

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Philosophy of Prayer.

“CONTINUING instant in prayer,” says the Apostle, but do not the words sound like a physical impossibility, if not a contradiction? Is there not something highly problematical if not almost paradoxical in making such a claim? Are not some of these Pauline precepts archaic and antiquated, very well adapted for primitive usage, but not suited for days like these? How can busy people with their multiplex duties of modern life in these tremendous war-times, observe such a precept? It might be possible in the Christian life of the first century, but will it work to-day? Under certain conditions such difficulties might appeal to one’s sympathy as both natural and reasonable, but before we dismiss the *seeming impossible* let us be fair and ask as to the *character* of the man who gave this command or what is the *nature* of the claim he makes? His character—and here lies the secret—gives extraordinary point and potency to his words, for he is not the sort of man to ask from others what he is not prepared to do himself. His life was positively one of the busiest ever lived, and his loyalty to Christ and duty unquestioned. St. Paul was no ancient ascetic or mediaeval monk fleeing from city to cloister to spend his days in isolation and introspection. Can we think of a man who crowded so much into the compass of his earthly life? What of his ceaseless activity and astounding endurance as he journeyed in perils by land and sea? Watch his burning enthusiasm for the souls of men, as from city to city and continent to continent he sped in the cause of Christ. Read his Epistles—that Divine Library—which have largely moulded and fashioned the theological ideas and ideals of the Christian world. Above all try and recollect his tender and constant love and care for all the Churches, manifested in a life of perfect surrender to God and of living sacrifice for mankind. *This* was the man who calls upon us to be *instant in prayer*—he was the man who not only preached but *prayed*, and prayer to him was the *first and greater half* of his life and work. Are we prepared to hear him: for he has a *right to be heard*? Now, in dealing with this question we shall try and discover some of the *main arteries* which circulate from the very heart of the prayer-life.

I. IS IT A NATURAL THING TO PRAY ?

Of all manly instincts there is none more natural and universal than the desire to pray. Prayer rises from the lips of the little child fresh lisping the Saviour's Name, and from the dying whispers of old age, with no longer strength to pronounce it. Among peoples renowned and obscure, civilized and otherwise, you meet with the prayer instinct. A well known writer likens the praying soul to the breathing of the body. In breathing we throw off the noxious gases from the body and draw in the fresh invigorating air to strengthen us. Might not this figuratively explain *something* (at least) of what is taking place in the act of prayer and worship? In our contact with the world we catch so much corrosive matter from things *materialistic* which endangers the condition and sensitiveness of the soul. So we need to be continually in touch with the prayer-atmosphere where the Blessed Agency of the Spirit holds correspondence with both worlds. By happy intercourse and sure conveyance He takes up the necessities of the one, and brings down the blessings of the other. Who has not *felt the joy and inspiration* which thrilled and filled the soul as he came down from the Mount of God? Prayer is not only the deeply *spiritual* thing but it is also the most *manly* thing, for the praying man recognizes his highest natural instinct and just as the birds, since they have wings, require the air in which to fly, so man with an immortal soul needs the atmosphere of prayer. In the truest sense the man who prays, who attends the "Means of Grace," who partakes Communion with his Lord, is the real man, but the undeveloped—the incomplete—the *unnatural* man is the *man who never prays*.

You may have stood by the sea-shore and watched a diver at his work, and you may have noticed the tube with which he connects himself with the upper air, while he pursues his quest below. By means of this he is kept steady amid the dangerous tidal currents in the sea beneath. In our Christian life and work we are—like that diver—constantly surrounded by deadly influences and dangerous currents, which would quickly carry us off our feet, but in the prayer-atmosphere we can receive strength and steadiness from the upper world.

The other day I was reading how *President Lincoln* in dark and difficult times met his great and solemn responsibilities. He has left us this beautiful testimony. "*I have been driven many times*

to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all around me seemed insufficient for the day."

Lincoln was one of the most *manly* men who have ever lived. His days were marked with big and burning questions as he moulded and unified the great American nation whose sons are fighting to-day for Lincoln's principles—*which are marching on*—where did he discover those great principles of freedom and right, and who gave him the right direction in the hour of national need? Lincoln tells us that "*his own wisdom and that of all around him were insufficient for the day.*" Lincoln's secret is to be found in the prayer atmosphere: for the man who is instant in prayer will see visions of God.

What is the meaning of prayer? In defining an answer let us remember that *petition is really only one province in prayer's vast Empire.* Prayer is really not the synonym of Petition: it is the soul speaking to God, whatever the language or the subject may be. Prayer may be confession of sin: or adoration and ascription, or thanksgiving or consecration. Indeed a man may pray who asks nothing from God; but who daily lives in the conscious presence of the Most High.

Prayer (says St. Basil) "should be the *salt* which is to salt everything besides"—so that the believer's life should be one great connected chain of prayer. There is a striking example of this in St. Augustine's great work—the *Confessions*—which is really a prayer from beginning to end. The book tells the writer's history and unfolds his beliefs, but unconsciously it shows that the *great thinker* did all his work in the form of intercourse with God. Now, *there exist to-day two opposite misconceptions concerning the position and personality of God in prayer.* They regard Him either in the capacity of a huge Charity Organization Society giving alms to all who come, or on the other hand not being sufficient to meet all their demands. Both are essentially and completely wrong. God's business in prayer is *not* that of Almoner and He is always equal to His responsibilities and His supply is always in advance of our needs. In amazing selfishness men and nations forget God until one day the crisis comes, and suddenly it occurs to them that they may possibly find some help in Him. In this respect they treat the Divine Being as some would treat their native land, when in

the hour of national danger they refuse to hear their country's call. The fight for right and freedom does not concern them and they accept no responsibility. Let their person or property be threatened by the enemy and these people are the very first to cry aloud for *protection*. In the same manner, men in extreme circumstances make their selfish demand on God. Prayer is not only a religious exercise at stated times but rather a *process* woven into Christian character extending throughout the whole domain of life. Like a golden thread it may sometimes disappear beneath the common surface, but it is there all the same. As a great bolt driven through the structure of some building, keeping it fitly joined together, so prayer gives strength and harmony to the building of life. Do we know this meaning of prayer and have we proved the vital fact that we are made for intercourse with God? Henry Drummond said that "even ten minutes spent every day in Christ's society would make the whole life different." If *ten* minutes make a real difference what about the golden *hours* lost? Tennyson pleads—

"Speak to Him, for spirit with spirit can meet,
Nearer is He than breathing, nearer than hands and feet."

II. IS IT REASONABLE TO PRAY?

Liddon beautifully said, "By prayer man detaches himself from the embarrassments of sense and ascends to the *true level of his destiny*." Now, if we believe in God at all, we must want to talk with Him. If we are in sympathy with Him it will be shown in intercourse. Prayer is that *intercourse*, and just as our senses put us into contact with *visible* things, so does *faith* in the things *invisible* and *prayer is the voice of faith*. Surely if any one knows the reasonableness of prayer Our Lord Jesus Christ does, for He talked of what He knew and showed us what He had seen. In nothing was His *consciousness* more fully expressed than in prayer, for this was the natural atmosphere of His life.

In the great pressure of work when men were coming and going He felt the greater need of prayer. He would rise long before day and pray in the faint morning light, and when the sunset came and "evening shuts" He loved still to pray. If any one ever knew how to release the power of God and realize the Divine blessing Jesus did, and He has not only given us His authority but *com-*

manded us to pray. *We may not be able to explain the principles or understand the conditions of how He answers prayer*, but it is enough that *He* knows. Let me illustrate. The King goes down to a midland city to open a hospital and the Mayor puts into the royal hand a little lock and key, and at his bidding the King turns the key and the doors fly open. Now the King did not *wait to understand* about the mechanical contrivance of the city engineer before he turned the key. He simply obeyed the Mayor and it was done. Jesus Christ has bidden us pray, "Ask and ye shall have: seek and ye shall find: knock—(yes—keep on knocking)—and it shall be opened unto you." Are we prepared to obey Him? Is it reasonable or not?

Does God answer our Prayers? The fact is there never was a prayer offered under right conditions which will pass unanswered. Let us gather from life and experience some of the ways in which God answers prayer. Sometimes God says *wait*, for prayer is a serious business, and in matters of great moment we must be prepared to wait. There are great questions concerning the Church and the Kingdom about which Christians of the centuries have prayed and God's time has not yet come, but we know that the answer will one day be given. Remember God's *delay* does not mean *denial*, there is a reason for it, perhaps we were not ready, or had the answer come we might not have used it for His glory. For four years we have prayed for victory, and *God said wait*, and then the fourth of August, and now the *tide of full and final victory*. Depend upon it there was a great, an Omniscient reason why victory did not come before. I know a praying mother whose two sons (all she had) were killed in this war. No mother could be more devoted to her boys, and no sons could be more proud of their mother. *How* did God answer her prayers? She will tell you. "I prayed day and night unceasingly that God *would save* my boys. If God sees it good to take them home, and keep them *safe* for me, I believe God knows *best*. His will be done." There are few of us who have reached this mountain top where that praying mother is wrapped round with the vision of "God's perfect wisdom: perfect love working for the best."

In my former parish I knew an engine driver on the Midland Railway system, who, since his conversion forty years ago, never placed his foot on the engine board without *first committing his*

train to God. He never had an accident. Was this a coincidence or did God answer his prayer? We forget how much our safety depends upon the character of the man who drives the engine.

Last summer at a certain point of the British front the enemy had planned a great "break through." Our "intelligence" knew of it and we waited wondering why it did not come. In turn the British stormed the enemy trenches, scored a *victory* with many prisoners, who revealed the secret of the enemy's failure to attack. It appears that the *enemy were convinced they saw "an exceeding great army" of reserves behind the British lines, when in fact we had no such reserves and were numerically much weaker than they.* The person who related the incident added that there *were strange atmospheric conditions over the British lines that morning and there had been much prayer.* Had prayer anything to do with this atmospheric phenomena which misled and illusioned the enemy? Was it answered prayer?

Emerson has said that the *supreme lesson of life is learning what the centuries say against the hours.* Now man is all for immediate results, God for ultimate results, for He is building for the ages. God answers prayer but *not always at our time or in our way.* He looks at things from the Eternal standpoint and frequently the withholding of the answer is an evidence of our ignorance but of His wisdom and Omniscience. Sometimes, too, *God withholds the form of our petition that He may grant the desire of our prayer.* You will recall how Monica, the sainted mother of Augustine, prayed with God to keep her son from sailing for Italy. She was longing for his conversion but felt that it could not be effected apart from her. The form of her prayer was not answered and Augustine sailed for Italy where he met the great preacher St. Ambrose, who brought him to Christ. He adds that *the form of his mother's petition was denied, but the substance of her prayer was granted.* Depend upon it there are no accidents with God, for as Tennyson puts it "nothing in this world walks with aimless feet."

The *delay* in answered prayer is frequently due to some fault of our own. *Familiarity*, for instance, may be a hindrance. In the vestibule of St. Peter's, Rome, I have seen a door walled up and marked with a Cross which is opened but four times in a century. Most of those who pass through that door have not done so before and will

not do so again. Suppose our access to the Throne of Grace were limited like that! Suppose we could only go once in a year! I think we should be more intense and earnest in our prayers. The fact is most of us are so busy with our own concerns that we think nothing of God's answer. We are so busy hammering at the building of our life that the Great Architect cannot discuss His plans with us. When the Spirit stands at the door there is so much *discussion* within that we do not hear. Savanarola remarks how in his day, "The Saints were so busy talking to God that they could not hearken to Him." Does not our very familiarity lessen our sense of God's presence in the fact of prayer?

Or maybe our prayers are spoilt by our own shadow of self or sin. Raphael used to wear a candle in his pasteboard cap so that while he painted his shadow could not spoil his work. Have we no need to learn this lesson on prayer? Are we seeking great things for self, perhaps the good of party and not that of principle, of favour with men and not fidelity to God? Where is our faith, our expectancy in prayer? You will remember how Tennyson pictures faith in prayer to the opening of the sluices between the ocean and our little channels, when the great sea gathers itself together and flows in at full tide. Let us clear out the channels and get ready for the inflow. God may be waiting for us until we are ready. He has something to give us, something to say to us, something to do through us. He cannot do it now, for He is hampered and hindered until the channels are clear. Let faith lift up the sluices and we shall find God's great love and power flow in at full tide.

III. IS IT SCIENTIFIC TO PRAY?

Some people object to pray on the ground that nature's laws are fixed and unalterable and things remain unchanged whether we pray or not. Now what are natural laws? They are merely the observed uniformities of nature as known to us. It may be possible however that there are many natural laws still undiscovered and still unknown. I have a friend whose friendship is one of the valued gifts of my life. He happens to be a man of science, who in his special study easily finds a place in the first rank of living scientists; his faith in Christ is that of a little child. He told me some time ago that the leading scientists have only crossed the borderland—

and entered the vast unexplored territory which is waiting to reveal its scientific secrets. In this great unexplored remainder of scientific knowledge it is possible that many present day scientific conclusions may one day find revision and readjustment—if not entirely superseded—and many unknown natural laws may be discovered. I venture to think the Christian experience of answered prayer does not violate the laws of nature. Men every day are modifying the natural phenomena. They adjust one to or against another and in this way they realize results which nature could not give alone. Your physician does this by introducing a new medicine into your system and bringing about a cure. The engineer does it by controlling or reversing steam and using the air-brake to avoid a train disaster. The schoolboy does this in the cricket field when he arrests the ball before it falls to the ground and thus modifies the well known law of gravitation. And yet none of these violate any natural laws although they considerably modify and modulate them. But if man in his limited capacity can modify any of nature's laws, why should we deny this power to the Omnipotent God, Who has a thousand keys to open a thousand doors—to Whom all things are possible—and Who may call into action some higher laws still unknown to the finite reason of man!

But quite apart from any suspension or infraction of natural law God may answer many of our prayers by exerting His influence on our own wills or on the wills of others and thus bring about the desired result. But some may say if it be God's function and nature to do all this why should we pray at all? Does it not offend the Divine omniscience by supposing He requires information. In nowise, for in prayer we express our utter need, not for God's instruction but for our own. In this very act we learn our humble dependence on God and we have entered on our great education of getting to know Him. In prayer we get knowledge, trust, love, and of our own free will we enter into service and co-operation with Him. The first mark of a man's life in its new relation to God is—"Behold he prayeth" (Acts ix. 11). What a strange family (says an old writer) it would be, where the parents' knowledge put a fetter on the children's tongues and put back their trusting into a cold and cheerless silence. Just because life is a discipline, a probation, an education, the school-house for eternity, we must needs pray. God knows we need to be prepared and proved by persistent prayer,

for it is the power of prayer which "cleanses the house, opens the windows, hangs the pictures, sets the table, unlocks the door." Then God says, "The house is *now* ready. I will come in."

IV. IS IT POSSIBLE TO PRAY ALWAYS?

There is no exaggeration nor impossibility about this, for prayer is an atmosphere rather than an act, it is a condition of soul rather than petition in speech. The difficulty is simplified when we understand it as the continual desire of the soul after God. You may have your special times of prayers, and your seasons of meditations, but the Christian life must not be confined to these. Some one has defined prayer as "*a wish referred to God.*" It is a helpful thought. To acquire the habit of referring each wish (which so quickly comes and goes) to God for His help to frustrate or further it. This would enable us to be always in the condition of prayer. This constant atmosphere of prayer changes life and transfigures circumstances. We have seen it lived out in all its ennobling influences in the life of the missionary, the soldier, the merchant, when they wist not that they reflected the Divine glory. *Scientists* tell us that the atmosphere in which we live is in reality a strange covering of some 7,000 miles diameter wrapped around the world. In the earth's daily motion it prevents friction and at the same time catches the falling meteors, turning them into dust and so making human life possible. I know of no better illustration of the prayer-life atmosphere. The life daily lived in touch with God is kept safe in the Divine atmosphere of His love and power.

Whatever life-string may be touched by the Master's hand, whether bass or treble, or high or low the note, it will be found in *tune with* the heart of God. The soul will still be *praying*, when it is unconscious that it prays. May we live in this atmosphere and we shall learn the secret how to smoothen and sweeten life's troubles and sorrows. Life is no more possible without the prayer atmosphere, than poetry without language, and music without tone. There was a great truth in Tennyson's words—"Our wills are ours we know not how. Our wills are ours to make them Thine." May God write on our remembrance the words of the good and wise *Hooker*. "Prayer is our chief work and by means of it we do all the rest."

J. GLASS.