retaliated and threatened. Surely planet earth would have crumbled under his threatening. When he 'suffered and threatened not', do you suppose

⁵ Psalm 137:9

that in his heart he was saying, 'This doesn't matter—I don't mind what they do to me; it's neither here nor there. And there's no sense bothering about the justice and iniquity of it.'? Of course he did not.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Peter lets us into the mind, heart and thoughts of our blessed Lord. As he was being led to crucifixion he 'committed himself to him who judges righteously'. He went to Calvary's cross in the unshakeable conviction that God is a God of justice. There will be a day of final judgment, when all earth's wrongs (including that of the crucifixion itself) will be put right. God will judge righteously, and in that confidence our Lord could leave it for God to deal with. That set him free not to revile or threaten. Instead he bore our sins in his body on the tree, with all the terrible wreckage that they caused in his body. And he did it without retaliation so that we, 'having died unto sin, might live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed (1 Pet 2:24). It was the very means in God's hands to bring men and women to repentance, to the realization of the hideousness and seriousness of their sin, and induce in them repentance that would lead them at last to faith—to pass away from sin and live unto righteousness.

That attitude of his came out on his way to Calvary as he talked to the women of Jerusalem. They came out breaking their hearts (as you might think)—pitying him and weeping floods of tears. Much as they would if they had seen a terrible accident along the road and somebody killed and mangled up. He turned to them and said, 'Enough of that!':

Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. The days are coming . . . when men shall call upon the rocks to hide them. For if they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry? (Luke 23:27–31)

Because of the inevitable consequence of what they are doing, the judgments of God must fall on them if they remain unrepentant. It was that profound conviction of God's justice and that one day there would be a judgment that set our Lord free not to retaliate and to endure the suffering, with the purpose of bringing sinners to repentance and making forgiveness possible for them.

We are called upon to adopt the same attitude. We cannot speak of persecution perhaps, like some can. I think of the men and women in various countries who have lived daily under the fear of death and suffered enormously for the sake of Christ. We cannot say we have known anything like that. On the other hand, I know of Christian businessmen who, because they have refused to cheat in the market place, have found themselves cheated by others. Persecution for Christ's sake and for righteousness' sake can take many different forms. This is a cruelly unjust world, and sometimes men and women who are not prepared to cheat are themselves cheated, passed by in promotion, put down and suffer loss for their principles' sake. And believers can suffer injustice at the hands of fellow-believers. Sometimes such injustices are put right, and sometimes they are not put right. Then what will happen? When they stand before him shall the Lord say, let's forget it!? Certainly not! He shall render to each 'the things done in the body' (2 Cor 5:10).

So then, we need to listen to the parable, and our Lord's exhortations are backed home for us by the explicit words of the Apostle Paul: 'Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give

place to wrath: for it is written, “Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay,” says the Lord’ (Rom 12:19).

Notice the grounds of the exhortation. You should not try to avenge yourselves; leave it to God. He has given his sure promise, ‘Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay.’ James says the same thing in his final chapter: My dear brethren, be done with smouldering resentments against one another. You feel you have been unjustly treated, and nobody will listen to you. The whole thing has gone by default and you are inclined, like a smouldering volcano, to erupt from time to time! Don’t do that, says James: ‘the judge stands before the door’ (5:9). Very soon he will come in and put things to rights. Not only your grievance—what others have done against you; but their grievance—what you may have done against them! It is, then, in the profound conviction that there is a coming judgment for this world that there is also judgment for the people of God.

Why should we pray and why shouldn’t we give in? If you gave up praying, what would that imply for the character of God? We come back to the parable. The judge was an unprincipled rascal, but even he could be moved to act in the cause of justice by a woman’s persistence. If you have a case that you need to take to God, will you give up if he doesn’t answer your prayer at once? It’s not worth praying, you say. God doesn’t take any notice, so it’s not worth my while praying any more about it. Then you are implying that God is more unprincipled and more hard-hearted than that unjust judge. That would be an aspersion on the very character of God. There is a God, and as the absolute anchor of our faith we must hold that he cares for justice. If God does not care for justice then heaven would be black. Indeed, there would be no heaven to go to. It would be an aspersion on his character to behave as though we have lost faith in the fact that God cares for justice. He does care!

Our Lord Jesus said that even though he is longsuffering he would see that justice is done for his elect who cry to him day and night. ‘When the Son of Man comes, shall he find faith on the earth?’ (Luke 18:8). Why shouldn’t he? Why, because the sufferings of the people of God in general will not grow easier, but worse. The temptation for people will be in the end to give up believing that God cares for justice, or that there is a God in heaven at all. This is one of the very big tests of the genuineness and reality of our faith in the character of God.

In Revelation 8 there is silence in heaven for half-an-hour. If you have ever experienced standing with a vast congregation of people (perhaps on Remembrance Day), when a silence of two minutes is being observed, you will know that two minutes can seem like half-an-hour. Imagine being in heaven when the ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands are in absolute silence for half-an-hour. Wouldn’t you begin to wonder when it was going to end and what will break the silence? John found the answer when the half hour was up. The silence was broken when an angel came forward ‘and there was given to him much incense, to add it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne’ (v. 3). As the incense came up with those prayers the angel turned out his censer upon the earth and the judgments of God began.

This is a beautiful, vivid figure of a problem that has tormented the hearts of God’s people all down the centuries. The silence of God and the oft-repeated question, why does God not hear? Think of the multitudes of Jewish people taken off to the gas chambers,

crying to their God and no reply coming; the killing fields of Cambodia, and the thousands of our fellow-believers in the gulags in Russia and elsewhere; the cries of the early believers as they were led out to the lions. Why was God silent?

We cannot spend time now thinking of all the reasons, save to notice two things. The time eventually came for God to take his great power and reign, reward his servants, judge the evil and destroy them that destroy the earth. In the meantime there came an angel to John, with one foot on the land and one upon the sea. He had a book in his hand, a scroll containing the purposes of God. 'He lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever . . . that there shall be delay no longer' (Rev 10:5–6). The promises of God were to be fulfilled. We do well to capture that wonderful vision in our mind's eye and let it sink down into our hearts. Whatever our trials, persecutions or injustices in this ungodly world, and however long the silence of God seems in response to our prayers, there stands one before us who is Lord of heaven and earth. He has one foot on the sea and one on the land. In one hand he has a book of the purposes of God, and with the other he swears the very oath of God. God has counted and measured our sufferings and he knows the limit of our patience. He has heard our prayers and soon he will grant us the answer.

His oath, His covenant, and blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul give way,
He then is all my hope and stay.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand!⁶

So then we are asked to persist in prayer that God's justice will be done. Meanwhile, like our Lord we can seek grace to follow his example: when we are reviled we do not revile again, when we suffer we do not threaten. By God's grace let us attempt to take and absorb the sufferings, so that in his hand it may lead even our enemies to repentance, faith and forgiveness.

⁶ Edward Mote, 1797–1874 (My hope is built on nothing less).

Servants Exercising Authority in Prayer

*Reading: Daniel 10:1–6, 12, 13; Matthew 17:19–20;
John 14:11–14; 15:7; 16:23–24; Acts 4:23–31*

Now we are to think of prayer in another context. In our first study we spoke of prayer in the context of ourselves as children coming to our Father. Our Lord told us that we do not have to constantly bombard God with endlessly repeated requests, for he knows what we need before we ask. Why then do we have to pray? The true and ultimate reward of prayer is not simply getting what we ask for, but the fellowship it sets up between God and us. We come to know the Father and have experience of him and of his love and kindness. The wonder is that he is prepared to listen to our childlike requests and, as he sees wise and good, to grant what we ask.

Then we moved on to consider prayer in relation to ourselves as scholars in God's school of holiness. It was there that we came to understand these exhortations that tell us that we must persist in prayer. This is not to be endless repetition. What we ask for is a thing like our daily bread that we must pray for every day. Our seriousness in wanting this is shown by the fact that we do not ask today, and forget about it for the next six months; but we persist in asking for the gracious ministry of God's Spirit in our hearts day after day because we have discovered that we cannot do without it, and we refuse to live without it.

Now we are to consider prayer in the context of ourselves in the work of God, of whatever kind that is. Here we should think about our authority in prayer as the servants of the Lord. If we are going to be effective servants our faith must be strong and unwavering. Not simply persistent, but strong and unwavering. You will remember the verse we read from Matthew 17. Our Lord had come down from the mountain top and cast out a demon from the boy. Afterwards the disciples came in private and asked why they had not been able to cast out the demon. They had tried apparently, but had been unable to cast out this evil spirit. Our Lord didn't say, you are human beings, and I am the Son of God! He said: 'If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Be removed, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you' (vv. 20–21).

Then again, in Mark 11, apropos of the withered fig tree, he said: 'Therefore, whatever things you ask in prayer, believe you have received them, and you shall have them' (v. 24). Authority in prayer! We shall need to explain a thing or two here.

Because of your lack of faith, 'your little faith' (Matt 17:20)—this phrase has worried a lot of people. We feel like the father who came to our Lord with a request and had to admit to the Lord that his faith was very weak. He said, 'I believe; help my unbelief' (Mark 9:24). I suspect many of us most of the time feel very much like him. Does that mean that you never get anything unless your faith is one hundred percent strong? Not at all!

Some people make that mistake when it comes to the basics of salvation. People ask me sometimes if I am sure of salvation. When I say that I am, they say, you must have very strong faith! As if, when it comes to salvation, the stronger your faith the more secure your salvation. That is nonsense. Our salvation does not depend on our faith as a work that we have to do up to a certain standard. If it is not strong enough we are not saved, and if it is strong enough then we are saved. Sometimes even believers fall into that mistake.

Someone once said to me that perhaps he wasn't saved after all. He told me that it says in the Bible that the devils believe and tremble, and it doesn't do them any good (Jas 2:19). How can I know that I have the right kind of faith, and if I don't what shall I do? Summoning up all he knew about faith, making sure that it would be faith in the Lord and nothing else, he prayed. He felt a lot better, but two days later the doubts came again—do I have the right kind of faith?

What was his mistake? First of all, thinking that salvation depends upon our faith. It doesn't. Faith in that sense, when it comes to salvation, is not a work that you have to do one hundred percent correctly, and if you don't you won't be saved. That would make faith a merit. You would earn salvation by doing it one hundred percent correctly. That is not true. Listen to the poor man asking for his son to be delivered from the demon. Our Lord said, 'If you have faith . . .'. The man said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' Our Lord did not say, 'I will do no such thing. Not until you can believe one hundred percent will I do anything for you!' Of course he didn't.

When Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water to come to the Lord Jesus, for a while all went well. But when he saw the waves he began to sink. As the water came up round him he cried out, 'Lord, save me' (Matt 14:30). And the Lord immediately stretched out his arm and lifted him up out of the water. Now he knew he was safe. Then the Lord gave him a kindly lecture on the fact that his faith had been so weak when it shouldn't have been!

Whether it is an unbeliever coming to Christ for the gift of eternal life and salvation, or a believer in the midst of life's struggles, will Christ not save or help us unless we have one hundred percent good, complete, absolutely strong faith? Of course he will! But when it comes to our work for God that is another situation.

One night a father went up to his little girl and found her still awake, tossing in her bed. Her father asked what was troubling her. She said, 'Daddy, if I don't pass my exams will you still love me?' He did not say, 'How dare you live under my roof and doubt my love! If you don't pass your exams I will put you out and disown you forever.' Of course he didn't. Here was the child beset with fears and imagining that dad would no longer love her. He did what we all would have done, he put his arms around her and told her that whether she

passed or not it made no difference to the fact that he loved her now, and would love her still.

What a wonderful comfort it is to know that in all life's works and troubles and difficulties God loves us. He loved us while we were still sinners, and he will go on loving us when we are saints under those same conditions. He loves us eternally in spite of our doubts.

But suppose that same father, being a businessman, had a grown-up son in New York. The boy was with his father in the business and for some reason had to attend an auction in New York. A certain item came up for sale and the boy saw an opportunity. It was to cost six million. What was he to do? He had to make an instant decision. Should he go above five million or not? Now he would need to have strong faith, for if he dithered the opportunity would be gone forever. Suppose he bid for it and got it and then his father was displeased. You can understand why he might dither, if he risked putting his father into debt for six million! But it is no good dithering in that situation. If he is going to do the successful deal he has to be so persuaded of his father's will and the principles of the firm that he can go and act at once and be assured that the firm and his father will back him up. If he has not got that confidence, he will not do many good deals.

When it comes to us as servants of the Lord doing the work of the Lord, there will be situations where we shall be called upon to act in faith and not to dither. Our authority will depend upon the firmness of our faith. 'Why couldn't we cast out the demon?' said the disciples. 'Because of your little faith,' said Christ. How shall I get firmness in faith as a servant of the Lord? The Lord gives us the secret three times over in the Gospel by John when he assures us that since his resurrection and ascension we have his authority to come and pray in his name.

These verses have often been quoted, and proved a puzzle to many of us. 'If you ask anything in my name I will give it to you.' Says somebody, I did ask for a new house! My kitchen is so small and I asked the Lord if I could have a new house with a nice modern kitchen. And here it says, 'If you shall ask anything in my name I will give it.' He didn't give it, so what am I to make of it?

We could help ourselves by reading these promises in their contexts. In John 15 our Lord says, 'If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you will and it shall be done to you' (v. 7). There he is talking about himself as the great vine, and we are the branches. The Father is the husbandman who tends us and daily looks at the branches and, if need be, prunes and cleanses us. His scheme is that he is going to produce the fruit of the gracious Holy Spirit, the fruit of Christ-likeness in our lives. The Father tends us and the Lord Jesus supplies the resources of love and knowledge so that we may produce Christian character. Our Lord says, 'If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you.' This is in the context of refining our characters and developing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. After all, we are not just pieces of wood like a literal vine, we are personalities and we have moderately good ideas of where we still need to be corrected. We don't have to be just passive. We can come to the great husbandman of the vine and say, 'Father, the Lord Jesus said that I may come in his name and you will do what I ask, if his words abide in me—and his Word tells me that in this particular thing and attitude I am

right. He says that if I come and pray according to his Word you will grant me the request.' And so he will, for God does not mock us. When it comes to the development of the Spirit's fruit in our lives and the removal of things that hinder that development, we can come and pray according to Christ's Word and the Father will grant our request.

The other two occasions in John chapters 14 and 16 are talking explicitly of the work that we do for the Lord. Whatever it is he has given to us, we have the authority to come and ask 'in his name' (14:13; 16:23). What does it mean to ask in the name of the Lord Jesus? First of all, the name of the Lord Jesus reminds us who he is, and what his merits are. So that we may strengthen our confidence and thus increase our authority in prayer, would we not be wise to think of his merits? We could not possibly ask something that would be in excess of what he deserves. We will never ask something of the Father in connection with the work of God, and he will be able to say, 'I'm sorry; my Son deserves a lot, but he doesn't quite deserve that!' O that my little heart would begin to take in the proportions of the merit of the Lord Jesus so that I may pray in that name and according to those merits.

Praying in his name means that I come and pray with his authority. How can I pray with the authority of Christ? I get it as I come, guided by his Word—guided by what is the Father's pleasure to do for Christ. What will God not do for his Son? If I come with the authority of Christ to ask for something that I can be absolutely sure that the Lord Jesus would ask, then I can ask with his authority.

We have a lovely picture in Acts 4. The early Christians had met the first bit of big opposition in their Christian testimony. The crowds were getting converted: 3,000 in one day and up to 5,000 the next. Then the high priest and the captain of the temple came and put them in prison, held a court of enquiry and forbade them to preach any more 'in the name of Jesus' (v. 18). Then, says Luke, they let them go. The apostles came to their waiting fellow-believers and they held a prayer meeting. What a lovely prayer meeting it was! Did they pray like this: 'We ask, Lord, if it could possibly be your will, would you ever consider glorifying the name of the Lord Jesus?' Of course they didn't! The early Christians did not pray for the vindication of the name of Christ with such feeble, cowardly, uncertain and wobbly prayers.

Let the opposition be what it will, as they came to prayer they let their minds dwell on the name of God. Said they, 'O Lord, thou that did make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is . . .' (v. 24). A sense of the greatness and vastness of God, before whom the nations of the earth are but dust of the balance and a drop in the bucket, filled their hearts. Then they founded themselves on holy Scripture: 'You know what has happened to your holy servant Jesus. . . both Herod and Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel were gathered together against him (v. 27). We read it in the book of Psalms: "Why do the heathen rage . . . and gather themselves against the LORD and his anointed?" (Ps 2:1-2). You told us about it, Lord; and what is more you told us what you would do—"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision"' (v. 4).

What a slap in the face it was for the Jerusalem authorities when three days after they had crucified Christ, God raised him from the dead, and forty days later set him at his own

right hand. The declared will of God was to vindicate and glorify the Lord Jesus, so there is not a waver of an uncertainty in their prayers. They pray in his name: 'Grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness . . . that signs and wonders might be done through the name of thy holy servant Jesus' (vv. 29–30).

I have to challenge my own feeble heart as I face my own little part in the work of the Lord. I could come to it defeated, and wonder whether it is going to be any good or not. Sure, we don't know which is going to prosper—this or that—as we cast our bread upon the waters. But this we do know, the objectives of God do not waver. The Holy Spirit has come to earth to vindicate the Lord Jesus, and to justify him in the eyes of men, to prove this world is wrong and Jesus is right. God has raised him to his own right hand in glory, and given him a name which is above every name, not only in this world but in the world to come. We can pray therefore with all the unflinching authority of the name of the Lord Jesus that God will honour and vindicate his Son.

We can pray as we work among his people too. We may not know what next to pray for, either for ourselves or for a particular company of his people. But we know what God's purpose is: 'whom he justified, them he also glorified' (Rom 8:30). The glory is that of being conformed to the image of his Son, so we know what the goal is. The Holy Spirit prays, but not automatically. He doesn't say to himself, Well, that's God's purpose so I shall not have to pray about it. Indeed not! The Holy Spirit knows what God's purpose is, but the fulfilment of that purpose depends upon the great energies of the Holy Spirit. Therefore he intercedes according to the mind of God and God's purposes are done and fulfilled. We have a part in that intercession too, by his grace. The bringing of God's people home to glory is not automatic. We can't say that it is God's purpose so I don't need to bother my head! We too may join in those intercessions by which his purposes are fulfilled.

May the Lord open our hearts and minds to the wonder of the merit of Christ and to the certainty of God's purposes for him, and thus to pray. Who shall say that changes in world affairs are due only to economic factors and not to the sustained prayer of millions of God's people over many years? God does not always act at once. In the great warfare that goes on in the heavenly places Daniel was informed that though his prayers were heard at the beginning, there was opposition in the heavenlies to the answering of those prayers and he had to wait and persist until the opposition was overcome before the prayers were granted (Dan 10).

We shall find opposition too, but we do not have to wait until we get home to glory before we see every bit of it overcome. We may see a good deal overcome even now—men and women rescued from the power of darkness and brought into God's wonderful light. The people of God saved from the snares of the evil one, kept from the world and becoming ever more like the Saviour. Indeed, it is not merely in the great affairs of nations that the Lord hears our prayers and vindicates his Son. In the quiet of a small meeting, where we have met on routine occasions and people have prayed in the name of the Lord Jesus, God (who has chosen us and saved us) is pleased to hear those prayers. He puts forth his energy and God's people are moved on to the next step on their way to final glory.

May the Lord use his Word to encourage us, so that as servants of the Lord our faith may be strong and our prayers authoritative.

About the Author

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