

Sermon.

Delivered at the Central Association of N. S. and Published by Request.

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TEXT: "And I prayed unto the Lord my God," Dan. 9:4.

Prayer is a universal instinct. It springs from a sense of man's relation to his Maker. It is the expression of the soul's desire, a direct address to the Supreme Being in human language.

The hunger of the child is not prayer, but the asking for bread would be. The immortal soul has its hungerings. Its mute appeals to the world of sense; its frantic efforts in the rush of business, or the whirl of pleasure; its cravings for what may satisfy its desires may, in metaphor, be described as prayer; but in metaphor only. In true prayer there is an approach to God; an opening of the heart to the divine influence; a pleading cry, in human speech, whether inaudible or expressed.

Prayer is not meditation, as some affirm. You may bend the knee at your bedside; or, beneath spreading branches that are bathed in the light of the morning sun, become wrapped in serious contemplation. You may stand in the presence of the snow capped mountain, and be moved by a sense of the sublime in nature, and of the majesty of him who is infinitely greater than all his works, but you do not pray until you make a direct address to Him, whom you adore, in request for what your spirit craves.

In our religious speech we are constantly referring to prayer in such a way as to imply its great importance; and yet we have scarcely realized, as we might, the blessings it has to give. This is my reason for choosing a topic for this occasion so common-place.

I shall endeavor to show *where* and *why* we should pray, and yet without the assurance that I shall succeed, either to your satisfaction or my own. But I am sure of your indulgence and sympathy in treating a theme so vital to our Christian life.

I. *Where shall we pray.* Every place is holy, for God is everywhere. The devoted minister of the gospel, drawn into a ball-room, could kneel and pray and convert even the place of revelry into a sanctuary for the manifestation of the divine presence. But, in order to the maintenance of the habit of prayer and to secure the fullest development of the Christian life, we need special times and places for the soul's intercourse with God.

The first place I would mention is the closet. Some spot where you can be alone with God. Concerning this we have specific instruction. "When thou prayest enter into thy closet and, when thou hast shut the door, pray." Enter the secret place, shut out all intruders, friends, business, pleasure. Let every thing stand back; let there be a pause in life's routine; let the sun and moon stand still, while, in communion with Jehovah, you gather new strength for the duties and struggles of life.

Nothing can take the place of secret prayer, not even the pulpit, for, though a man may daily lead the devotions of the people at the sacred desk, his spiritual life will suffer loss if he does not draw new supplies from the closet. He cannot be a growing, happy Christian who is not often in this place of prayer.

Again, there should be daily prayer in the household. Though we may not be able to furnish the Scripture command for family worship, we nevertheless recognize its importance. Abraham was to be the founder of a nation that should become the channel of blessings to all the world because of his godly influence in his household. Wherever he went the patriarch erected an altar, upon which, in the presence of his family and dependents, he presented his daily offering to Jehovah. Joshua, amid the cares of state, did not neglect the culture of religion in his family. So well was he assured of their piety he confidently affirmed, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." Thus potent should be the influence of every parent and guardian.

For the daily family devotions, where God's word may be heard by all and his favor humbly sought, no express command is needed. The godly parent must have a concern for the spiritual welfare of those who are of his own flesh and blood, and this anxiety will find its natural expression in the establishment of the family altar. Its omission would entail serious loss. We sympathize with Philip Henry in his saying, "There is a plague and a curse in the home where God is not worshipped."

The prayers of believers should be heard in the church. In this term we may include both the spiritual and the material structure. For the maintenance of the former prayer is an absolute necessity. The design of the latter is to provide a place where God's people may meet together for worship. This purpose needs to be strongly emphasized. We go to the church to hear the sermon. Other parts of the service are of minor consequence. What precedes is "preliminary," and yet this includes praise, prayer and the hearing of God's holy word.

It is true that by the preaching of the gospel our Lord has ordained the salvation of men. Perhaps we are undervaluing this divinely appointed agency in our efforts to crowd the sermon into twenty minutes or half an hour. If, by the foolishness of preaching the Lord will save them that believe, let us give to the preaching all due honor. Let us make it more than a dry dissertation, or a learned essay, which the divine purpose never contemplated. Let us make the sermon a faithful exponent of gospel truth, let its aim be the conversion of sinners and the edification of the saints. Give the preaching its true place and it will rather help than hinder the spirit of devotion. It certainly should not exclude that part of worship that is the most spiritual and that brings the soul into direct and immediate communion with God.

The prayer meeting is especially devotional in its character. It gives ample opportunity for the exercises of prayer and praise. It was in the mind of Jesus when he gave the promise, "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them." It took form in the days just preceding the advent of the Spirit; it out-lived the times of Pentecostal blessing; it has continued to the present as a mighty force in the kingdom of Christ and must so remain until the end of time.

II. *The necessity of prayer.* It is the natural result of our relations to God. We are dependent and sinful. Prayer is the expression of the one fact and the confession of the other. The act has a reflex influence upon him who prays. He becomes more sensible of the divine presence about him. Christ seems more near and real. Love becomes more ardent and the will more submissive. But this is not the explanation of its necessity, as some affirm. He who declares that his mind looks more to prayer as a power for uplifting the spirit to divine communion, or who affirms that its value consists in this, that it stops people from asking for what they cannot get, cannot be trusted as interpreters of the Saviour's words, "Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find." To such as these prayer is only, as Dr. Bushnell expressed it, "a kind of dumb-bell exercise, good as exercise, but not to be answered."

Prayer is weakness coming to the source of power; it is poverty approaching the stores of inexhaustible wealth; it is sinfulness asking for pardon, and pollution for cleansing. It is the deposit of faith in the Bank of Heaven that makes sure of large revenues of wealth. God gives his people a draft that they may fill out for themselves, that shall never be dishonored. "For every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth."

The rationalist pronounces this an absurdity. "God," he says, "cannot change his purposes at the request of man. Nature has her fixed laws that cannot be abrogated by the human will." That is as much as to affirm that nature is superior to the Creator, or that God is limited by his own works.

We are ready to confess the mysteries of divine providence. We are encompassed with mystery. There is a mystery in prayer. But what we cannot understand we need not know. Faith lays hold of the facts of Providence and builds upon the firm foundation of certitude. It does not attempt a solution of the riddles of the universe. It does not tear the bud asunder to find the secret of the opening flower. It plants the acorn, though it knows not the mystery of the oak within its shell. It believes God in the face of the impossible.

The objector affirms that prayer is useless because the divine plans must all be accomplished. But is it not included in the divine purpose? Is it any more unreasonable to expect an answer to your prayer than to believe the word of Jesus, "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out?" It is in God's thought to save you, but not without your trust in Christ as your personal Saviour. If, by yielding to gospel demands, you are to "make your calling and election sure," is it not also certain that if you would have good things of God, you must ask Him for them?

God, by Isaiah, revealed his purpose to deliver Israel from captivity two hundred and fifty years before that event occurred. One hundred years later Jeremiah repeated the promise. A score of years pass away and Ezekiel is commissioned to repeat the gracious word, but adds a necessary condition, "For this, moreover, will I be engaged of by the House of Israel to do it for them." The time draws near for the fulfillment of the promise, concerning which Daniel had learned from the books. And what does he do? Does he sit down and wait for the good word to be accomplished? In my text he tells us what he did—"I set my face unto the Lord God to seek by prayer and supplication . . . and I prayed unto the Lord my God."

The triumphs of the Messiah are conditioned by prayer. It brings down the power that makes the gospel mighty to the casting down of strongholds. In the seventy-second Psalm it is written "Men shall pray for him continually." In the second Psalm Jehovah makes

promise to the Son, "Ask of me and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance." The disciples were taught to pray "Thy kingdom come." The disciples are still praying, and the kingdom is still coming and, in answer to prayer, shall continue to prevail until the last of the saved shall have opened his heart for the enthronement of the King of Heaven. Permit an illustration of my thought.

On the first day of January, 1854, Mr. Jewett and wife, with three native helpers, in the early morning ascended the hill that overlooks Ongole and the surrounding country. They looked down upon the city and the fifty villages in sight. They could see many Hindu temples and Mohammedan mosques, but nothing to tell them that the one true God was worshipped there. With hearts burdened by a sense of the need of these perishing multitudes they knelt and each one in turn prayed to the God of missions to send a missionary to Ongole. These were earnest prayers and, even before they were ended, the answer came, as of old to Daniel. They returned to their lodgings assured that God had heard their cry.

Twelve weary years pass away, but their prayer is still in remembrance, and Mr. Clough and three native preachers are sent thither. In 1872, six years later, there was a native church numbering one thousand six hundred and fifty-eight members, and that in seven years grew to twelve thousand eight hundred and four. That work is still going on and twice ten thousand in the city and surrounding regions attest to the faithfulness of God to his promises. Thousands upon thousands, yet unborn, shall look up to "Prayer-meeting Hill" as a monument to the grace of God who heareth prayer.

The historian will have many events to relate that led up to the final conquest of Burmah by the British. In the Book of Providence there will stand recorded the prayers of the American Baptist missionaries, answered sooner than they had dared to hope. God's people are "working together" with him in the accomplishment of his purposes, and so where more effectually than before the throne of grace.

All our requests will not be heard. We do not dictate to God; we accept what he bestows. We must not put a too literal interpretation upon such passages as these, "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." "Whatsoever we ask we receive of him." We are not to understand from James that prayer is an infallible cure of sickness. God will be true to all that He has promised and, when his spirit inspires the prayer, it shall be heard. There are passages, however, that we may understand in their literal sense and without reserve. "In every thing by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God," "Casting all your cares upon him, for he careth for you." Thus praying and trusting we shall have many assured answers to prayer; and, sometimes, paradoxical as it may appear, even when our petitions are denied.

It is seen that the necessity of prayer arises from the result of our relatives to God, and that it is apparent from the place it holds in the progress of the Kingdom of Christ. Prayer is also a necessity to the individual believer. Without it there can be no growth in grace. Whether the sinner is to be exhorted to pray before he believes, may be an open question. That he will pray when he becomes a believer, is certain, and this may be put in evidence that he has accepted Christ as his Saviour. The words "For behold he prayeth," allayed at once the fears of Ananias respecting Saul of Tarsus. The young convert will soon discover the necessity of prayer. A brief experience will suffice to show that backsliding begins with its neglect. The tempter, finding the young Christian off his guard, will be sure to improve his opportunity. There will be an immediate decline of spiritual fervor, and he, who promised so well at the beginning, will be soon back again into the world, to the disappointment and grief of his brethren, and to the dishonor of the Christian name.

Few, however, will give up prayer at once. Many will retain, in some measure, the outward form of religion, but they will be feeble, stumbling Christians all through their course. Really there are but few of Christ's professed followers who know the strength, the stability and the joy that comes from the life of prayer. These find the secret of the Lord, and possess the covenant blessings. The closet testifies to their devotion to their Saviour; the family altar declares their settled purpose to serve the Lord; the prayer meeting witnesses to their fidelity to the church; and their daily life gives demonstration to the gracious work of the Spirit within. Enoch walked with God, and so may we. He had hindrances to piety, for he lived in a corrupt age, but he passed through all uncorrupted. To attain to similar excellence our life must be such as his, prayerful, circumspect and consecrated.

Our associational letters have revealed a very general neglect of family prayer. This is a serious, if not an alarming symptom: The aroma of piety is largely lacking in those homes, and the children reared amid such surroundings are far less likely, from that circumstances ever to become Christians; and even if they do their piety is likely to be of the lower type. The standard is in the home. Water rises no higher than its source, and, in fact, not so high.

These letters also show a too general neglect of the prayer meeting. Here we find the pulse of the church, and it is often so feeble that the very life is endangered from heart failure. A visit to a good many of our prayer meetings will suggest anxious thoughts with respect to the state of religion in the churches which they represent. Here indeed are the few, a noble, struggling band, the "pillars" of the church, the salt of the earth. These have come from their homes and their fields, wearied, perhaps discouraged. With hardly time, as they suppose, for secret prayer during the day, and with but small opportunity for a few minutes talk with God before leaving for the evening service, it cannot but be expected that the meeting will lack in spiritual fervor. Allow me to suggest to these dear brethren and sisters—the flower of the Lord's army—that pressure of business claims, and domestic cares furnish no excuse for the neglect of secret prayer, and that a little while with God before the prayer