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The Importance of Prayer



IN EPHESIANS 6:18 we read words that put the tremendous importance of prayer with startling and overwhelming force:

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.”

When we stop to weigh the meaning of these words, then note the connection in which they are found, the intelligent child of God is driven to say,

“I must pray, pray, pray. I must put all my energy and all my heart into prayer. Whatever else I do, I must pray.”

The *Revised Version* (RV) is, if possible, stronger than the King James:

“With all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons

in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints."

Note the *alls*: "with *all* prayer," "at *all* seasons," "in *all* perseverance," "for *all* the saints." Note the piling up of strong words, "prayer," "supplication," "perseverance." Note once more the strong expression "watching thereunto," more literally, "being sleepless thereunto." Paul realized the natural slothfulness of man, and especially his natural slothfulness in prayer. How seldom we pray things through! How often the church and the individual get right up to the verge of a great blessing in prayer and just then let go, get drowsy, and quit. I wish that these words "being sleepless unto prayer" might burn into our hearts. I wish the whole verse might burn into our hearts.

By why is this constant, persistent, sleepless, overcoming prayer so needful?

1. *There is a devil.*

He is cunning, he is mighty, he never rests, he is ever plotting the downfall of the child of God; and if the child of God relaxes in prayer, the Devil will succeed in ensnaring him.

This is the thought of the context. Verse 12 reads: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in

the heavenly places" (RV). Then comes verse 13: "Wherefore take up the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand" (RV). Next follows a description of the different parts of the Christian's armor, which we are to put on if we are to stand against the devil and his mighty wiles. Then Paul brings all to a climax in verse 18, telling us that to all else we must add prayer—constant, persistent, untiring sleepless prayer in the Holy Spirit, or all else will go for nothing.

2. Prayer is God's appointed way for obtaining things, and the great secret of all lack in our experience, in our life, and in our work is neglect of prayer.

James brings this out very forcibly in chapter 4 and verse 2 of his epistle: "Ye have not because ye ask not." These words contain the secret of the poverty and powerlessness of the average Christian—neglect of prayer.

Many a Christian is asking, "Why is it I make so little progress in my Christian life?"

"Neglect of prayer," God answers. "You have not because you ask not."

Many a minister is asking, "Why is it I see so little fruit from my labors?"

Again God answers, "Neglect of prayer. You have not because you ask not."

Many a Sunday school teacher is asking, "Why is it that

I see so few converted in my Sunday school class?"

Still God answers, "Neglect of prayer. You have not because you ask not."

Both ministers and churches are asking, "Why is it that the church of Christ makes so little headway against unbelief and error and sin and worldliness?"

Once more we hear God answering, "Neglect of prayer. You have not because you ask not."

3. Those men whom God set forth as a pattern of what He expected Christians to be—the apostles—regarded prayer as the most important business of their lives.

When the multiplying responsibilities of the early church crowded in upon them, they "called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, fully of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But *we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word*" (Acts 6:2–4). It is evident from what Paul wrote to the churches and to individuals about praying for them that much of his time, strength, and thought were given to prayer (Romans 1:9 RV; Ephesians 1:15–16; Colossians 1:9 RV; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 2 Timothy 1:3 RV).

All the mighty men of God outside the Bible have been

men of prayer. They have differed from one another in many things, but in this they have been alike.

4. *Prayer occupied a very prominent place and played a very important part in the earthly life of our Lord.*

Turn, for example, to Mark 1:35. "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." The preceding day had been a very busy and exciting one, but Jesus shortened the hours of needed sleep that He might arise early and give Himself to more sorely needed prayer.

Turn again to Luke 6:12, where we read, "And it came to pass in those days that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." Our Savior found it necessary on occasion to take a whole night for prayer.

The words *pray* and *prayer* are used at least twenty-five times in connection with our Lord in the brief record of His life in the four Gospels, and His praying is mentioned in places where the words are not used. Evidently prayer took much of the time and strength of Jesus; a man or woman who does not spend much time in prayer cannot properly be called a follower of Jesus Christ.

5. *Praying is the most important part of the present ministry of our risen Lord.*

This reason for constant, persistent, sleepless, overcom-

ing prayer seems if possible even more forcible.

Christ's ministry did not close with His death. His atoning work was finished then, but when He rose and ascended to the right hand of the Father, He entered upon other work for us just as important in its place as His atoning work. It cannot be divorced from His atoning work; it rests upon that as its basis, but it is necessary to our complete salvation.

What that great present work is, by which He carries our salvation on to completeness, we read in Hebrews 7:25: "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing *he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*" This verse tells us that Jesus is able to save us unto the uttermost, not merely *from* the uttermost but *unto* the uttermost unto entire completeness, absolute perfection, because He not merely died but because He also "ever liveth."

The verse also tells us for what purpose He now lives, "*to make intercession*" for us, to pray. Praying is the principal thing He is doing in these days. It is by His prayers that He is saving us.

The same thought is found in Paul's remarkable triumphant challenge in Romans 8:34: "Who is he that shall condemn? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, *who also maketh intercession for us*" (RV).

If we then are to have fellowship with Jesus Christ in His present work, we must spend much time in prayer; we

must give ourselves to earnest, constant, persistent, sleepless, overcoming prayer. I know of nothing that has so impressed me with a sense of the importance of praying at all seasons, being much and constantly in prayer, as the thought that that is the principal occupation at present of my risen Lord. I want to have fellowship with Him, and to that end I have asked the Father whatever else He may make me, to make me at all events an intercessor, to make me a man who knows how to pray, and who spends much time in prayer.

This ministry of intercession is a glorious and a mighty ministry, and we can all have a part in it. The man or the woman who is shut away from the public meeting by sickness can have part in it; the busy mother; the woman who has to take in washing for a living can have part—she can mingle prayers for the saints, and for her pastor, and for the unsaved, and for foreign missionaries, with the soap and water as she bends over the washtub, and not do the washing any more poorly on that account; the hard-driven man of business can have part in it, praying as he hurries from duty to duty. But of course we must, if we would maintain this spirit of constant prayer, take time—and take plenty of it—when we shall shut ourselves up in the secret place alone with God for nothing but prayer.

6. Prayer is the means that God has appointed for our receiving mercy, and obtaining grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 is one of the simplest and sweetest verses in the Bible. "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." These words make it very plain that God has appointed a way by which we shall seek and obtain mercy and grace. That way is prayer; bold, confident, outspoken approach to the throne of grace, the most holy place of God's presence, where our sympathizing High Priest, Jesus Christ, has entered in our behalf (verses 14–15).

Mercy is what we need, grace is what we must have, or all our life and effort will end in complete failure. Prayer is the way to get them. There is infinite grace at our disposal, and we make it ours experimentally by prayer. Oh, if we only realized the fullness of God's grace that is ours for the asking, its height and depth and length and breadth, I am sure that we would spend more time in prayer. The measure of our appropriation of grace is determined by the measure of our prayers.

Who is there that does not feel that he needs more grace? Then ask for it. Be constant and persistent in your asking. Be importunate and untiring in your asking. God delights to have us "shameless" beggars in this direction; for it shows our faith in Him, and He is mightily pleased with faith. Because of our "shamelessness," He will rise and give us as much as we need (Luke 11:8). What little streams of mercy and grace most of us know, when we might know rivers overflowing their banks!

7. *Prayer in the name of Jesus Christ is the way Jesus Christ Himself has appointed for His disciples to obtain fullness of joy.*

He states this simply and beautifully in John 16:24: "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full." "Made full" is the way the *Revised Version* reads. Who is there that does not wish his joy filled full? Well, the way to have it filled full is by praying in the name of Jesus. We all know people whose joy is filled full; indeed, it is just running over, shining from their eyes; bubbling out of their very lips, and running off their fingertips when they shake hands with you. Coming in contact with them is like coming in contact with an electrical machine charged with gladness. Now people of that sort are always people that spend much time in prayer.

Why is it that prayer in the name of Christ brings such fullness of joy? In part, because we get what we ask. But that is not the only reason, nor the greatest. It makes God real. When we ask something definite of God, and He gives it, how real God becomes! He is right there! It is blessed to have a God who is real, and not merely an idea. I remember how once I was taken suddenly and seriously sick all alone in my study. I dropped upon my knees and cried to God for help. Instantly all pain left me—I was perfectly well. It seemed as if God stood right there and had put out His hand and touched me. The joy of the healing was not so great as the joy of meeting God.

There is no greater joy on earth or in heaven than communion with God, and prayer in the name of Jesus brings us into communion with Him. The psalmist was surely not speaking only of future blessedness but also of present blessedness when he said, "In thy presence is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11). Oh, the unutterable joy of those moments when in our prayers we really press into the presence of God!

Does someone say, "I have never known any such joy as that in prayer"?

Do you take enough leisure for prayer to actually get into God's presence? Do you really give yourself up to prayer in the time that you do take?

8. Prayer, in every care and anxiety and need of life, with thanksgiving, is the means that God has appointed for our obtaining freedom from all anxiety, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

"Be careful for nothing," says Paul, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). To many this seems, at the first glance, the picture of a life that is beautiful, but beyond the reach of ordinary mortals; not so at all. The verse tells us how the life is attainable by every child of God: "Be careful for nothing," or as the *Revised Version*

reads, "In nothing be anxious." The remainder of the verse tells us how, and it is very simple: "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." What could be plainer or more simple than that? Just keep in constant touch with God, and when trouble or vexation, great or small, comes up, speak to Him about it, never forgetting to return thanks for what He has already done. What will the result be? "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus" (RV).

That is glorious, and as simple as it is glorious! Thank God, many are trying it. Don't you know anyone who is always serene? Perhaps he is a very stormy man by his natural makeup, but troubles and conflicts and reverses and bereavements may sweep around him, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guards his heart and his thoughts in Christ Jesus.

We all know such persons. How do they manage it?

Just by prayer, that is all. Those persons who know the deep peace of God, the unfathomable peace that passes all understanding, are always men and women of much prayer.

Some of us let the hurry of our lives crowd prayer out, and what a waste of time and energy and nerve force there is by the constant worry! One night of prayer will save us from the many nights of insomnia. Time spent in prayer is not wasted but time invested at big interest.

If we would only spend more time in prayer, there would be more fullness of the Spirit's power in our work. Many and many a man who once worked unmistakably in the power of the Holy Spirit is now filling the air with empty shoutings and beating it with his meaningless gesticulations, because he has let prayer be crowded out. We must spend much time on our knees before God, if we are to continue in the power of the Holy Spirit.

9. Prayer is the means that Christ has appointed whereby our hearts shall not become overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness and cares of this life, and so the day of Christ's return comes upon us suddenly as a snare.

One of the most interesting and solemn passages upon prayer in the Bible is along this line (Luke 21:34–36). "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." According to this passage there is only one way in which we can be prepared for the coming of the Lord when He appears, that is, through much prayer.

The coming again of Jesus Christ is a subject that is

awakening much interest and much discussion in our day; but it is one thing to be interested in the Lord's return, and to talk about it, and quite another thing to be prepared for it. We live in an atmosphere that has a constant tendency to unfit us for Christ's coming. The world tends to draw us down by its gratifications and by its cares. There is only one way by which we can rise triumphant above these things—by constant watching unto prayer, that is, by sleeplessness unto prayer. *Watch* in this passage is the same strong word used in Ephesians 6:18, and *always* the same strong phrase *in every season*. The man who spends little time in prayer, who is not steadfast and constant in prayer, will not be ready for the Lord when He comes. But we may be ready. How? Pray! Pray! Pray!

10. *Because of what prayer accomplishes.*

Much has really been said upon that already, but there is much also that should be added.

(a) Prayer promotes our spiritual growth as almost nothing else, indeed as nothing else but Bible study; and true prayer and true Bible study go hand in hand.

It is through prayer that my sin is brought to light, my most hidden sin. As I kneel before God and pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me" (Psalm 139:23–24),

God shoots the penetrating rays of His light into the innermost recesses of my heart, and the sins I never suspected are brought to view. In answer to prayer, God washes me from mine iniquity and cleanses me from my sin (Psalm 51:2). In answer to prayer, my eyes are opened to behold wondrous things out of God's Word (Psalm 119:18). In answer to prayer, I get wisdom to know God's way (James 1:5) and strength to walk in it. As I meet God in prayer and gaze into His face, I am changed into His own image from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). Each day of true prayer life finds me more like my glorious Lord.

John Welch, son-in-law to John Knox, was one of the most faithful men of prayer this world ever saw. He counted that day ill-spent in which seven or eight hours were not used alone with God in prayer and the study of His Word. An old man speaking of him after his death said, "He was a type of Christ."

How came he to be so like his Master?

His prayer life explains the mystery.

(b) Prayer brings power into our work.

If we wish power for any work to which God calls us, be it preaching, teaching, personal work, or the rearing of our children, we can get it by earnest prayer.

A woman with a little boy who was perfectly incorrigible once came to me in desperation and said:

“What shall I do with him?”

I asked, “Have you ever tried prayer?”

She said that she had prayed for him, she thought. I asked if she had made his conversion and his character a matter of definite, expectant prayer. She replied that she had not been definite in the matter. She began that day, and at once there was a marked change in the child, and he grew up into Christian manhood.

How many a Sunday school teacher has taught for months and years, and seen no real fruit from his labors, and then has learned the secret of intercession and by earnest pleading with God has seen his scholars brought one by one to Christ! How many a poor teacher has become a mighty man of God by casting away his confidence in his own ability and gifts and giving himself up to God to wait upon Him for the power that comes from on high! John Livingstone spent a night, with some others like-minded, in prayer to God and religious conversation, and when he preached next day in the Kirk of Shotts five hundred people were converted or dated some definite uplift in their lives to that occasion. Prayer and power are inseparable.

(c) Prayer avails for the conversion of others.

There are few converted in this world unless in connection with someone's prayers. I formerly thought that no human being had anything to do with my own conversion,

for I was not converted in church or Sunday school or in personal conversation with anyone. I was awakened in the middle of the night and converted. As far as I can remember, I had not the slightest thought of being converted, or of anything of that character, when I went to bed and fell asleep, but I was awakened in the middle of the night and converted probably inside of five minutes. A few minutes before I was about as near eternal perdition as one gets. I had one foot over the brink and was trying to get the other one over. I say I thought no human being had anything to do with it, but I had forgotten my mother's prayers, and I afterward learned that one of my college classmates had chosen me as one to pray for until I was saved.

Prayer often avails where everything else fails. How utterly all of Monica's efforts and entreaties failed with her son! But her prayers prevailed with God, and the dissolute youth became St. Augustine, the mighty man of God. By prayer the bitterest enemies of the gospel have become its most valiant defenders, the greatest scoundrels the truest sons of God, and the vilest women the purest saints. Oh, the power of prayer to reach down, down, down where hope itself seems vain, and lift men and women up, up, up into fellowship with and likeness to God! It is simply wonderful! How little we appreciate this marvelous weapon!

(d) Prayer brings blessings to the church.

The history of the church has always been a history of grave difficulties to overcome. The Devil hates the church and seeks in every way to block its progress; now by false doctrine, again by division, again by inward corruption of life. But by prayer, a clear way can be made through everything. Prayer will root out heresy, allay misunderstanding, sweep away jealousies and animosities, obliterate immoralities, and bring in the full tide of God's reviving grace. History abundantly proves this. In the hour of darkest portent, when the case of the church, local or universal, has seemed beyond hope, believing men and believing women have met together and cried to God and the answer has come.

It was so in the days of Knox, it was so in the days of Wesley and Whitefield, it was so in the days of Edwards and Brainerd, it was so in the days of Finney, it was so in the days of the great revival of 1857 in this country and of 1859 in Ireland. And it will be so again in your day and mine! Satan has marshaled his forces. Christian Science with its false Christ—a woman—lifts high its head. Others making great pretensions of apostolic methods, but covering the rankest dishonesty and hypocrisy with these pretensions, speak with loud assurance. Christians equally loyal to the great fundamental truths of the gospel are glowering at one another with a devil-sent suspicion. The world, the flesh, and the Devil are holding high carnival. It is now a dark day, *but*—now “it is

time for thee, Lord, to work; for they have made void thy law" (Psalm 119:126). And He is getting ready to work, and now He is listening for the voice of prayer. Will He hear it? Will He hear it from you? Will He hear it from the church as a body? I believe He will.