

# Chapter 21

## February 23, 1997

We come now to the end of our series of studies in the Bible's doctrine and practice of prayer. We could, of course, go on and on, so much does Holy Scripture have to say about this centerpiece of the Christian life, but an end must be made somewhere. We have defined prayer, in the words of John Knox, as "earnest and familiar talking with God." We have discussed both its difficulty and its power and efficacy. We have discussed the different kinds of prayer, or the different parts of prayer: adoration/thanksgiving; confession; and petition. We have discussed the qualifications of prayer, the characteristics of prayer that is pleasing to God and avails with him, such things as: prayer being sincere, in the name of Christ, in the Spirit, according to God's will, with right motives, and offered in faith. We studied the Lord's Prayer as a model prayer. We considered the various types of prayer: deliberate prayers (and the various types of those) and arrow prayers. We considered the special importance characteristics and requirements first of corporate prayer and then of private prayer. We discussed two "accompaniments" of prayer that Scripture lays particular stress on: the posture of the body when we are at prayer and fasting as an intensifier of prayer. Last week we considered separately the question of unanswered prayer. And, tonight, we conclude with one final study laying stress, once more — for we have stressed this repeatedly throughout this series of studies — on the importance of the sincerest engagement of our souls in the work and the life and the practice of prayer.

Tonight, I want to put it this way: The Word of God commends *passion* to us, as the special character of sincere evangelical prayer. As Alexander Whyte put it:

“The more passionateness any man puts into his prayer, the more praise the Bible gives to that man.” [Lord Teach us to Pray, p. 73.]

I have that quote in the margin of my Bible next to Psalm 6:8, which reads, “Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.”

And by that same text, which emphasizes so nobly and so beautifully the passion of true prayer, the power of emotion in our prayer, the power of prayer accompanied with tears, I have citations from many other experts in the life of godliness and the relationship between God and the soul.

Here is:

Augustine: “We do not come to God upon our feet, but upon our affections.”

Calvin: “Tears and prayers are our weapons.”

St. Teresa: “Tears gain everything.”

Rutherford: “Tears have a tongue, and grammar, and language, that our Father knoweth. Babes have no prayers for the breast, but weeping; the mother can read hunger in weeping.” “Words are but the body, the garment, the outside of prayer; sighs are nearer the heart-work.” [Trial and Triumph, pp. 66-69]

And so on.

Many prayers in the Psalter are such prayers of the deepest feelings and with tears. Many of the psalms of complaint, in which the author of the psalm and the prayer is so bold as to state his argument to God and to wonder why God has not acted on his behalf are prayers of such deep feeling.

And, in the case of those many matters that we must bring to God concerning which we know we ought to be weeping, which prayers ought to be accompanied by tears, but we have no tears, no adequate depth of feeling,

well, we have Matthew Henry, in his Commentary on Psalm 137, speaking of “deliberate tears.” That is, passion that is more the exercise of the will than of the emotions, a passion that is offered to God by force of conviction and effort rather than naturally from pent-up feeling.

1. We have, for example, Jeremiah praying in 9:1 “Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears. I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.” In other words, he knows he needs more passion and prays for it, and the very asking adds passion, wonderful passion to his prayer.
2. Or, Lamentations 2:18-19, where God’s people are called upon to “let your tears flow like a river” and “pour out your heart like water,” which we take to be a command to put as much passion into prayer as possible, as befits the situation and, if the tears do not come naturally, the eye remains dry, then at least speak the tears, the sorrow, the longing and confess that you know there ought to be tears along with your words and that the lack of them is only the measure of the hardness of your heart, for which you have reason to pray with still greater passion.

Augustine wrote: “Man can say nothing of what he is incapable of feeling, but he can feel what he is incapable of putting into words.” Now, in the case of passion in prayer, that surely means that a man may have more passion in his heart than he can express in his words, his emotions can be profounder than his capacity to express them. Then tears must speak for themselves, or dancing for joy. But, it can also mean, I think, that a person can sense very clearly *what he ought to feel* and so be able to give expression in words to that feeling he does not actually have as an emotion.

In any case, Whyte is right in saying that the Bible loves to draw attention to passionate prayer. Think of how supremely this passion features in some of the Bible’s choice examples of prevailing prayer and model praying.

1. Jacob wrestling with the Lord we have already considered. But what a picture of ardor and passion: the refusal to let God go until he had given the blessing Jacob sought.
2. Hannah for a son (1 Samuel 1:13-14): She prayed so ardently, so completely forgot herself in the desperation of her heart — her lips were

moving though her voice was not heard — that Eli thought she was drunk and rebuked her for carrying on so in the temple. Remember Paul in Ephesians 5:18? “Do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.” A striking juxtaposition and comparison surely! There is a passion in our pursuit of Christ and godliness that can be likened to a state of inebriation!

3. Elijah’s prayer that it would not rain. In James 5:17 the NIV renders the Hebrew idiom faithfully but rather colorlessly: “Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain. . .” Literally it reads, “Elijah prayed in his prayer. . .” The idiom appears a number of times in the NT: Jesus desired with desire to eat the Passover with his disciples (Luke 22:15); the friend rejoices with joy when he hears the voice of the bridegroom (John 3:29), etc. In each case the reduplication has an intensive force: he really desired, he really rejoiced, and, here, Elijah *really* prayed! He prayed hard! And the emphasis in James’ words falls upon this point of how hard he prayed.
4. And, then, chief among all of these exemplars of passionate prayer, our Savior himself, who dropped sweat like great drops of blood as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Now, all of this raises a question. To what extent can this goal be realized in the church’s prayer? Take, for example, the prayer of confession we pray together in the church on the Lord’s Day morning, reading it, as we do, from a text printed in the Order of Service.

Here is Samuel Rutherford saying some hard things about written prayers in connection with this biblical emphasis on passion in prayer.

“There be so many other things that are a pouring out of the soul in prayer; as groaning, sighing, looking up to heaven, breathing, weeping; that it cannot be imagined, how far short printed and read prayers come of vehement praying; for you cannot put sighs, groans, tears, breathing, and such heart-messengers down in a printed book; nor can paper and ink lay your heart, in all its sweet affections, out before God. The service book then must be toothless and spiritless talk.” [Trial and Triumph, p. 73]

Now, that remark needs to be taken in its historical context, in which the King and government were attempting to impose upon Presbyterian Scotland a form of worship they did not believe in and in which they could themselves see a great many lifeless clergymen lifelessly read a service from a book and so produce multitudes of lifeless church members thereby. What he might say of the use of such written prayers in another context we cannot know.

But, much as it pains me to part company with Samuel Rutherford on anything, clearly this argument cannot be sustained.

1. We have already in a previous study made the obvious point that corporate and private prayer have different rules and that one of the chief purposes of private prayer, prayer that is prayed completely alone before God *is precisely that unfettered emotion, feeling, thoughts, cares may be expressed to God*. Such could not and should not be done in the presence of others. So, to say that written prayers will not normally express the same depth of emotion in a congregation that private prayer may express in an individual is to acknowledge both what is obvious and intentional.
2. That is demonstrated beyond doubt in the Psalms themselves, which, of course, are nothing other than written prayers. Now, Psalm 51, for example, was no doubt prayed with tears and gall when it was first the utterance of David's heart upon his repentance, but by the time it was numbered with the psalms of the Second Book of the Psalter, it was entitled "For the Director of Music" and had become a prayer for the use of the congregation. No one can pray that prayer in the way in which David first prayed it. But, like many other such prayers in the Psalms, it also can serve the collective expression of the church. With less emotion, to be sure, but with honesty and accuracy saying what ought to be said to God. Indeed, it is our task to put as much emotion, much feeling into our corporate prayers without distracting others. This is the way the Scripture has taught us to pray together as a church. It can hardly be a mistake to continue to do so today! Surely, however, there is likewise a place for the deeper passions of private prayer.

One of the ways, indeed, throughout the history of the church, that this passion in prayer was taught and commended to the godly was to

encourage them to pray through the psalms and so learn what a true prayer sounded like, what depth of feeling it conveyed. Athanasius, already in the 4th century, tells us how Egyptian Christians prayed the psalms. Later the monks of both the Eastern and Western churches prayed through the entire psalter week by week. The heart of the famous “Rule of St. Benedict” was a system for praying through the psalms in a single week. The Reformers picked up this practice and made it the practice of their churches as well, installing the psalms as a central part of the church’s worship and so also an education in prayer. One cannot pray the psalms with an honest heart, of course, without learning the place of feeling, passion, and earnestness in all right praying.

Everything we have so far said, comes finally to this point: we must pray, and pray without ceasing, but we must be sure our prayers are *really prayed*, earnestly, sincerely, passionately prayed. Daniel did not open his windows and kneel down toward Jerusalem three times a day because he thought God could hear him better if he pointed himself toward the ruins of the temple. He did that for himself, it was a way of bringing his own heart to flame. We must do such things ourselves, so great is the need and so difficult the work! We should not come with half a mind and heart before God. Concerning too many of our prayers it might well be said, “Try that on the governor!” Let us commit ourselves to prayer, to the life of prayer, but let us be sure that when we pray, we really pray, we pray with our heart and soul and mind and not our mouth only!

You know Cowper’s great hymn and poem on prayer:

What various hindrances we meet  
In coming to the mercy seat!  
Yet who, that knows the power of prayer,  
But wishes to be often there!

Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw,  
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw,  
Gives exercise to faith and love,  
Brings every blessing from above.

Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;

Prayer makes the Christian's armour bright;  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.

While Moses stood with arms spread wide,  
Success was found on Israel's side;  
But when, through weariness, they failed,  
That moment Amalek prevailed.

Have you no words, Ah! think again!  
Words flow apace when you complain  
And fill your fellow-creature's ear  
With the sad tale of all your care.

Were half the breath, thus vainly spent  
To heaven in supplication sent,  
Your cheerful song would oftener be,  
"Hear what the Lord has done for me!"

I finish now with this peroration from a sermon on prayer of Alexander Whyte  
[James Fraser of Brea, p. 86]:

"But enough, and more than enough, for one Sabbath evening. Only begin to pray as you will wish you had begun when you are on your last bed, and have not all your life on earth learned aright to pray. Pray without ceasing, while the way is still open to the mercy-seat. Hitherto you have asked nothing. Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you; even the whole treasure-house of God. For all things that are really worth asking for are open to him who lives a life of prayer."