

Getting Started in Prayer

The subject before us relates to problems which we encounter in prayer. What do we really mean by prayer? The definition which we should be familiar with is that given by the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It is worth committing to memory: 'Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.'

We may divide the theme of prayer into two parts: secret prayer and public prayer. Secret prayer refers necessarily to what we do on our own, when there is nobody to listen but God. Public prayer refers, of course, to what we do when we gather in a prayer meeting. One of the Christians engages in prayer and leads us to the throne of grace. We must be more circumspect in spoken prayer in a meeting than we need be in secret and alone with God.

Prayer is the natural response of a converted heart to an inner desire for communion with God. In a sense there ought not to be any problems. However, when we come down to the details of how to pray, whether it be in secret or in public, everyone becomes acquainted with some of these difficulties. I take it for granted that we are agreed that all of us ought to pray. We are surely agreed that we may pray sitting, standing or walking about; that we ought to be praying without ceasing. Whenever we have an odd moment throughout the day when our minds are not taken up, we can send up an arrow prayer to God. I am going to concentrate this evening on problems that we find in certain areas of the duty of prayer.

First of all there is the problem of getting started in prayer, and getting organized in our own private lives in prayer. Now you will see what I mean by that. If we never have a special time for prayer throughout the day, and if we never organize our time so that we have at least a time of prayer in every day, then in a sense you could say that we are never praying. It is not enough that we should simply be praying here and there in odd moments as we walk about and go about our duties in life. We should be doing that, but we should also have stated and set times for private devotion and prayer.

Another problem is this: the tension that arises in our secret prayers between the form of prayer and the spirit of prayer. Still another difficulty is this, that everybody sooner or later finds in prayer the tendency to weariness. That is the state of mind in which from time to time even the best of men and women who pray are tempted to think to themselves, 'I'm so weary of prayer: must I go on and on?' So, then, there is the problem of getting started in prayer, and getting our own lives organized with a view to having secret prayer. We all know that the Christian desires to pray. Even those who are not Christians have an instinctive desire to pray. Prayer is one of the things which marks out a man from a beast. It is instinctive in man to cry out to God. I shall not take up further time with this point, but even atheists have been known to pray in times of trouble. Worldly persons say when things go wrong, 'Oh, let's pray that it will work out'. They never go to God's house, but that is their attitude. However, although the Christian especially desires to pray, he often feels that it is difficult to organize himself to pray and it is often very difficult to get started, to get into the spirit of prayer. Some days it is easy: some days it is very hard. We should have method in our lives.

Let us try to be practical. Every one of us should have a place in our own homes ? or wherever it is ? where we know we can go to pray. If we do not have a place to get alone with God, it is very difficult to pray. It is intensely difficult to devote the whole of your life to concentration upon this duty of seeking the face of God, if we do not have the privacy of a place where we can meet alone with God. Normally, of course, it will be our own bedroom. Some are privileged to have a study or a room in the house where they will not be disturbed. Also a time must be made as well.

We need a time each day in which we can go to be alone with God. Obviously there are variations permissible here. The ideal would be in the morning, before we begin the duties of the day. However, it may be that in certain cases, for various reasons that just is not possible. It would not be wise for instance for a young mother to be on her knees praying when she should be preparing the breakfast. So times will vary, but we need to have a time in the day when we are as awake as can be.

People ask, 'How long should I pray for?' This depends on the individual. I would give you this general rule: try to pray yourself 'out'. Try to make sure that you have prayed everything you want to say to God. Empty the vessel of your heart out fully to God. Try to make sure, if you can, that you have said everything you desire to say. This may take about half an hour, less or more. Half an hour is perhaps the sort of time many will give daily to prayer in our busy generation. Try to have enough time to pray to God without being hurried.

You need to be able to concentrate. You need to be warm. There is no good praying if you are in a cold bedroom. Otherwise all the time you are on your knees you will be mentally switching on an electric fire! Be practical. You need to be in the very best state of body and mind. Then try to shut the whole world out.

I recommend praying on one's knees. Of course, there are times when that might be inappropriate, but I think that ought to be the general rule. Shut yourself in. Be on your own with God.

How do you get started? I recommend that we read from the Bible first, and that we read with a view to preparing our hearts for fellowship with God in prayer. For instance, you might read Psalm 1, and having read it and thought about its meaning, you then go on your knees and pray something like this: 'O Lord, give me the blessedness of the man who does not sit in the seat of the scornful or walk in the ways of the ungodly, and this and that. But rather Lord, give me the spirit of the man who is planted as a tree beside the water courses: the blessing of the man who is not driven about like chaff in the streets. Give me, Lord, the character of the man who will stand in the day of judgment, when the wicked shall be overthrown and destroyed.' Now, I believe that is the right way to learn to pray. M'Cheyne and other writers on the subject tell us that. Take your Bible, read a passage, then turn what you have read into prayer. Do not do it mechanically. Turn everything that you can remember into prayer. Pray that God would give to you the spirit of prayer.

Next, should we pray aloud or should we pray silently? I would recommend that you do both on different occasions,

depending upon the state of your own soul and of your own mind.

What are we aiming at in secret prayer? I would say what we are aiming at, above all else, is to bring our hearts to God in such a way that we hide nothing from him. We wish to be able to get up from our knees and feel in our consciences that we have exposed ourselves in every way to God. We have laid our very hearts bare before his gaze.

I come now to the problem of the form and the spirit in prayer. And I must explain to you first of all what I mean. It is possible to buy 'prayer books', books which actually write out prayers word for word. Most famous of all is the Book of Common Prayer, which has long been in use in the Church of England. Are we to use books of prayer? Are we to commit prayers to memory, and then repeat them, rather like the Lord's Prayer? Or, are we to make up our own prayers? Protestant churches have normally believed and taught that we should depend on God to teach us how to pray. We learn to pray by reading and also through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Books of prayer are not absolutely wrong. I do not think anyone would ever want to go that far. But what you and I need to learn to do is to have real heart-to-heart communion with God, because, after all, that is what prayer is. It is the pouring out of our hearts to God. We must believe, first of all, that the Bible is the perfect book of prayer, just as it is the perfect book of doctrine. This is especially so of the Psalms, which are given to teach us how to frame our words in prayer to God. But the whole Bible, and especially the Lord's Prayer, is a manual of instruction on how to pray. That is one aspect of the subject. It is the form.

Then there is the other aspect, that of the spirit of prayer. These two must be kept in view by us. We should endeavour, I believe, to pray to God with a certain form in our prayers. I mean we should endeavour to pray in an orderly sort of manner, in a logical sort of manner. This is illustrated by the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer has order and form. It is not haphazard. The order here is this: We begin with the glory of God; the Kingdom of God; the will of God. Everything begins with God: his glory, his kingdom, his will. And then we descend to ourselves: our needs, our sins, our problems. That is what I mean by order in prayer. We should endeavour to teach ourselves to pray with an orderliness and methodicalness of mind. It is a biblical practice and it is a biblical thing to do. But then, too, orderliness can be as cold as an icicle. You can have the most perfect prayer in beautiful English (the 'Queen's English', as we say), and it can be full of poetical phrases and lovely liturgical sentences, but it can be, as I say, as cold as ice. What we need therefore is to have also the fire of the Spirit of God within us. One of the first things which I think a Christian learns when on his knees is that in prayer God helps him. It can be so difficult to begin. But what you discover is, that as you start to pray with stammering words, you suddenly feel the ice in your heart melting. You do not know how it works but words come, because thoughts come, and emotions come, and you begin to warm to the theme. Whereas you began cold and with inertia in your soul, before long you are like a blacksmith, hammering at the anvil, as hard as you can go. The 'sparks' are now flying. Now the Spirit of God is the One who inspires prayer, and this, I do not hesitate to say, is what Paul means when he says to us, 'We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered' (Rom. 8:26). That is to say that the Holy Spirit teaches us

how to pray. He does not intercede as Christ does. Christ intercedes for us at the right hand of God, apart from us and outside us. But the Holy Spirit intercedes within us. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prayer. However, having said that, we must go on to add that God is sovereign in the gift of prayer, and he gives more of a gift of prayer to some Christians than to others. This is true in every congregation. Immediately you can think of some who have a gift of prayer that is quite exceptional, but others have a gift of prayer which is perhaps no more than ordinary. But every one of us should stir up the gift within him and endeavour to become stronger in prayer. It is a wonderful thing when a congregation begins to be full of mighty wrestlers in prayer.

One word about prayer 'lists'. I do not want in any sense to be disparaging when I say this. Of course we have to remind ourselves, by one means or another, of certain things and persons to pray for. That is inevitable; we have to do that. But when you have your list of things that you are going to pray for ? persons, and various places ? put the list down and then depend upon God to illuminate your mind. I do not think it is a wise practice to be tied to a list, as though we have to mention every detail of every point in that list necessarily. I say this because God gives to his people in prayer what we call 'access' and 'liberty'.

Let me say a word about those two things. They are really the same thing. Our forefathers were right to say that this is a most vital aspect of prayer. This is perhaps the pinnacle of prayer. Nine times out of ten we pray and we find it very difficult to 'get through'. We have plenty of words, but do you know what I mean when I say that you pray and you still feel 'wooden'? You will know this experience. But we must never be content with that. What

we should strive for is to 'get through', to get 'access' to God. That is the most blessed experience, in my opinion, of any experience you can have upon earth. It is the nearest thing to being in glory, to have this 'access' to God. It melts the soul and the heart of the person who has it. He can be quite literally bathed in tears of joy. Now that should be a commonplace experience for the people of God. It is a mistake in prayer to go on our knees, and stop after ten minutes because we think that we have not 'got through'. We have been praying correctly, we have been praying with the right form, and with plenty of words, but now we say, 'O, I have not felt very much'. So we stop praying. Do not get off your knees too quickly. Pray on, because you know the experience that Jacob had with the angel was this: he wrestled till he prevailed. He said, 'I will not let thee go except thou bless me' (Gen. 32:26). We ought to have that vision. We ought not always to go from the place of prayer until we have felt the dew coming down from heaven upon our spirits. That is what is referred to in Psalm 133: the dew that comes from heaven upon the hills of Zion, that anointing on the head of Aaron which flowed down the garments and skirts of his robe. That is what we should regard as a thing to strive for in prayer. We will not always get it. But every so often we shall feel this presence of God in prayer.

By Maurice Roberts

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