

Pray!

“Pray for us . . . But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner” (Hebrews 13:18-19).

Christianity, church life, is inseparable, unthinkable, apart from prayer. The Christian church, when spoken of under the metaphor of a temple, a spiritual house, the house of God, is called a *house of prayer* (Matt. 21:13, Mark 11:27, Luke 19:46). The heavenly scene is incensed with the sweet fragrance of the prayers of the saints (Rev. 5:8). Prayer was the common denominator in every activity of the early church. If they ate, it was in “breaking of bread and prayers.” If they fasted, it was with “prayer and fasting.” Their ministers gave themselves *continually* “to the word of God and prayer” (Acts 6:4).

Prayer is signally the holiest and most spiritual exercise of mortal men. Carnal flesh shrinks and flees from it. It is cause for spiritual alarm when we find ourselves eagerly snatching any excuse to absent ourselves from the time and place of prayer. We may rely upon, ply and parade flesh in our preaching, singing, writing, teaching, witnessing, giving, and doing in general. And there is a vain babbling, a pagan chanting, a hypocritical performance, that some pass off as prayer, but truly praying . . . coming into the presence of a thrice-holy God, is a purely spiritual exercise. Here flesh withers, hollow insincere words die in our throats. There will be no conning God with clever words and pretenses. Our souls are made bare before Him, and we must bow and beg, worship and wonder, confess and capitulate. The quality of our Christian church life is *absolutely* determined by prayer, not by our study, scripture knowledge, doctrinal training, activities, outreach, not even by the content and power of the preaching. This will also be found to be just as absolutely true of our personal lives, our homes, and to a significant degree, our communities. It is in our praying that devotion, faith, and earnestness toward God and spiritual realities are most vividly and unfailingly discovered.

Prayer has a four-fold practical value and purpose: (1) Worship, Adoration, Communion with God. (2) It is an exercise in humility. Bowing or kneeling or prostrating ourselves, we acknowledge our weakness, our fallibility, our utter impotence to deal with the issues of life. We are reduced to our status as dust in the Hand of the Creator. (3) It is a means of becoming conformed and reconciled to the will of God. Our objections and fears are silenced, and, confessing His wisdom and goodness, we rest sweetly in God’s sovereign providence. (4) It is a means of facilitating and bring to pass future events and circumstances, things which *would not come to pass if we did not pray*. It is this fourth utility of prayer that is in view in our text. The apostle would like to get out of prison and be with his charges sooner than would be otherwise if the saints did not pray for his release. That is the plain unavoidable meaning of what is said, and logically, it seems to run afoul of divine providence. Such passages as Romans 8:28, Ephesians 1:11, and Isaiah 46:8-11, tell us clearly that God has determined whatsoever comes to pass, that He purposes and then unfailingly brings to pass whatsoever He sovereignly wills. “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure . . . I have purposed it, I will also do it.” How may saints, then, who hold to the rock-solid truth of divine providence, truly pray, believing their petitions to be effectual? How may they pray earnestly, fervently, rather than a faltering, passive “thy will be done” that comes short of the divine wrestling that characterizes the prayers in the Bible?

Saints are flesh and blood people, human beings living in this present world. Like all people, they desire and they also fear certain eventualities. They will and purpose; they also act, respond to all these. How a person responds to these issues of life tells us what he is in his heart.

The infidel responds with total confidence in himself. He purposes, wills and acts in his own imagined independent power. The fatalist responds not at all, believing himself a helpless victim of blind fate. And there is a quasi-Calvinist who reasons with himself thusly: “Here are all these admonitions to pray, and all these fervent prayers of the saints, the apostles and the Lord Himself. But in the end, does God not do what He had purposed to all along?” And with a knowing smile, and his human logic, he dismisses the word of God and rids himself of any necessity of prayer. His response differs only from the fatalist in that he makes religious noises in his passivity. Here also is the Reformed Creedalist who reads in his creed that prayer is merely the *means* by which God has chosen to do His sovereignly decreed predetermined will. “Ah, so that is it,” he exclaims with a sigh of relief. His human creed has emptied the holy scriptures of its divine mystery. So how does he respond? What is in his mind and heart when he “prays?” He is not praying at all. He is behaving as a smug, orthodox religionist, careful not to violate his creedal confession or to give nay appearance of any attempt to prevail upon God to do anything He has not already determined to do. There is no urgency, fervency, desperate cry, no impassioned intreaty that so characterizes Biblical praying.

In the model, or pattern, of prayer which our Lord gave us, He shows us that our stance is to be firmly committed to the sovereign will of God in the outset. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.” If our prayers were locked up to the will of God, and that alone, that would be the end of praying, and even that would be unnecessary, for God’s will must certainly be done. But that is only the beginning. A whole-hearted assent and commitment to the absolute sovereignty of God and His perfect will in all things is the basic spiritual stance for every true believer. From there we launch out to entreat God for what *we* desire and what we choose to believe Him to do for us (Mark 11:24, James 1:5-6). Dire need, urgency, soul anguish, demand that *we tell God what we wish Him to do*. Prayer is no time for high theology. Notice the absence of “Thy will be done” in the cries of Psalm 69:1-2, 14-18, and again in Psalm 83. Peter was not inclined to put the will of God foremost when he was sinking. There was no time for that. He wished to be rescued. It would have been a denial of his humanity and anguish of soul, his stark terror, for him to have said, “Lord, it appears I am about to drown. If it be your will, rescue me. If not, let me sink.” If he had had time to coolly think things through theologically, he

might have said that, but that is not the mentality in which we live. We live in this world with our immediate circumstances falling in upon us, our sole hope and expectation of survival or success being the faithfulness and power of our great God. Certainly He knows our every need and has promised to supply them. Nevertheless, He tells us to ask for our bread daily, even if we already have it stored in the pantry. We do this so that all we receive of this world's bounties may be perceived of coming from His blessed hand, not as the fruits of the cursed earth or our own sweating labors.

We need not fear frustrating or bucking the will of God when we pray for the salvation of our loved ones, for His blessings on our preaching, witnessing or spiritual undertakings, or for an outpouring of His Holy Spirit in Spiritual Awakening. Not only do we have strong indications that these things are His will, but we have assurances that our *real* praying will be according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27). Is it not therefore about time we took our Saviour's exhortation seriously? "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24). We may need to look no further to discover that the reason why others' joy seems much more vividly real and consistent than our own, is our own carnality and unbelief betrayed in our prayerlessness.

- C. M.