

Prayer

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'Men always ought to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1)

'I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands' (I 'Timothy 2:8)

Prayer is the most important subject in practical religion. All other subjects are second to it. Reading the Bible, listening to sermons, attending public worship, going to the Lord's Table—all these are very important matters. But none of them are as important as private prayer I propose in this chapter to offer seven clear reasons why I use such strong language about prayer. I draw these reasons to the attention of every thinking man into whose hands this publication may fall. I venture to assert with confidence that they deserve serious consideration.

Absolutely Necessary To a Man's Salvation

In the first place, prayer is absolutely necessary to a man's salvation. I use the words 'absolutely necessary' and do so deliberately. I am not speaking now of infants and those with learning difficulties. I remember that where little is given, little will be required. I speak especially of those who call themselves Christians, in a land like our own. Of these I say a man or woman who does not pray cannot expect to be saved.

I hold salvation by grace as strongly as anyone. I would gladly offer a free and full pardon to the greatest sinner that ever lived. I would not hesitate to stand by his dying bed, and say, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.' But that a man can have salvation without *asking* for it, I cannot see in the Bible. I cannot see that it states anywhere that a man who will not so much as lift up his heart inwardly, and say, 'Lord Jesus, give it to me,' will receive pardon for his sins. I can see that nobody will be saved by his prayers, but I cannot find that anybody will be saved without prayer.

It is not absolutely necessary to salvation that a man should *read* the Bible. A man may have no learning, or be blind, and yet have Christ in his heart. It is not absolutely necessary that a man should *hear* the public preaching of the gospel (though he must receive the Word by some means). He may live where the gospel is not preached publicly, or he may be bedridden, or deaf. But the same thing cannot be said about prayer. It is absolutely necessary to salvation that a man should pray.

There is no royal road either to health or learning. Princes and kings, poor men and peasants, all alike must attend to the wants of their own bodies and their own minds. No man can eat, drink, or sleep by proxy. No man can get the alphabet learned for hire by another. All these are things that everybody must do for himself, or they will not be done at all.

Just as it is with the mind and body, so it is with the soul. There are certain things absolutely necessary to the soul's health and well-being. Each one must attend to these things for himself. Each must repent for himself. Each must apply to Christ for himself.

And for himself each one must speak to God and pray. You must do it for yourself, for nobody else can do it for you.

How can we expect to be saved by an "unknown" God? And how can we know God without prayer? We know nothing of men and women in this world, unless we speak with them. We cannot know God in Christ, unless we speak to him in prayer. If we wish to be with him in heaven, we must be his friends on earth. If we wish to be his friends on earth, 'We must pray.'

There will be many at Christ's right hand in the last day. The saints gathered from north and south, and east and west, will be 'a great multitude which no one could number' (Revelation 7:9). The song of victory that will burst from their mouths, when their redemption is finally complete, will be a glorious song indeed. It will be far above the noise of many waters, and of mighty thunders. But there will be no discord in that song. Those who sing will sing with one heart as well as one voice. Their experience will be one and the same. All will have believed. All will have been washed in the blood of Christ. All will have been born again. All will have prayed. Yes, we must pray on earth, or we will never praise in heaven. We must go through the school of prayer, or we will never be fit for the celebration of praise. In short, to be prayerless is to be without God - without Christ — without grace —without hope — and without heaven. It is to be on the road to hell.

One of the Surest Marks of a True Christian

In the second place, a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian. All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality in their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in a newborn infant is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is *praying*.

This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God: 'Men always ought to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1). The Holy Spirit, who makes them new creatures, works in them, the feeling of adoption, and makes them cry, 'Alba, Father' (Romans 8:15). The Lord Jesus, when he saves them, gives them a voice and a tongue, and says to them, 'Be silent no more.' God has no speechless children. It is as much a part of their new nature to pray, as it is of a child to cry. They see their need of mercy and grace. They feel their emptiness and weakness. They cannot do other than they do. They *must* pray.

I have looked carefully over the lives of God's saints in the Bible. I cannot find one of whom much history is told, from Genesis to Revelation, who was not a man of prayer. I find it mentioned as a characteristic of the godly, that they 'call on the Father', that they 'call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord'. I find it recorded as a characteristic of the wicked, that they 'do not call on the Lord' (Peter 1:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Psalms 14:4).

I have read the lives of many great Christians who have been on earth since the days of the Bible. Some of them, I see, were rich, and some poor. Some were educated, and some were uneducated. They came from various denominations and some were

Independents. Some loved a very structured worship service, and some liked it rather informal. But one thing, I see, they all had in common. They have all been

men of prayer.

I study the reports of missionaries in our own times. I rejoice that heathen men and women are receiving the gospel in various parts of the globe. There are conversions in Africa, in New Zealand and in America. The people converted are naturally unlike one another in very respect. But one striking thing I observe at all the missionary stations — the converted people *always pray*.

I do not deny that a man may pray without heart, and without sincerity. I do not for a moment pretend that the mere fact that a person prays proves everything about his soul. As in every other part of religion, so also in this, there is plenty of deception and hypocrisy. But this I do say — that not praying is a clear proof that a man is not yet a true Christian. He cannot really feel his sins. He cannot love God. He cannot feel himself in debt to God. He cannot long for holiness. He cannot desire heaven. He has yet to be born again. He has yet to be made a new creature. He may boast confidently of election, grace, faith, hope, and knowledge, and deceive ignorant people. But you may rest assured it is all vain talk *if he does not pray*.

Furthermore, a habit of hearty private prayer is one of the most satisfactory evidences of the real work of the Spirit. A man may preach from false motives. A man may write books, and make fine speeches, and seem diligent in good works, and yet be a Judas Iscariot. But a man seldom goes into his room, and pours out his soul before God in secret, unless he is serious. The Lord himself has set his stamp on prayer as the best proof of true conversion. When He sent Ananias to Saul in Damascus, he gave him no other evidence of his change of heart than this: 'He is prayer' (Acts 9:11).

I know that much may go on in a man's mind before he is brought to pray. He may have many convictions, desires, wishes, feelings, intentions, resolutions, hopes and fears. But all these things are very uncertain proofs. They are to be found in ungodly people, and often come to nothing. In many cases they are no more lasting than 'morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away' (Hosea 6:4). A real hearty prayer, flowing from a broken and repentant spirit, is worth all these things put together.

I know that the elect of God are chose to salvation from all eternity. I do not forget that the Holy Spirit, who calls them in due time, in many instances leads them by very slow degrees to an awareness of Christ. But the eye of man can only judge by what it sees. I cannot call anyone justified until he believes. I dare not say that anyone believes until he prays. I cannot understand a silent and speechless faith. The first act of faith will be to speak to God. Faith is to the soul what life is to the body. Prayer is to faith what breath is to life. How a man can live and not breathe is past my comprehension; and how a man can believe and not pray is past my comprehension too.

Let no one be surprised if he hears ministers of the gospel dwelling much on the importance of prayer. This is the point we want to bring you to — we want to know that you pray. Your views of doctrine may be correct. Your love of evangelical religion may

be warm and unmistakable. But still this may be nothing more than head

knowledge and party spirit. The great point is this — whether you can speak *to* God as well as speak *about* God.

No Duty So Neglected As Private Prayer

In the third place, there is no duty in religion so neglected as private prayer. We live in days abounding in religious profession. There are more places of public worship now than there ever were before. There are more people attending them than there ever have been since we were a nation. And yet in spite of all this public religion, I believe there is a vast neglect of private prayer.

I would not have said that a few years ago. I once thought, in my ignorance, that most people said their prayers, and many people prayed. I have lived to think differently. I have come to the conclusion that the great majority of professing Christians do not pray at all.

I know that this sounds very shocking and will startle many. But I am convinced that prayer is just one of those things which is thought to be a 'private matter', and like many 'private matters' it is shamefully neglected. It is 'everybody's duty'; and, as often happens in such cases, it is a business carried on by very few. It is one of those private transactions between God and our souls which no eye sees, and therefore one which there is every temptation to pass over and leave undone.

I believe that thousands *never say a word of prayer at all*. They eat; they drink; they sleep; they rise; they go to their work; they return to their homes; they breathe God's air; they see God's sun; they walk on God's earth; they enjoy God's mercies' they have dying bodies' they have judgement and eternity before them. But they *never speak to God!* They live like the animals that perish; they behave like creatures without souls; they have no words to say to the one in whose hand is their life, and breath, and all things, and from whose mouth they must one day receive their everlasting sentence. 'How dreadful this seems! But if the secrets of men were only known, how common!

I believe that there are tens of thousands *whose prayers are nothing but a mere form* — a set of words repeated by rote, without a thought about their meaning. Some say over a few hasty sentences picked up in the nursery when they were children. Many, even of those who use good forms, mutter their prayers after they have got into bed, or scramble over them while they wash or dress in the morning. Men may think what they please, but they can count on the fact that, in the sight of God, this is not praying. Words said without heart are as utterly useless to our souls as the drumbeating of the poor heathen before their idols. Where there is no heart, the lips *may* move and the tongue wag, but there is nothing that God listens to — there is *no prayer*. Saul, I have no doubt, said many a long prayer before the Lord met him on the way to Damascus. But it was not till his heart was broken that the Lord said, 'He is praying'.

Does this surprise any reader? Listen to me and I will show you that I am not speaking as I do with reason. Do you think that my assertions are extravagant and unwarranted?

Listen to what I have to say, and I will soon show you that I am only telling you the truth.

Not Natural

Have you forgotten that it is not natural to anyone to pray? The carnal mind has a hatred towards God. The desire of man's heart is to get far away from God, and to have nothing to do with him. His feeling towards him is not love but fear. Why, then, should a man *pray* when he has no real sense of sin, no real feeling of spiritual needs — no thorough belief in unseen things — no desire after holiness and heaven? Of all these things the vast majority of men know and feel nothing. The multitude are traveling on the wide road. I cannot forget this. Therefore I say boldly, I believe that few people pray.

Not Fashionable

Have you forgotten that it is not fashionable to pray? It is just one of the things that many would be rather ashamed to admit is their practice. There are hundreds who would sooner storm a beach in battle than confess publicly that they make it a habit to pray. There are thousands who, if obligated by chance to sleep in the same room with a stranger, would lie down in a bed without a prayer. To ride a horse well, to shoot well to dress well, to go to dances and concerts, and theatres, to be thought clever and congenial — all this is fashionable; but not to pray. I cannot forget this. I cannot consider a habit is common when so many seem ashamed to admit to it. I believe that few pray.

How Men Live

Have you forgotten the lives that many live? Can we really suppose that people are praying against sin night and day, when we see them plunging right into it? Can we suppose they pray against the world, when they are entirely absorbed and taken up with its pursuits? Can we think they really ask God for grace to serve him, when they do not show the slightest desire to serve him at all? Oh, no! It is clear as daylight that the great majority of men either ask nothing of God, or 'do not mean what they say' when they do ask — which is just the same thing. Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will consume sin, or sin will choke prayer. I cannot forget this. I look at men's lives. I believe that few pray.

How Men Die

Have you forgotten the deaths that many die? How many, when they draw near death, seem like entire strangers to God. Not only are they sadly ignorant of his gospel, but sadly devoid of the power of speaking to him. There is a terrible awkwardness, and shyness, and newness, and coldness, in their endeavors to approach him. They seem to be taking up something new. They appear as if they wanted an introduction to God, as if they had never talked with him before. I remember having heard of a lady who was anxious to have a minister to visit her in her last illness. She desired that he would pray with her. He asked her what he should pray for. She did not know and could not tell. She was utterly unable to name any one thing that she wished him to ask God for her soul. All she seemed to want was the form of a minister's prayers. I can quite understand this. Deathbeds are great revealers of secrets. I cannot forget what I have seen of sick and dying people. This also leads me to believe that few pray.

The Greatest Encouragement

In the fourth place, prayer is that act in religion to which there is the greatest encouragement. For his part, God does everything to make prayer easy, if men will only attempt it. 'All things are now ready' on his side (Luke 14:17). Every objection is anticipated. Every difficulty is provided for. The crooked places are made straight, and the rough places are made smooth. There is no excuse left for the prayerless man.

There is a way by which any man, however sinful and unworthy, may draw near to God the Father. Jesus Christ has opened that way by the sacrifice he made for us upon the cross. The holiness and justice of God need not frighten sinners and keep them back. Only let them cry to God in the name of Jesus -- only let them please the atoning blood of Jesus — and they will find God on a throne of grace, willing and ready to hear. The name of Jesus is a never-failing passport to our prayers. In that name a man may draw near to God with boldness, and ask with confidence. God has pledged to hear him. Think of this. Is this not encouragement?

There is an *advocate* and intercessor always waiting to present the prayers of those who will employ him. That advocate is Jesus Christ. He mingles our prayers with the incense of his own almighty intercession. So mingled they go up as a sweet savour before the throne of God. Poor as they are in themselves, they are mighty and powerful in the hand of our High Priest and elder brother. The banknote without a signature at the bottom is nothing but a worthless piece of paper. A few strokes of a pen confer on it all its value. The prayer of a poor child of Adam is a feeble thing in itself, but once endorsed by the hand of the Lord Jesus it accomplishes much. There once was an officer in the city of Rome who was appointed to have his doors always open, in order to receive any Roman citizen who applied to him for help. In the same way, the ear of the Lord Jesus is ever open to the cry of all who want mercy and grace. It is his business to help them. Their prayer is his delight. Think of this. Is this not encouragement?

There is *the Holy Spirit* always ready to help our weakness in prayer. It is one part of his special functions to assist us in our endeavors to speak to God. We need not be cast down and distressed by the fear of not knowing what to say. The Spirit will give us words if we will only seek his aid. He will supply us with 'thoughts that breathe and words that burn'. The prayers of the Lord's people are the inspiration of the Lord's Spirit — the work of the Holy Spirit who dwells within them as the Spirit of grace and supplications. Surely the Lord's people may well hope to be heard. It is not that they merely pray, but the Holy Spirit pleading in them (Romans 8:26). Think of this. Is this not encouragement?

There are surpassing *promises* to those who pray. What did the Lord Jesus mean when he spoke such words as these: 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened' (Matthew 7:7-8). 'Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive' (Matthew 21:22). 'Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the son. If you ask anything in my name, I will do it' (John 14:13-14). What did the Lord mean when he spoke the parable of the friend at midnight and the insistent widow? (Luke 11:5; 18:1). Think over these passages. If this is not

encouragement to pray, then words have no meaning at all.

There are wonderful *examples* in Scripture of the power of prayer. Nothing seems to be too great, too hard, or too difficult for prayer to accomplish. It has obtained things that seemed impossible and out of reach. It has Avon victories over fire, air, earth and water. Prayer opened the Red Sea. Prayer brought water from the rock and bread from heaven. Prayer made the sun stand still. Prayer brought fire from the sky on Elijah's sacrifice. Prayer turned the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness. Prayer overthrew the army of Sennacherib. Mary Queen of Scots right said: "I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand men." Prayer has healed the sick. Prayer has raised the dead. Prayer has procured the conversion of souls. "The child of many prayers", said an old Christian to Augustine's mother "will never perish". Prayer, pains and faith can do anything. Nothing seems impossible when a man has the Spirit of adoption. "Leave me alone," is the remarkable saying of God to Moses, when Moses was about to intercede for the children of Israel (Exodus 32:10). The Chaldee version renders it "Stop praying." As long as Abraham asked mercy for Sodom, the Lord went on giving. He never ceased to give till Abraham ceased to pray. Think if this. Is this not encouragement?

What more can a man want to lead him to take any step in religion than the things I have just told him about prayer? What more could be done to make the path to the mercy-seat easy, and to remove all causes of stumbling from the sinner's way? Surely if the devils in hell had such a door set open before them they would leap for gladness, and made the very pit ring with joy.

But in the end, where will the man who neglects such glorious encouragements hide his head? What can possibly be said for the man who dies without prayer? God forbid that any of my readers should be that man.

The Secret of Eminent Holiness

In the fifth place, diligence in prayer is the secret of eminent holiness. Without question there is a vast difference among true Christians. There is an immense gap between the greatest and weakest in the army of God.

They are all fighting the same good fight — but how much more valiantly some fight than others! They are all doing the Lord's work — but how much more some do than others! They are all light in the Lord -- but how much more brightly some shine than others! They are all running the same race — but how much faster some run than others! They all love the same Lord and Savior — but how much more some love him than others! I ask any true Christian whether this is not the case. Are these things not so?

There are some of the Lord's people who seem *never able to advance and grow* from the time of their conversion. They are born again, but they remain babies all their lives. "They are learners in Christ's school, but they never seem to get beyond A B C. They have got inside the fold, but there they lie down and go no further. Year after year you see in them the same old habitual sins. You hear from them the same old experience. You note in them the same need of spiritual appetite — the same squeamishness about

anything but the milk of the Word, and the same dislike of the strong meat of the Bible — the same childishness — the same feebleness — the same trivialness of mind — the same narrowness of heart — the same lack of interest in anything beyond their own little circle, that you noted ten years ago. They are indeed pilgrims, but they are like the Gibeonites of old; their bread is always dry and mouldy — their shoes always old and split, and their garments always ripped and torn (Joshua 9:4-5). I say this with sorrow and grief. But I ask any real Christian, 'Is it not true?'

There are others of the Lord's people who seem to be *always growing*. They grow like the grass after rain. They increase like Israel in Egypt. They press on like Gideon — though sometimes 'exhausted but still in pursuit' (Judges 8:4). They are ever adding to grace, and faith to faith, and strength to strength. Every time you meet them their hearts seem larger, and their spiritual stature bigger, taller and stronger. Every year they appear to see more, and know more, and believe more, and feel more in their religion. They not only have good works to prove the reality of their faith, but they are 'zealous' of them. They not only do well, but they do not 'grow weary' in well doing (Titus 2:14; Galatians 6:9). They attempt great things, and they do great things. When they fail they try again, and when they fall they are soon up again. And all this time they think of themselves poor unprofitable servants, and believe they do nothing at all! These are the people who make religion lovely and beautiful in the eyes of all.

They obtain praise even from the unconverted, and win golden opinions even from the selfish men of the world. These are the people whom it does one good to see, to be with, and to hear. When you meet them, you could believe that, like Moses, they had just come out from the presence of God. When you part with them you feel warmed by their company, as if your soul had been near a fire. I know such people are rare. I only ask, 'Is it not true?'

Now, how can we account for the difference that I have just described? What is the reason that some believers are so much brighter and holier than others? I believe the difference in nineteen cases out of twenty arises from different habits of private prayer. I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray 'little', and those who are eminently holy pray 'much'.

I dare say this opinion will startle some readers. I have little doubt that many look on eminent holiness as a kind of special gift, which none but a few must pretend to aim at. They admire it at a distance, in books: they consider it beautiful to see an example for themselves. But as to its being something within the reach of any but a very few, such a notion never seems to enter their minds. In short, they consider it a kind of monopoly granted to a few laboured believers, but certainly not to all.

Now I believe that this is a most dangerous mistake. I believe that spiritual, as well as natural; greatness depends far more on the use of means within everybody's reach, than on anything else. Of course I do not say we have a right to expect a miraculous grant of intellectual gifts. But I do say this, that when a man is born again by Jesus Christ, whether he will be exceptionally holy or not depends mainly on his own diligence in the use of God's appointed means. And I confidently assert that the principal means

by which most believers have become great in the church of Jesus Christ is the habit of `diligent private prayer'.

Look through the lives of the brightest and best of God's servants, whether in the Bible or not. See what is written of Moses, David, Daniel, and Paul. Note what is recorded about Luther and the Reformers. Observe what is related of the private devotions of Whitefield, and M'Cheyne. Tell me of one of all the godly fellowship of saints and martyrs who has not had this mark most prominently — he was a 'man of prayer'. Oh, depend on it, prayer is power!

Prayer obtains fresh and continued outpourings of the Spirit. He alone begins the work of grace in a man's heart; he alone can carry it forward and make it prosper. But the Holy Spirit loves to be petitioned. And those who ask most will always have most of his influence.

Prayer is the surest remedy against the devil and besetting sins. The sin that is heartily prayed against will never stand firm: The devil will never maintain influence over us when we ask the Lord to help us. But, then, we must cast our whole situation before our heavenly Physician, if he is to give us daily relief. We just drag our indwelling sins to the feet of Christ, and ask him to send them back to the pit.

Do we wish to grow in grace and be very bold Christians? Then let us never forget the value of prayer.

One Great Cause of Backsliding

In the sixth place, neglect of prayer is one great cause of backsliding. There is such a thing as going backwards in religion, after making a good profession. Men may run well for a season, like the Galatians, and then turn aside after false teachers. Men may profess loudly, while their feelings are warm, as Peter did; and then, in the hour of trial, deny their Lord. Men may lose their first love, as the Ephesians did. Men may cool down in their zeal to do good, like Mark, Paul's companion. Men may follow an apostle for a season, and then, like Demas, go back to the world —men may do all these things.

It is a miserable thing to be a backslider. Of all the unhappy things that can happen to a man, I suppose it is the worst. A stranded ship, a broken-winged eagle, a garden overrun with weeds, a harp without strings, a church in ruins — all these are sad sights; but a backslider is a sadder sight still. There is no doubt that if the person is truly a Christian then the true grace will never be extinguished, and true union with Christ will never be broken. But I do believe that a man may backslide so far that he will lose sight of his own grace, and despair of his own salvation. And if this is not hell, it is certainly the next thing to it! A wounded conscience, a mind sick of itself, a memory full of self-reproach, a heart pierced through with the Lord's arrows, a spirit broken with a load of inward accusation — all this is a taste of hell'. It is a hell on earth.

Now, what is the cause of most backsliding' I believe, as a general rule, one of the chief causes is neglect of private prayer. Of course the secret history of backsliding will not be known until the last day. I can only give my opinion as a minister of Christ and a

student of the heart. That opinion is that backsliding generally first begins with *neglect of private prayer*.

Bibles read without prayer, sermons heard without prayer, engagements to marriage without prayer, travel undertaken without prayer, homes chosen without prayer, friendships formed without prayer, the daily act of private prayer itself hurried over or gone through without heart — these are the kinds of downward steps by which many a Christian descends to a condition of spiritual paralysis, or reaches the point where God allows him to have a tremendous fall.

This is the process which forms the lingering Lots, the unstable Samsons, the wife-idolizing Solomons, the inconsistent Asas, the pliable Jehoshaphats, the over careful Marthas, of whom so many are to be found in the church of Christ. Often the simple history of such cases is this — they became *careless about private prayer*.

We may be very sure that men fall in private long before they fall in public. They are backsliders on their knees long before they backslide openly in the eyes of the world. Like Peter, they first disregard the Lord's warning to watch and pray; and then, like Peter, their strength is gone, and in the hour of temptation they deny their Lord.

The world takes notice of their fall, and scoffs loudly. But the world knows nothing of the real reason. The heathen succeeded in making Origen, the old Christian Father, offer incense to an idol, by threatening him with a punishment worse than death. They then triumphed greatly at the sight of his cowardice and apostasy. But the heathen did not know the fact, which Origen himself tells us, that he had neglected his private time of prayer with the Lord.

If any of my readers is really a Christian then I trust he will never be a backslider. But if you do not wish to be a backsliding Christian, remember the hint I give you — mind your prayers.

One of the Best Ways to Acquire Happiness and Contentment

In the seventh place, prayer is one of the best ways to acquire happiness and contentment. We live in a world where sorrow abounds. This has always been its state since sin came into the world. There cannot be sin without sorrow. And till sin is driven out from the world it is vain for anyone to suppose he can escape sorrow. Some, without doubt, have a larger cup of sorrow to drink than others. But few are to be found who live very long without sorrows or cares of one sort or another. Our bodies, our property, our families, our children, our relations, our friends, our neighbours, our worldly callings — each and all of these are fountains of care. Sickesses, deaths, losses, disappointments, partings, separations, ingratitude, slander — all these are common things. We cannot get through life without them. Some day they will find us out. The greater our affections, the deeper are our afflictions; and the more we love, the more we have to cry.

And what is the best way to acquire cheerfulness in such a world as this? How will we get through this valley of tears with the least pain? I know no better way than the habit

of 'taking everything to God in prayer'.

This is the clear advice that the Bible give both in the Old Testament and the New. What does God say? 'Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me' (Psalm 50:15). 'Cast your burden on the LORD, and he shall sustain you; he shall never permit the righteous to be moved' (Psalm 55:22). What does the apostle Paul say? 'Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6-7). What does the apostle James say? 'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray' (James 5:13).

This was the practice of all the saints whose history we have recorded in the Scriptures. This is what Jacob did, when he feared his brother Esau. This is what Moses did, when the people were ready to stone him in the wilderness. This is what Joshua did, when Israel was defeated before Ai. This is what David did, when he was in danger at Kcliah. This is what Hezekiah did, when he received the letter from Sennacherib. This is what the church did, when Peter was put in prison. This is what Paul did, when he was cast into the dungeon at Philippi.

The only way to be really happy, in such a world as this, is to be ever casting all our cares on God. It is the attempt of carrying their own burdens which so often makes believers sad. If they will only tell their troubles to God he will enable them to bear them as easily as Samson did the gates of Gaza. If they are resolved to keep them to themselves they will find one day that the very 'grasshopper is a burden' (Ecclesiastes 12:5).

There is a friend ever waiting to help us, if we will only tell him our sorrow — a friend who pitied the poor, and sick, and sorrowful, when he was on earth — a friend who knows the heart of a man, for he lived thirty-three years as a man among us — a friend who can weep with the weepers, for he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief — a friend who is able to help us, for there never was an earthly pain he could not cure. That friend is Jesus Christ. The way to be happy is to be always opening our hearts to him. Oh, if only we were all like that poor Black Christian who, when threatened and punished, only answered, 'I must tell the Lord.'

Jesus can make those who trust and call on him happy, whatever their outward condition. He can give them peace of heart in a prison, contentment in the midst of poverty, comfort in the midst of bereavements, and joy on the brink of the grave. There is a mighty fullness in him for all his believing members — a fullness that is ready to be poured out on every one who will ask in prayer. Oh, if only men would understand that happiness does not depend on outward circumstances, but on the state of the heart!

Prayer can lighten crosses for us no matter how heavy they are. It can bring down to our side the one who will help us to bear them. Prayer can open a door for us when our way seems hedged up. It can bring down one who will say, 'This is the way, walk in it.'

Prayer can let in a ray of hope, when all our early prospects seem darkened. It can bring down one who will say, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' Prayer

can obtain relief for us when those we love most are taken away, and the world feels empty. It can bring down one who can fill the gap in our hearts with himself, and say to the waves within, 'Peace: be still!' Oh, if only men were not so much like Hagar in the wilderness, blind to the well of living waters closebeside them! (Genesis 21:19)

I want my readers to be really happy Christians. I am certain I cannot urge on them a more important duty than prayer.

Some Final Words

And now it is high time for me to bring this chapter to an end. I trust I have brought before my readers things that will be seriously considered. I heartily pray to God that his consideration may be blessed to their souls.

To Those Who Do Not Pray

Let me speak a parting word to those who do not pray. I dare not suppose that all who read these pages will be praying people. If you are a prayerless person, permit me to speak to you on God's behalf.

Prayerless friend, I can only warn you; but I do warn you must solemnly. I warn you that you are in a position of dreadful danger. If you die in your present state you are a lost soul. You will only rise again to be eternally miserable. I warn you that of all professing Christians you are most utterly without excuse. There is not a single good reason that you can show for living without prayer.

It is useless to say you *don't know how to pray*. Prayer is the simplest act in all religion. It is simple speaking to God. It needs neither learning, nor wisdom, nor book knowledge to begin it. It needs nothing but heart and will. The weakest infant can cry when he is hungry. The poorest beggar can hold out his hand for charity, and does not wait to find fine words. The most ignorant man will find something to say to God, if he has only a mind.

It is useless to say you *have no convenient place to pray in*. Any man can find a place private enough, if he is inclined. Our Lord prayed on a mountain; Peter on the housetop; Isaac in the field; Nathanael under the fig tree; Jonah in the whale's belly. Any place may become private, and a Bethel, and be to us the presence of God.

It is useless to say you *have no time*. There is plenty of time, if men will only utilize it. Time may be short, but time is always long enough for prayer. Daniel had all the affairs of a kingdom on his hands, and yet he prayed three times a day. David was ruler over a mighty nation, and yet he says, 'Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud' (Psalm 55:17). When time is really wanted, time can always be found.

It is useless to say you *cannot pray till you have faith and a new heart*, and that you must sit still and wait for them. This is to add sin to sin. It is bad enough to be

unconverted and going to hell. It is even worse to say, 'I know it, but I will not cry for mercy.' This is a kind of argument for which there is no warrant in Scripture. 'Seek the LORD) while he may be found,' says Isaiah, 'Call upon him while he is near' (Isaiah 55:6). 'Take words with you, and return to the LORD,' says Hosea (Hosea 14:2). 'Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God,' says Peter to Simon Magus. (Acts 8:22). If you want faith and a new heart, go and cry

to the Lord for them. The very attempt to pray has often been the arousing of a dead soul. Yes, there is no devil so dangerous as a speechless devil.

Oh, prayerless man, who and what are you that you will not ask anything of God? Have you made a covenant with death and hell? Are you at peace with the maggot and the fire? Have you no sins to be pardoned? Have you no fear of eternal torment? Have you no desire after heaven? Oh, that you would awake from your present folly! Oh, if only you would consider the coming end of your life! Oh, that you would rise up and call upon God! Yes, there is a day coming when men will pray loudly, 'Lord, Lord, let us in,' but all will be too late; when many will cry to the rocks to fall on them, and the hills to cover them, who would never cry to God. In all affection I warn you. Beware lest this be the end of your soul. Salvation is very near you. Do not lose heaven because you failed to ask.

To Those Who Have Real Desires For Salvation

Let me speak, in the next place, to those who have real desires for salvation, but do not know what steps to take or where to begin. I can only hope that some readers may be in this state of mind, and if there is even one, I must offer him encouragement and advice.

In every journey there must be a first step. There must be a change from sitting still to moving forward. The journeyings of Israel from Egypt to Canaan were long and wearisome. Forty years passed before they crossed the Jordan. Yet there was someone who moved first when they marched from Rameses to Succoth. When does a man really take his first step in coming out from sin and the world? He does it on the day when he first prays with his heart.

In every building, the first stone must be laid, and the first blow must be struck. The ark was 120 years in building. Yet there was a day when Noah laid his axe to the first tree he cut down to form it. The temple of Solomon was a glorious building. But there was a day when the first huge stone was laid at the foot of Mount Moriah. When does the building of the spirit really begin to appear in a man's heart? It begins, so far as we can judge, when he first pours out his heart to God in prayer.

If any of my readers desires salvation, and wants to know what to do, I advise him to go this very day to the Lord Jesus Christ, in the first private place he can find, and plead with him in prayer to save his soul. Tell him that you have heard that he receives sinners, and has said, 'The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out' (John 6:37). Tell him that you are a poor wretched sinner, and that you come to him on the faith of his own invitation. Tell him you put yourself wholly and entirely in his hands — that you feel evil and helpless, and hopeless in yourself, and that unless he saves you,

you have no hope to be saved at all.

Plead with him to deliver you from the guile, the power and the consequences of sin. Plead with him to pardon you and wash you in his own blood. Plead with him to give you a new heart, and plant the Holy Spirit in your soul. Plead with him to give you grace, and faith, and will, and power to be his disciple and servant from this day for ever. Yes; go this very day, and tell these things to the Lord Jesus Christ, if you really are serious about your soul.

Tell him in your own way and your own words. If a doctor came to see you when you were sick you could tell him where you felt pain. If your soul really feels its disease you can surely find something to tell Christ. Do not doubt his willingness to save you because you are a sinner. It is Christ's business to save sinners. He says himself, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance' (Luke 5:32).

Do not wait because you feel unworthy. Wait for nothing; wait for nobody. Waiting comes from the devil. Just as you are, go to Christ. The worse you are, the more you need to go to him. You will never mend yourself by staying away.

Do not fear because your prayer is stammering, your words feeble, and your language poor. Jesus can understand you. Just as a mother understands the first babblings of her infant, so does the blessed Saviour understand sinners. He can read a sign, and see a meaning in a groan.

Do not despair because you do not get an answer immediately. While you are speaking, Jesus is listening. If he delays in his answers, it is only for wise reasons, and to test if you are serious. Pray on and the answer will surely come. Though it be delayed, wait for it: it will surely come at last.

If you have any desire to be saved, remember the advice I have given you this day. Act upon it honestly and heartily, and you will be saved.

To Those Who Do Pray

Let me speak, lastly, to those who do pray. I trust that some who are reading this know indeed what prayer is, and have the Spirit of adoption. To all these I offer a few words of brotherly counsel and exhortation. The incense offered in the tabernacle had to be made in a particular way. Not every kind of incense would do. Let us remember this, and be careful about the matter and manner of our prayers.

If I know anything of a Christian's heart, you to whom I now speak are often sick of your own prayers. You never enter into the Apostle's words, 'Evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good' (Romans 7:21), so thoroughly as you sometimes do upon your knees. You can understand David's words, 'I hate vain thoughts.' You can sympathize with that poor converted soul, who was overheard praying, 'Lord, deliver me from all my enemies' and, above all, from my own evil self' There are few children of God who do not often find the season of prayer a season of conflict. The devil is especially angry towards us when he sees us on our knees. Yet I believe that prayers which cost us no

trouble should be regarded with great suspicion. I believe we are very poor judges of the quality of our prayers, and that the prayer which pleases us least, often pleases God most.

Some Words of Exhortation

Permit me then, as a companion in the Christian warfare, to offer you a few words of exhortation. One thing, at least, we all feel — we must *pray*. We cannot give it up; we must go on.

Reverence and Humility in Prayer

I commend, then, to your attention the importance of reverence and humility in prayer. Let us never forget what we are, and what a solemn thing it is to speak

with God. Let us beware of rushing into his presence with carelessness and flippancy. Let us say to ourselves, 'I am on holy ground. This is none other than the gate of heaven. If I do not mean what I say, I am trifling with God. If I hold sin in any heart, the Lord will not hear me.' Let us keep in mind the words of Solomon: 'Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few' (Ecclesiastes 5:2). When Abraham spoke to God, he said 'I who am but dust and ashes'. When Job spoke, he said, 'I am vile; what shall I answer you?' (Genesis 18:27; Job 40:4). Let us do likewise.

Praying 'Spiritually'

I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of praying spiritually. By this I mean that we should labor always to have the direct help of the Spirit in our prayers, and, above all things, beware of formality. There is nothing so spiritual that it cannot become routine, and this is especially true of private prayer. We may insensibly get into the habit of using the fittest possible words, and offering the most scriptural petitions; and yet we may do it all by rote, without feeling it, and walk daily round an old beaten path, like a horse in a mill. I wish to touch upon this point with caution and delicacy. I know that there are certain critical things we want every day, and that there is nothing necessarily formal in asking for these things with the same words. The world, the devil, and our hearts, are the same every day. Of necessity we must go over old ground each day. But I am saying that we must be very careful on this point. If the skeleton and outline of our prayers are by our habit almost a form, let us strive to make the clothing and filling of our prayers as much as possible of the Spirit.

As to praying a written prayer out of a book, it is a habit I cannot commend. If we can tell our doctors the state of our bodies without a book, we ought to be able to tell the state of our souls to God. I have no objection to a man using crutches, when he is first recovering from a broken limb. It is better to use crutches than not to walk at all. But if I saw him on crutches all his life, I would not consider it a matter for praise. I would like to see him strong enough to throw his crutches away.

A Regular Business of Life

I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of making prayer a regular business of life. I might say something of the value of regular times in the day for prayer. God is a God of order. The hours of the morning and evening sacrifice in the Jewish

temple were not established as they were without a meaning. Disorder is notably one of the fruits of sin. But I would not bring anyone under bondage. I only say that is essential to your soul's health to make praying a part of the routine of every twenty-four hours in your life. Just as you allot time to eating, sleeping and business, so also allot time to prayer. Choose your own hours and periods. At the very least, speak with God in the morning, before you speak with the world; and speak with God at night, after you have finished with the world for that day. But settle it in your minds that prayer is one of the vital things of each day. Do not put it into a corner. Do not give it the scraps, and left over minutes of your day.

Whatever else you make a business of, make a business of prayer.

Perseverance in Prayer

I commend to you now the importance of perseverance in prayer. Having once begun the habit, never give it up. Your heart will sometimes say, 'We have had family prayers; what great harm is it if we leave our private prayer unsaid?' Your body will sometimes

say, 'You are sick, or sleepy, or weary; you do not need to pray.' Your mind will sometimes say, 'You have important business to attend to today; cut short your prayers.' Look on all such suggestions as coming directly from the devil. There are as good as saying, 'Neglect your soul.' I do not maintain that prayers should always be of the same length; but I do say "let no excuse make you give up prayer." Paul did not say without reason, 'Continue earnestly in prayer.' and 'Pray without ceasing' (Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). He did not mean that men should be always on their knees, as an old sect called the Euchitae supposed. But he did mean that our prayers should be like the continual burnt offering—something steadily persevered in every day; that it should be like seed-time and harvest, and summer and winter – something that should unceasingly come around at regular seasons; that it should be like the fire on the altar, not always consuming sacrifices, but never completely going out.

Never forget that you may tie together morning and evening devotions by an endless chain of short exclamatory- prayers thought the day. Even in the company of others, or while you work or going down the street, you may be silently sending up little winged messengers to God, as Nehemiah did in the very presence of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:4). And never think that time given to God is wasted. A nation does not become poorer because it loses one year of working days in seven by honouring the Lord's Day. A Christian never finds he is a loser in the long run by persevering in prayer.

Earnestness in Prayer

I commend to you now the importance of earnestness in prayer. It is not necessary for a man to shout, or scream, or be very loud, in order to prove that he is serious. But it is desirable that we should be hearty, and fervent, and warm, and ask as if we were really interested in what we were doing. It is the prayer of a righteous man that is 'powerful and effective', and not the cold, sleepy, lazy, listless one. This is the lesson that is taught us by the expressions used in Scripture about prayer. It is called 'crying, knocking, wrestling, labouring, striving'. This is the lesson taught us by Scripture examples. Jacob is one. He said to the angel at Fennel, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me!' (Genesis 32:26). Daniel is another. Hear how he pleaded with God: "O, Lord, hear! O, Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for your own sake, my

God'(Daniel 9:19). Our Lord Jesus Christ is another. It is written of him, 'In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears' (Hebrews 5:7). Yet, how unlike many of our petitions this is! How truly might God say to many of us, 'You do not really want what you pray for!' Let us try to amend this fault. Let us knock loudly at the door of grace, like Mercy in *Pilgrim's Progress*, as if we must perish unless heard. Let us settle

it in our minds, that cold prayers are a sacrifice without fire. Let us remember the story of Demosthenes, the great orator, when one came to him, and wanted him to please his cause. He paid little attention to him while he told his story without earnestness. The man saw this, and cried out anxiously that it was all true. 'Ah!' said Demosthenes, 'I believe you now.'

Praying with Faith

I commend to you now the importance of praying with faith. We should endeavor to believe that our prayers are always heard, and that if we ask things according to God's will, we will always be answered. This is the plain command of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them' (Mark 11:24). Faith is to prayer what the feather is to the arrow: without it prayer will not hit the target. We should cultivate the habit of pleading promises in our prayers. We should take with us some promise, and say, 'O LORD) God, the word which you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as you have said' (2 Samuel 7:25).

This was the habit of Jacob, and Moses, and David. Psalm 119 is full of things asked 'according to your word'. Above all, we should cultivate the habit of expecting answers to our prayers. We should do as the merchant who sends his ships to sea. We should not be satisfied unless we see some return. The church at Jerusalem prayed without ceasing for Peter in prison; but when the prayer was answered they would hardly believe it (Acts 12:15). It is a serious saying of old, 'There is no surer mark of trifling in prayer, than when men are careless what they get by prayer.'

Boldness in Prayer

I commend to you now the importance of boldness in prayer. There is an unbecoming familiarity in some men's prayers, which I cannot praise. But there is such a thing as a holy boldness, which is greatly to be desired. I mean such boldness as that of Moses, when he pleads with God not to destroy Israel: 'Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, "He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to your people' (Exodus 32:12). I mean such boldness as that of Joshua, when the children of Israel were defeated before Ai; 'Then what', he says, 'will you do for your great name?' (Joshua 7:9). This is the boldness for which Luther was distinguished. Someone who heard him praying said, 'What a spirit — what a confidence was in his very expression! With such a reverence he petitioned, as one begging of God, and yet with such hope and assurance, as if he spoke with a loving father or friend.' This is the boldness that distinguished Bruce, a great Scottish man of God of the seventeenth century. His prayers were said to be 'like thunderbolts shot up into heaven'. Here I also fear we sadly come short. We do not sufficiently realize the believer's privileges. We do not plead as often as we should, 'Lord, are we not your own people? Is it not for your

glory that we should be made holy? Is it not for your honour that the gospel should be preached?'

The Fullness of Prayer

I commend to you, in the next place, the fullness of prayer. I do not forget that our Lord warns us against the example of the Pharisees, who for show uttered long prayers, and commands us, when we pray, not to use vain repetitions. But I cannot forget, on the other hand, that he has given his own sanction to long devotions, by continuing all night in prayer to God. In this day we are not likely to err on the side of praying 'too much'. Might it not rather be feared that many believers in this generation pray 'too little'? Is not the actual amount of time that many Christians give to prayer in total very small? I am afraid these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. I am afraid the private devotions of many are most painfully few and limited — just enough to prove they are alive, and no more. They really seem to want little from God. They seem to have little to confess, little to ask for, and little to thank him for. Yes, this is completely wrong! Nothing is more common than to hear believers complaining that they do not grow in their faith. They tell us that they do not grow in grace, as they would desire. Is it not rather to be suspected that many have just as much grace as they ask for? Is it not true of many, that they have little, because they ask little? The cause of their weakness is to be found in their own stunted, dwarfish, clipped, contracted, hurried, little, narrow, diminutive prayers. *They do not have because they do not ask.* Oh, reader, we are not limited in Christ, but in ourselves. The Lord says, 'Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.' But we are like the king of Israel who hit the ground three times and stopped, when he ought to have hit it five or six times (Psalm 81:10; 2 Kings 13:19-19).

Be Specific in Prayer

I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of being specific in prayer. We ought not be content with general petitions. We ought to specify our want before the throne of grace. It should not be enough to confess we are sinners. We should name the sins of which our conscience tells us we are most guilty. It should not be enough to ask for holiness. We should name the graces in which we feel the most deficient. It should not be enough to tell the Lord we are in trouble. We should describe our trouble and all its circumstances. This is what Jacob did, when he feared his brother Esau. He tells God exactly what it is that he fears (Genesis 32:11). This is what Eliezer did, when he sought a wife for his master's son. He spreads before God precisely what he wants (Genesis 24:12). This is what Paul did, when he had a thorn in the flesh. He told the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:8). This is true faith and confidence. We should believe that nothing is too small to be named before God. What would we think of the patient who told his doctor he was ill, but never went into details? What would we think of the wife who told her husband she was unhappy, but did not specify the cause? What should we think of the child who told his father he was in trouble, but said nothing more? Let us never forget that Christ is the true Bridegroom of the soul — the true Physician of the heart — the real Father of all his people. Let us show we feel this by being completely open in our communications with him. Let us hide no secrets from him. Let us tell him everything that is in our hearts.

Intercession In Our Prayers

I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of intercession in our prayers. We are all selfish by nature, and our selfishness is very apt to stick with us, even when we are converted. There is a tendency in us to think only of our own souls, our own spiritual conflict, our own progress in religion, and to forget others. We need to watch and strive against this tendency, not least in our prayers. We should learn to be more open. We should stir ourselves up to name names other than our own before the throne of grace. We should try to bear in our hearts the whole world — the heathen — the Jew — the Roman Catholics — the body of true believers — the professing Protestant churches — the country in which we live — the congregation to which we belong — the family and home in which we live — the friends and relations we are connected with. For each and all of these we should plead. This is the highest love. He loves me best who loves me in his prayers. This is for our soul's health. It enlarges our sympathies and expands our hearts. This is for the benefit of the church. The wheels of all machinery for extending the gospel are oiled by prayer. Those who intercede like Moses on the mount do as much for the Lord's cause as those who fight like Joshua in the thick of the battle. This is to be like Christ. He bears the names of his people on his breast and shoulders as their High Priest before the Father. Oh, the privilege of being like Jesus! This is to be a true helper to ministers. If I must choose a congregation, give me a people who pray.

Thankfulness in Prayer

I commend to you, in the next place, the importance of thankfulness in prayer. I know well that asking God is one thing, and praising God is another. But I see so close a connection between prayer and praise in the Bible that I dare not call prayer in which thankfulness has no part, *true prayer*. It is not without reason that Paul says, 'By prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God' (Philippians 4:6). 'Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving' (Colossians 4:2). It is of mercy that we are not in hell. It is of mercy that we have the hope of heaven. It is of mercy that we live in a land with spiritual light. It is of mercy that we have been called by the Spirit, and not left to reap the fruit of our own ways. It is of mercy that we still live, and have opportunities of glorifying God actively or passively. Surely, these thoughts should come to mind whenever we speak with God. Surely, we should never open our lips in prayer without blessing God for that free grace by which we live, and for that loving kindness which endures for ever. Never was there a celebrated saint who was not full of thankfulness. Men like Whitefield in the eighteenth century were ever running over with thankfulness. Oh, if we would be bright and shining lights in our day, we must cherish a spirit of praise! And above all, let our prayers be thankful prayers.

Be Watchful over Your Prayers

I commend to you, in the last place, the importance of watchfulness over your prayers. Prayer is that point, above all others in religion, at which you must be on your guard. It is here that true religion begins; here it flourishes, and here it decays. Tell me what a man's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of his soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse: by this the spiritual health may always be tested. Prayer is the spiritual barometer: by this we may always know whether it

is fair or foul with our hearts. Oh, let us keep an eye continually upon our private devotions! Here is the essence, and substance, and backbone of our practical Christianity. Sermons, and books, and tracts,

and committee meetings, and the company of good men are all good in their way; but they will never make up for the neglect of private prayer. Mark well the places, and society, and companions that keep your hearts from communion with God, and tend to make your prayers difficult. *There be on your guard.* Observe what friends and what occupations leave your soul in the most spiritual frame and most ready to speak with God. *Cling and adhere to these, tightly. If you will only* take care of your prayers, I will promise that nothing will go wrong with your soul.

I offer these points for private consideration. I do it in all humility. I know no one who needs to be reminded of them more than I do myself. But I believe them to be God's own truth, and I would love to know and understand them more.

I want the times we live in to be praying times. I want the Christians of our day to be praying Christians. I want the church of our age to be a praying church. My heart's desire and prayer in sending out this publication is to promote a spirit of prayerfulness. I want those who have never yet prayed to rise and call upon God; and I want those who do pray, to improve their prayers every year, and to see that they are not becoming slack and praying in the wrong way.