

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL WELFARE (I)

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

Faith in God as God

How do we establish an understanding and conviction about God that will stand the test of anything that life throws at us? Faith must lay hold of God whatever the circumstances. It is out of long experience that the Apostle Paul can write to Timothy from prison and say 'I am not ashamed, for I know *whom* I have believed (in whom I trusted) and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.' (2 Timothy 1 v 12.) It is not the imprisonment that fills Paul's mind as he writes this but the Lord and his absolute faithfulness.

So often those who wrote the Psalms are bewildered by events. They cannot explain them. Suffering seems to continue, those who hate God prosper, they feel forsaken and a long way from God. Yet whenever they feel like they fight back to the foundation conviction: 'Who is a rock except our God? (Psalm 18) 'God is our shelter and strength' (Psalm 46). So often we need to stop, put on the brakes and get perspective restored. Events overwhelm us. God wants us to pause in the quiet. 'Be still and know that I am God'. Get your perspective restored. This is what gripped the prophet Habakkuk – see chapter 3 of his prophecy.

The Character of God

Faith is holding on to God even when we do not understand what is happening. That holding on is more assured when we know more about God on to whom we are holding.

Covenant love

The great Hebrew word *hesed* is the anchor word of the Old Testament. Translated variously as mercy or steadfast love it is *the* word to which the believer is to cling, the word to which he climbs from the lowest depths of depression. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end: they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3 v 23). From there the picture of a new covenant began to merge a personal covenant, but still of covenant love. For us this came to its fullness in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus himself took the bread and wine symbols of His body and blood at the Last Supper, He said 'This is the new covenant in my blood'. It is into this eternal covenant of love that we have entered by faith in Christ and it is on that unmovable rock of covenant love that we must set our feet forever. The Holy Spirit makes it not just a mental acceptance but an inward experience (Romans 5 v 5)

Unchanging love

If we want prayer to bring us a trouble-free life we are in difficulties. There is no promise of that in the New Testament. Instead there is the promise that none of the pressures and trials of life can separate us from the love of Christ. This is the key to triumphant living as a Christian- the grasp of the unchanging love that holds us always. This does not mean that we do not pray when sickness or hardship strike. We will pray in the face of danger, in an accident or disaster. In this sinful fallen world Christians will be caught in the middle of war or subject to cancer or heart attack like anyone else. But the supreme overriding factor for the Christian is that nothing- no powers, not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:28-39). The onslaught of 'Why should this happen to me? Why should I have to endure this suffering? Why doesn't God answer my prayer? Will still come, but it will be met by an unshakeable conviction. Though I may not be able to explain why God does or does not seem to answer, though I know my feelings may become those of emptiness and desolation; yet I know God is love, that I am united to Him for ever by covenant love.

The Purposes of God

The next foundation to be built concerns who is in control. The popular - nonbiblical concept of prayer has ourselves 'in control' and God 'out there' to do our bidding when called upon. He is available to us to get what we want. We have our plans and our purposes and God is expected to fit in with them. If he doesn't, then we don't bother to pray anymore. How often have we heard the comment (maybe we have said it) 'I use to have faith, but I lost it when.....' That sort of faith needs to go. It isn't Christian faith. We need deliberately and constantly to reaffirm as Christians that the purposes of God are greater than ours.

As William Cowper puts it brilliantly in one of his hymns;

God moves in a mysterious way.

His wonders to perform;

He plants His footsteps in the sea

and rides upon the storm

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,

but trust Him for his grace;

behind a frowning providence

He hides a smiling face

His purposes will ripen fast,

unfolding every hour;

the bud may have a bitter taste,

but sweet will be the flower

As we wrestle with this we need to be reminded of the words of Jesus. 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you' (Matthew 6 v 33). This is the Christian approach to prayer not seeing it as a technique for getting things. We are to pray with faith, expectantly but that is not the same as imagining we can put some kind of armlock on God. That isn't prayer. It is an attempt to control supernatural powers to do my will. It turns the Christian Amen into abracadabra.

Real believing prayer is about a personal relationship with God; it is not about getting things; it is about sharing things. Look at the example of Jesus in Gethsemane 'My Father if it is possible let this cup pass from me. Yet not what I will but as you will.' Were those last words added because of a lack of faith on the part of Jesus? No. Prayer is not selfish completion of a blank cheque that God has pledged to sign; prayer is my acceptance of the cheque God has completed on my behalf. It is not a sort of magic spell; prayer is a participation in God's purposes.

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL WELFARE (II)

DEVOTIONAL PRAYER

Worship

Worship is 'worthship' giving God the glory and honour which is due to him. At the same time, it is an expression of our dependence on Him and our submission to Him as Lord. Frequently in Scripture, worship is associated with falling down or kneeling. There are innumerable examples of this in the Bible. Psalm 95 invites us:

'O Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the flock under his care.'

How do we worship?

Two important texts will guide us in our attitude to worship:

John 4 v 24 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth'

Romans 12 v 1 'I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

Three areas of our being are involved: our spirit, our mind (truth) and our body. Real worship will involve all three.

Spirit

When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well in John 4, he knew that her worship was a formal activity depending on what was done and how it was done. Jesus pressed her to the heart of worship. No form of service, however good, is worship - it is only the vehicle of worship. In Jesus Christ a new experience of spiritual worship was to be opened up by the Holy Spirit. Here men and women would be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and He would inspire, enlighten and empower from within. For all of us in Christ this is our privilege. We must therefore take time to be attuned to the Spirit of God within us as we approach the Lord. No charging in!

We should come unhurried, asking the Holy Spirit to open our hearts. His great desire is to take the things of God and open them to us. He will want to interpret spiritual truth to us. He will want to open the depths of our being in adoration and worship.

Mind

Jesus added the words 'and in truth' to what he said about worship in John 4 v 23. Jesus was constantly exposing error and teaching the truth. The truth divides, it also liberates: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free' (John 8:31-32). The church from Pentecost onwards has sought to teach, spread and protect the truth of God. Worship must therefore include the submission of our minds to the wisdom of God- to His thoughts which are higher than our thoughts. Meditation on the Scriptures with an open mind and prayerful attitude is essential within our daily worship. The truth of God must also be a check on forms of worship.

Body

The body part of worship is the submission of my life to my Lord, dedicating my life to God's purposes and seeking his direction for the way ahead. So, worship moves out into the week 'Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work for your glory '

Approaching God

With Penitence

As often as we come into the presence of God we come as sinners cleansed and forgiven through the blood of Christ. The worshiper must never forget the means of their being welcomed by God, must never approach God in an attitude of self-confidence. Our confidence is in Christ as Saviour and Mediator:

Bold, I approach the eternal throne

And claim the crown through Christ my own

(Charles Wesley)

Confession

One of the good things about Anglican liturgy is the central place of confession! In our personal devotional prayer, we can give more time and attention to self-examination. This is not morbid introspection but a real desire to live the Christian life in a way that pleases God.

Good questions to ask ourselves would be:

Can I listen to other Christians being praised and not be jealous?

What do I honestly regard as 'getting on in life' is it in terms of Christian maturity, or of possessions and success?

Am I quick to see the wrongs in others but slow to see them in myself?

Am I a peace-maker? Am I quick to say sorry?

With Praise and Thanksgiving

We are to praise God as God – revelling in the wonder of who He is and all that He means to us. The Psalms are full of such praise. See Psalm 18 v 1, 8v 1, 96 v 1,4,8

Creation

See Psalm 19,24, 104 etc. Think of the Creator and there is an endless arena of praise.

His Word

Praise for God's revelation of Himself through creation is matched in Psalm 19 by praise for God's revealing of His laws and ways. The Psalmist is not praising for the Word itself but for the way in which it brings him hope, assurance, comfort, guidance and understanding. It is when his word becomes the living word to us that we begin to praise.

People

Paul frequently thanked God for his friends. Are we ready to jump to criticise someone without looking for aspects to praise about them? This can bring a new dimension to devotional prayer.

Day by Day

Jesus encouraged his followers to pray alone with God- this may not be easy. Is there anywhere we can go on our own? What about our posture when we pray- is kneeling appropriate? Maybe we need to walk around the room! When should daily devotion take place? Is there life before breakfast? We need to work out what the best time for us is.

Being practical

We do not know whether Jesus went apart every day to pray. We *do* know that he had some special times apart particularly after times of pressure. The benefit of these times away is that we can relax and unwind.

We need the refilling of the Holy Spirit

This must be a continual desire, but we will particularly pray for his refilling after times of tiredness and busyness and as we rise afresh to face what lies ahead.

Checklist

Take time with God – do not come in a hurry

Worship Him – with adoration, why not use hymns, psalms, Scripture passages – using a pattern of Bible study notes.

Confession- think over the past day- seek to discern where you have failed God- seek the grace of the Spirit to live more effectively

From time to time, spend a special time reviewing your life and lifestyle

Praise and Thanksgiving

For God himself

For creation

For the Word

For people

PRAYER AND THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE (III)

Looking at Intercessory Prayer

Ephesians 6:18-20 is a key passage for understanding the scope of intercession. 'Pray on every occasion as the Spirit leads. For this reason, keep alert and never give up; pray always for all God's people. And pray also for me, that God will give me a message when I am ready to speak, so that I may boldly make known the gospel's secret'.

We need to examine the context. From verse 10 of Ephesians 6 it is the context of battle – being strong in the Lord, putting on the whole armour of God, standing against the wiles of the devil, contending against the spiritual hosts of wickedness.

Prayer takes the spiritual battle seriously and 'means business with the Lord of all power and might'. There are five marks of real prayer or 'prayer in the Spirit' as Ephesians 6v 18 puts it:

Accurate

Perhaps not a word we associate with prayer! Vague waffling prayer is a distraction and unhelpful. Prayer needs to be on target. Often, we can discern a target and can get praying, but sometimes it is not so clear how to pray for a particular situation even though we realise that prayer is vital in it. Here the Spirit is ready to help and direct us. *Romans 8 v 26*. That can be the experience in personal intercession.

Fervent

See James 5:16-18 What then does earnestly or fervently mean? For some it may mean a special voice of trembling or intensity. For some prayer expressed with emotion is the only effective form of praying, and straightforward speaking to God is dismissed as not 'fervent prayer'. This is an inaccurate and unhelpful viewpoint. What the Greek says in James 5 is 'with prayer he prayed'! Nothing about a trembling voice but obviously meaning the person praying meant business with God- the prayer was real and from the heart.

Expectant

Expectancy is something submitted to the foundations of prayer and in the purposes and ways of God but it is still to be a real mark of praying not least that God is always able to do more than we ask or think. Submitting our requests to the will and plans of God will protect us from the immature and mechanical use of the phrase 'Ask in faith'. Expectancy with the humble 'your will be done' is a mark of real prayer. When we come to special evangelistic events in the church it is not much use praying without expectancy – and we will need to learn to pray 'on target' for spiritual blindness to be removed, for power as people share their own testimony and the preaching of God's word. We must expect God to bring His results. The key question is of course are we expectant or going through the motions? Expectancy can also be a growing conviction. As we pray perhaps over a period of weeks we begin to sense that God is with us.

Earnest

Similar to fervent but subtly different. When Peter was in prison 'earnest' prayer was made to God by the church. (Acts 12v 5). What does that mean? Again, some say it is to do with the emotion in the voice, but the original word has the sense of laying hands on someone and identifying with them. So as the group of Christians prayed for Peter, they in a sense identified with him, lifting him up to the Lord with love, urgency and deep oneness.

Persevering

The fifth mark comes directly from Ephesians 6 v 18 'To this end keep alert with all perseverance'. We often have to persevere in prayer because we cannot see what is happening in the spiritual realm. Daniel 10 is an interesting example of this. When Daniel has spent three weeks of prayer and fasting the heavenly messenger tells him that his prayer was heard from the beginning but the 'prince of the Kingdom of Persia withstood me for twenty one days' Its clear from the text that this prince must be an evil angelic power the sort of foe Paul speaks about in Ephesians 6. As Dale Davis remarks in his commentary on this part of Daniel, "One must not sensationalise the text nor mute its testimony. The teaching seems to be that unseen evil powers influence and control the kingdoms and governments of this world in order to inflict harm and havoc on the people of God".

We shall never fully understand how our prayers are effective in the spiritual battle nor how our prayers are involved in God's will and action. It is clear from Scripture that they are, and this is why we must press on in persevering prayer- perhaps over many years, when we know that the matter has been laid on our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther said "To pray diligently is more than half the task". Do we believe that? We may not always understand the how and why of prayer, but two things are clear- the disaster of no prayer and the power of real prayer.

Praying for the Saints

Spiritually

It is natural to pray first for our own or our fellow Christians safety, wellbeing, health or success. However, if we read through the prayers of the New Testament, we find them overwhelmingly concerned with the spiritual growth of believers. That must be our priority. Ephesians 3:14-19 gives one such prayer. It is a magnificent expression of heartfelt praying. It is a prayer for the Ephesians to know increasing spiritual power, in terms of the riches of God's glory and not of meagre human expectation. The prayer is concerned with the fruit of Christian character, that the Ephesians will be rooted and grounded in love. The aim of the prayer is that believers may be filled with the fullness of God- not content with second rate Christian living, always wanting to grow at whatever age.

Mentally

Paul is sufficiently concerned about such growth to make it a matter of prayer for the saints. In Philippians 1: 9-11, for example, he prays that 'your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and may be pure and blameless... filled with the fruit of righteousness'.

Sometimes there seems to be almost a despising of Christian understanding. There can be a dangerous anti- intellectualism. Love is to abound more and more – but with all knowledge and understanding. We are all under pressure to 'conform to the world' (Romans 12 v 1). The media powerfully influences us. There is a battle for the mind, and we are in the middle of it.

Physically

The key to all prayer for healing is the glory of God. If we accept the foundations of prayer (see 'Foundations of Prayer' section) then the glory of God will be our greatest concern and we will submit all healing prayer to that higher purpose. The classic passage to turn to in this area is 2 Corinthians 12.

To end- a verse of a hymn which is in effect a prayer written as many of the best hymns are out of deep life changing experience.

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear-
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!*