

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

**August 25, 1996**

Tonight we begin a new series of evening studies devoted to “prayer.” I imagine that this series will take us through most if not the entirety of the Autumn and that very easily. Prayer is so fundamental to the Christian faith and life, a subject of such comprehensive instruction and illustration in the Bible, and a matter of such interest, complexity, and personal importance that the study of it could easily fill up a year or two of Sabbath evenings. Alexander Whyte preached a series of sermons on prayer in which Luke 11:1, “Lord, teach us to pray,” was combined with some other text to exhibit some aspect of the life of prayer. These sermons took up the winter of 1895-96, but others were added in 1897, and through the years up to 1906 others were occasionally added. Some of these were later published in the book Lord, Teach us to Pray, which is not only quintessential Alexander Whyte, but the finest work on prayer I have ever read. Sell your shirt to buy Whyte if you ever have the opportunity in some used book store.

In any case, we will never lack for subjects if we are considering the Bible’s teaching concerning the life of prayer.

Let me tell you some of the thinking that led to the decision to undertake this study at this particular time in the life of our church. We are, many of us, the adults in this congregation, getting into the middle of our years. Others of us have been there for some time now. The danger of this time of life, for the Christian, is very great. It is here that many grow comfortable

in the routine of Christian living, in the habitual practice of the faith, and, in many cases, without even being aware of the fact, they fall prey to the temptation to live a Christian life that is more the repetition of Christian routine than it is a daily, active dependence upon God, the regular experience of his provision, the grasping after more of the Lord, his power, his nearness, that characterized our Christian lives, at least at certain periods, when we were younger. We are still serious Christians, of course we are. We still intend to serve the Lord faithfully, of course we do. But, if the truth be told, even we ourselves from time to time shudder at how little true engagement there is between the Lord and ourselves, how little we look to heaven in a given day, how little our thoughts turn upwards, and how little we seem genuinely to depend upon what God alone can supply. Even when we are at prayer there is too much of the duty and too little of the sense that we are seeking from God what he has promised to provide in answer to prayer. There is too much principle and too little personal in our walk with God.

I am not saying, of course, that young Christians don't face the same temptation. They certainly do. It is the master temptation of the Christian life to live it by sight instead of, by spiritual might and main, to determine to live it every day by faith. But there is a peculiar danger for the Christian in middle age, when the routines of life have become so well established, and when, so it seems, the blessings of the Lord come in adequate measure whether one prays or not! I do not say that they do so come, only that it can seem so! Is this not why it is so regularly the case that afflictions of real gravity and weight begin to encounter us in this time of life? We must be called back to an active dependence upon the Lord, a real communion of faith, hope, and love, a personal engagement with the Lord himself in the depth of our souls — for that is the true Christian life, nothing else — and nothing short of tragedy and pain and the deepest need will force us out of the comfortable ruts of a dutiful, far too deistic Christian life.

And it is in the matter of prayer that this entire issue is concentrated for the Christian. For prayer is the means by which active dependence upon the Lord, personal engagement with him day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, is practiced in the Christian life. In fact, that is what true prayer is, active communion with the Lord, so that how much real prayer is present in our lives is the measure of our faith as faith is defined in the Bible.

We are all so ready to accept our convictions as the true measure of our faith,

but the Bible warns us not to do that. The Devils believe in that way, and tremble. The issue is rather how those convictions are turned into a life of true prayer — true prayer, not merely the outward act of prayer, but true engagement with the Lord, honest speaking with him, person to person, or, as John Knox defined prayer, “earnest and familiar talking with God.” Real Christians know this down deep, which is why there is so universally among them an uneasy conscience with respect to their prayer.

But, what is true of individuals is also true of congregations. The life of a church, like the life of an individual Christian is measured by prayer, by the amount of it, by the fervency of it, by the expectation that accompanies it. When churches get into a comfortable position — paying their bills is no longer a continual concern, good work is being done and supported, there is unity in the body and general faithfulness on the part of the people, there is a commitment to obedience that is honored in the public life of the church — I say, churches in that condition can sink into the rut of dutiful routine. There is not a seeking hard after God, a living sense of openness to the future believing that God might do many wonderful things in answer to the urgent and importunate prayers of his people, not even a sense of real dependence upon the Lord. They believe he has supplied their needs and loves them — of course they do — but he has done this, at least so it seems by their behavior — from a distance, and not so much because they asked him — children asking their father — but because he laid down certain principles that are now bearing fruit in their lives.

In the American evangelical church prayer has fallen on hard times. Prayer Meetings are disappearing rapidly. But we don't need to look at the church as a whole; our own situation reveals the same difficulties.

We face them in regard to our prayer meeting, in the difficulty we have had in getting the prayer meeting to grow at or near the same rate at which the congregation has grown over the years, and, those who are regularly in the prayer meeting itself know the difficulty we face in sustaining ardor, earnestness, and a sense of urgency in our prayers.

Now you know and I know that we all suffer from this malaise of too much sight and too little faith, too much dutiful action and too little real counting on and looking to the Lord, too much assuming and too little pleading, too much conviction and too little practice of those convictions — which is all just another way of saying that, both individually and together as a church family,

our Christian life is too much a matter of belief and obedience and too little of faith and prayer. We need the belief and obedience, absolutely. Faithfulness in prayer would be only a gigantic hypocrisy if it were not accompanied by true belief and real obedience to God's commands.

As the English congregationalist, P.T. Forsyth says in his wonderful book on prayer, The Soul of Prayer (the second best book on the subject I've read!):

“To pray for God's kingdom is also to engage ourselves to service and sacrifice for it. To begin our prayer with a petition for hallowing God's name and to have no real and prime place for holiness in our life of faith is not sincere. The prayer of the vindictive for forgiveness is mockery, like the prayer for daily bread from a wheat-cornerer. No such man could say the Lord's Prayer but to his judgment. . . . The Lord's Prayer is also a vow to the Lord. To begin the day with prayer is but a formality unless it go on in prayer, unless for the rest of it we pray in deed what we began in word. One has said that while prayer is the day's best beginning it must not be like the handsome title-page of a worthless book.” [p. 28]

But, in the same way, without a foundation of living prayer, belief and obedience pale and weaken and no longer can sustain either a true Christian experience or empower our lives or the life of the church to walk with God and serve him faithfully.

And so it seemed a good time to face the issue of prayer head on and to call us, each individually, and all together, once again to the life of prayer. For when our lives are done and we are ready to face the Lord, there is nothing in all the world that will be more important to us than that we have been praying men and women and a part of a praying church, that our lives were lived by prayer, which is to say, *that we walked with God*.

Let me then begin by reminding you of the place that prayer occupies in the religious life commended to us in Holy Scripture. That is, let's begin our study by banishing from our minds once and for all the notion — that the Devil is always seeking to insinuate in our minds and hearts — that prayer is but one of many parts of the Christian life and that if we aren't particularly faithful at this, we can make it up with faithfulness elsewhere (a temptation to which I know I am always subject and to which I am so susceptible that I

can remember myself even speaking those words in my own mind). Or we tell ourselves that other things in the Christian life might be just as if not more important than the life of prayer. I received recently in the mail an audio tape. It peaked my interest because on the label I read “Please listen to this tape. It brought back memories of our R.P.C.E.S. days before for the J & R with the P.C.A.” I wondered if it might be former R.P. stalwarts speaking of the old days. However, the tape was actually a pitch for Super Blue Green Algae as sold in a pyramid marketing scheme. The tape was primarily testimonials, mostly from ministers and their wives, concerning the revolution that Super Blue Green Algae had effected in their lives. One suggested that the declining enthusiasm for prayer meetings in the church resulted primarily from weariness caused by poor nutrition. Another lamented that the church was praying for healing while all the time violating God’s laws of nutrition. Another spoke of his vision of life according to Biblical principles, a life that would reap the blessings of God and of his confidence that Super Blue Green Algae was an important ingredient in such a life. One minister was audacious enough to say, “Of all the things I’ve ever done, this is the most important.” *A Christian* said that! Here is only a particularly egregious and blasphemous example of what you and I are always tempted to do: consider anything, turn to anything, count on anything before prayer.

Alexander Whyte wrote,

“... if prayer is anything at all it is everything. And that is exactly what the whole Word of God says about prayer; it is everything, absolutely everything.” [Thomas Shepard, 64]

And it is easy enough to demonstrate that claim, audacious as it sounds, from the Bible itself.

At the very beginning of biblical revelation, true faith and true religion is described (Gen. 4:26) as “calling on the name of the Lord.”

Listen to Calvin [Genesis, ad loc]:

“In the verb ‘to call upon,’ there is a synecdoche, for it embraces generally the whole worship of God. But religion is here properly designated by that *which forms its principal part*. For God prefers this service of piety and faith to all sacrifices... Yea, this

is the spiritual worship of God which faith produces. This is particularly worthy of notice, because Satan contrives nothing with greater care than to adulterate, with every possible corruption, the pure invocation of God, or to draw us away from the only God to the invocation of creatures. Even from the beginning of the world he has not ceased to move this stone, that miserable men might weary themselves in vain. . . .”

And, at the very end of the Bible the saints in heaven are represented as still at prayer, pleading “How long, O Lord, how long. . . ?” (Rev. 6:10)

And in between, they pray for forgiveness and receive it, pray for one blessing, one provision or another and have it from God’s hand, pray for others or for some intervention of God in the world and see with their own eyes what they asked for come to pass. What is more, a failure to pray or insincere praying is everywhere the crime and the mark of those who are without God. Earnest prayer, a suppliant coming with his needs to a merciful and a hearing God is everywhere in the Bible the evidence of true faith, the act of a true child of God. Prayer was the vital force of the life of the great men and women who are presented to us in the Bible as examples of authentic faith. Hannah was a woman of prayer. David calls himself a man of prayer. We see Moses often at prayer and conducting his great ministry by prayer. The Book of Psalms is a collection of prayers, in the largest part, and demonstrate in how many ways the life of faith is a life of prayer, and concerning how many things and in how many different spirits the man or woman of faith is to speak to God. And the Lord himself was supremely a man of prayer, often praying through the watches of the night, robbing himself of much needed sleep that he might speak with his father in heaven. No other man in all the world lived his life without sin, and yet this man was a man devoted to prayer as no man before or since. And he taught his own disciples to pray and encouraged them with many promises of prayer’s power and effect. The apostles were men of prayer and taught their churches the life of prayer.

Often we are taught that the absence of blessing results from want of prayer. “You have not because you ask not.” And, contrarily, many times, we see the fortunes of God’s people improve because they prayed to God and he heard and answered their prayers.

But, perhaps the most telling demonstration of all that prayer is, as James Montgomery’s famous hymn has it, “the Christian’s vital breath,” is that

we find it so hard to do. Think of it: the promise is that you can have the undivided attention of almighty God; that he will hear you and answer your prayers; that if you ask in his name, you will receive. And think of how simple and easy the work: get down on your knees and talk to God. Even a child can do it. Indeed, children do it all the time. You might well think that Christians couldn't be got off their knees, that they would have to be dragged to work or to play because they could not get enough of this privilege — talking directly to God whenever one wants! But, you and I know that it is not so! It is precisely because prayer is so important to the Christian life and to its advancement and to the advancement of the kingdom of God in the world, that we are so averse to it in our sinfulness — which is contrary to all that is holy and good — and that the devil takes such pains to distract us from it.

Richard Sibbes wrote long ago: “When we go to God by prayer, the devil knows we go to fetch strength against him, and therefore he opposes us all he can.”

But, clearly, it isn't only because of the devil's wiles that we find such difficulty in prayer. There is something inside of us still, something powerful and deeply rooted that renders us indisposed to prayer. We have an aversion to it that is contrary to all that we know to be true, even to the deepest and purest desires of our lives. The finest Christians have always admitted this.

“Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.” *Lloyd Jones*

“There is nothing that we are so bad at all our days as prayer.” *Alexander Whyte*

“I find in my own case an unaccountable backwardness to pray. I can read, I can write, I can converse with a ready will, but secret prayer is far more spiritual than any of these. And the more spiritual a duty is the more my carnal heart is apt to start away from it.” *John Newton*

“There are times in my life when I would rather die than pray.” *Thomas Shepard*

Richard Hooker, the celebrated “judicious Hooker,” the 16th century Anglican divine, in his immortal sermon on justification by faith uses the misery of the prayer life of Christians as the crowning argument against the Roman Catholic idea that justification means actually becoming righteous in heart and behavior. If so, Hooker argues, “why do justified people do so poorly at

holy living?” And he uses prayer as his chief illustration of that fact.

“Let the holiest and best thing we do be considered. We are never better affected unto God than when we pray; yet when we pray, how are our affections many times distracted! How little reverence do we shew to the grand majesty of that God, unto whom we speak! How little remorse of our own miseries! How little taste of that sweet influence of his tender mercy do we feel! Are we not as unwilling many times to begin, and as glad to make an end, as if God in saying ‘Call upon me,’ had set us a very burdensome task?” [Works, vol. 2, 302 col. 1]

So, in the Christian faith and life you have this terrible tension between the greatness of prayer and our tendency to despise it; the importance of our praying and our inclination to ignore it.

No wonder Lloyd Jones should say that “The ultimate test of the Christian life is the amount of time we give to prayer.” That is to say, prayer is the ultimate test because it is in the Bible the grand method of Christian living and of true godliness and yet, we are averse to it, so the faithful Christian is the one who overcomes that aversion, in the strength of the Lord, and lives the Christian life as it must be lived, as a walking and talking with God.

So, we have reason enough to care deeply about how we pray and how often and how long and for what and in what manner we pray to God. Let us then pray that the Lord will use this study to convict and convince us all that true biblical prayer is the essential foundation of the Christian life *and*, together with obedience, the method of living that life.

Let me conclude this introduction to our series on prayer with the “seven encouragements to prayer” that are found in John Bradford’s “Meditation on Prayer [1562].” [The English martyr].

1. Our need (do you not have need of what God alone can give you? do not your children, your loved ones, your church, your friends, your country?) Hebrews 4:16: “. . . grace to help in time of need.”
2. God’s commandments. Pray without ceasing. Pray and do not give up. Etc. In the keeping of God’s commandments there is a great reward!

3. God's goodness. If the mercy of the Lord is over all his works, if he provides for the lilies and the birds, will he not richly supply the needs of those who call upon him, those for whom he did not spare his own Son...?
4. The promise of God. How many and how extraordinary the promises are that God has made to prayer. Ask and you will receive. Whatever you ask in my name it shall be given to you. Call upon me and I will answer and show you great and mighty things that you know not. If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. And on and on.
5. Examples of how God was rich toward those who called upon him. How many examples there are in the Bible (Abraham; Moses; Hannah; David; Jeremiah; Paul; etc.) and how many since.
6. The benefits that prayer has brought them in the past. Any Christian who has lived the Christian life for any length of time knows the power and virtue and blessing and reality of prayer. His faithfulness to your prayers before is a powerful reason to come confidently to him again.
7. The prayers of Scripture themselves which show them true prayer and the right way of prayer, and encourage them by this demonstration of how right and good and necessary such praying is for anyone who believes to be true what a Christian does.