

# *The Privilege and Power of Prayer*

by Dr. Manford George Gutzke

## **The Reality of Prayer**

*Pray without ceasing.* This was the admonition of the Apostle Paul to the people in Thessalonica: "Pray without ceasing."

I feel very humble in talking about something that I wish were much more developed in my own experience. However, we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servant for Christ's sake. So if I tell you of some things that I wish I had more of for myself, you'll understand.

Perhaps no other exercise of the soul is so generally and universally commended by all men.

On one occasion early in my ministry I was in the city of Winnipeg, Canada and we were sharing in an all day prayer meeting. We began at six o'clock in the morning and we had one congregation after another who would take an hour apiece. It was my privilege that day to stay from beginning to end. Our own congregation closed the last one, between nine and ten that night. Now, all denominations were represented. Every single preacher who spoke believed in prayer. And every single congregation that took part believed in prayer.

Turn to the Bible, look at the scriptural record of the lives of godly men, you'll find them to be men of prayer. Enoch walked with God, and that's what we mean by prayer. If I mention Abraham you know he was a praying man. Jacob was a man who won a great victory in prayer. When you come to Moses you find, of course, a man of prayer; Joshua, Samuel, Samson, men of prayer. Every one of the judges was a man of prayer. David, Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, all men of prayer. When you come into the Prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel — every one of these were praying men.

Move into the New Testament you think of the Lord Himself; but think of the apostles and others in the early church and you'll find praying marked the lives of these people. Prayer is encouraged by the very Word of God, in verse after verse. "All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." "Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint." "I will therefore that men pray everywhere." "Call upon me and I will answer thee, saith the Lord."

Then there is the very example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If ever there was a man who could have made the claim that in himself he was able and strong enough to live without help — if any person could live because he was good, or live because he was strong — you'd certainly think of Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was without sin. And yet, there were times He spent all night in prayer. He prayed in front of people and in full view of other folks. He lifted His face up toward heaven and prayed to His Father which is in heaven. He set the example of praying.

In the book of the Acts, remember how the apostles said that they would appoint seven deacons to take care of the practical matter of distributing food. And then they used this sentence: "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." And so in Christian experience, if you know of any person that you look upon as a real Christian, you will know that he prays.

Now let me say something to you about the common forms of prayer.

Consider your daily returning of thanks at your meals. Anybody who wants to honor God finds it to be a perfectly proper thing to return thanks when they're about to eat; and if you will do that, you'll see immediately that here is an opportunity three times a day for talking to the Lord . . . with thanksgiving.

Plan to do it at least that often. And if you'll make it a practice you'll find you can do it anytime, every time. Even if you're just having lunch, or a snack — especially in the presence of other people — you should have fellowship with the Lord. You've asked Him to give you this day your daily bread . . . now give Him your thanks for every morsel.

The same is true with reference to your personal habits. Some people pray in the morning when they wake up. Other people will pray when they retire at night. Frankly, it's a wonderful thing to open the day *and* to close the day by speaking to the Lord. I think it would be a wonderful thing if a person had a definite prayer time as a practice and a rule in his life.

You may wonder, what will I pray about? The things you carry on your heart. If you have burdens, problems, turn them over to the Lord. Of course, you have loved ones for whom you should pray. This is part of what we mean by praying.

If our loved ones are away from home, we can remember them especially in prayer. Or if someone is going to the doctor and we have reason to fear, we will pray. In time of fear we will normally turn to the Lord in prayer. If there is something we want very much — for ourselves or for others — we can join with others in praying that these things will come to pass.

When we're in trouble and we're faced with distress, we turn to God, yielding ourselves to Him. And when we're downhearted or feeling badly, it's not an unusual thing for us to turn to God in prayer. So also with a crisis; some big decision has to be made, or if there's uncertainty involved, we turn to God in our helplessness and we'll pray to Him.

But, of course, this is not really enough. If we pray in just the way I have indicated to you, our praying will tend to dry up, as it has for many, many people. The prayer that is made in time of distress of urgency and emergency — you will find yourself tending to pray less and less. That's because we feel we've got to do a certain amount of praying in order to get the blessing of God.

Sometimes this kind of praying continues as long as something hurts. Sometimes it's a sort of desperation. I'm in trouble so bad I've got to turn somewhere and so I turn to God and I pray to Him in desperation.

It's an amazing thing that God is so meek and so humble that when we come to Him: even for any of these oblique reasons, He apparently is ready to hear. If our hearts are right, if we really do believe in Him, the Lord Jesus assures us that Almighty God will not turn away His ear from us.

Perhaps you're wondering why it is you don't pray more than you do. I think there are several reasons. The first one I am going to put down is *ignorance*. A good many people have an idea that, somehow or other, it's up to them to carry their own load. I'm sure a good many people feel that they are doing God a favor if they just go and do the best they can and don't bother Him. He is infinitely able and infinitely powerful and He is waiting for us to turn to Him.

The next reason I would give for lack of prayer is *indifference*. I am sorry to say it but there are those of us who do not care beyond the self. We'll do everything we humanly can and feel that's all there is. They are actually indifferent to the possibility of what God might do. If the man involved or the woman involved will do everything he or she can and if I will do everything I can, then when we've all done our best that's all we feel we can do. If that is our attitude, then, of course, we will not pray.

Another reason for lack of prayer is *indolence*. I mean just downright being lazy. I tell you right now that for some of us it's too much bother to pray. Let's admit it. It makes us tired and we don't pray because we just don't want to be bothered by our own responsibility.

Some of us don't pray because of *irresponsibility*. We actually feel that the matter that's in question, the problem in which we're involved, is not on our shoulders. It's somebody else's problem and they can

take care of it, and for that reason we leave it alone.

With some of us, the reason that we don't pray more is *indwelling sin*. What I mean is that if I am living in a sinful way it hurts too much to pray. For me to pray and come to God in prayer actually makes me feel uncomfortable. I can just get by better if I don't pray. And so, because of indwelling sin, we may fail to pray.

With others of us it is a matter of *impatience*. The reason we don't pray is that it takes too long. It takes too long to pray — and it takes too long for the answer. And so, we don't pray because we're not willing to wait.

The last reason for our deficient prayer life is *irreligious intimacies*. What I mean by that is the company we keep. We have companions who are not praying people and so we don't pray. We read books that don't bring out prayer. We share thoughts and conversations with people and we don't talk about prayer. We don't talk about answers to prayer. The people we're with just are not praying people, and when the people we are with aren't praying people it turns out that we don't pray either.

Now, all of these reasons are forms of unbelief. We don't think He is able to help us in any real way. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, let us remember the words of the Apostle Peter who told us to cast "all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

## **Unanswered Prayer**

Have you ever been troubled in your own heart because someone has claimed there has been no answer to their prayers? Most *unanswered prayer* is actually *unheard prayer*!

Some years ago, when I was pastor of a church in Dallas, Texas, I had preached a series of sermons on prayer, and when I was announcing the particular sermon of the morning I also announced that the following Sunday I would preach a sermon on "Unanswered Prayer." That afternoon a lady telephoned to say that her high school daughter had been greatly disturbed when she heard that announcement. The young girl had supposed there was no such thing as unanswered prayer, and this woman told me I should be careful what I announced in public, because these children would get wrong ideas.

As a result of this telephone conversation, I made a very close study on the matter of prayer that following week, going all through the Bible. I found out to my amazement that there is very little *unanswered* prayer in the Bible. But what I did find out was that there is much said about *unheard* prayer. Many times, and in different ways, the Lord lets it be known that He will not hear us when we pray. There are some instances of unanswered prayer.

Let us think together concerning the prayer that is not heard in the presence of God.

There are two general conditions when this is true. First, when the heart of the person praying is not right with God; and second, when the heart of the person who is praying is not right with man. In either case sin is the cause, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). If I am thinking in terms of doing wrong, of walking in a way that the Lord does not want me to walk, it will not do any good to pray to Him about where I am going. If I have already made up my mind where I am going, God will not stop me. If I regard iniquity in my heart, if I look with favor upon the thing that is wrong and that is really what I prefer, the Lord will not hear me!

There are other very specific instances of this, consider a person who refuses to hear or heed God's Word. In the Old Testament, we read about certain persons who would not listen to the prophets as they preached and as the Word of God was spoken. To such people God says "Because they would not hear when I sent prophets to them and they would not listen to the Word of God, neither will I hear

when they call unto me." There is no question about it: if you will not listen to God, God will not listen to you!

Insincerity also prevents our prayers from reaching God. If our devotion to God and our worship of Him is insincere, He cannot answer. Isaiah, for example, said about the people in his day that with their lips they praised God but their hearts were far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). God's eyes run to and fro through the whole earth (2 Chron. 16:9), and if a man is insincere, is dishonest in his personal dealings with the Lord, how can he expect that God is going to hear him when he prays? Frequently, people like that will come to you and will ask you to pray for them.

When asked thus to pray, you may not recognize that such lack of sincerity is present and you may pray earnestly. If no answer comes, you may wonder why. But in all probability you will find that the individual making the request was harboring ideas contrary to the known will of God. In His gracious love, He may give you a further opportunity to deal with such a man. But if a man or woman lightly makes a request for prayer, and does not really care, there is no ground on which to approach God, nor expect a reply.

In James 1:7, 8 we read: "A double minded man is unstable in all his ways," and are warned "Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord."

What is a "double minded man"? A man who is trying to serve two masters, talking today about serving God, and tomorrow playing with the things of the world, unable to make a decision about his own relation to God or to the world. Such a person, two-faced in his attitudes, cannot expect God to answer any prayer but one, the simple prayer of the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

Another reason for silence on God's part is the prayer of an unrepentant man. Isaiah brings this to our attention with great clarity: "Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1, 2).

Unrepentant sin makes prayer fruitless. God knows your heart! ". . . man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). If you or I come to God and ask Him to undertake on our behalf something seriously needed, no matter how earnest we may be, if we are not normally walking with Him, and seeking by His grace to do His will, He cannot answer. It may be a case of a man who is ordinarily found everywhere else but with the Lord's people and then, in a time of acute need or deep distress he comes to God. That man is calling in vain! ". . . God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). Again, the only prayer God can or will hear from such a man is the prayer of the publican.

There is one other group of people in the Old Testament whom I would like to mention in passing: the Moabites. We are told that with their mouths they said they belonged to the Lord, but in their hearts they served their own gods, and we read that when they came into the sanctuary, they could not prevail. How true this is, even to this day, of many people.

We find some instances of unanswered prayer in the New Testament. You will remember the incident after Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, and a man brought his son to the Master for healing. He said to the Lord, "I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him" (Matt. 17:16). Jesus rebuked the devil and the child was cured, but the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief" (vs. 18). There is nothing which will any more quickly block the channel of access to God and answer from God, than the sin of unbelief. Evidently they failed to believe that God could do this. How can we expect an answer, if we

actually do not believe in God's power and His love!

We have briefly considered a number of situations where God did not hear when people cried unto Him. Refusal on the part of a man to heed God's word prevents God from hearing him. These instances I have given you have been caused by sin, which fostered a wrong attitude of heart toward God.

Now let me draw your attention to some circumstances which will prevent prayer from being heard because of our attitude toward other people, when the heart is not right with man.

If deep down in my heart I bear ill will against anybody and am not willing to forgive, the teaching is very clear in the Lord's Prayer, which says, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). If for any reason I am not able to forgive my debtors, then God is not able to forgive me, and my prayer will be disqualified on that account. Furthermore, when I come to God, if I remember that my brother hath ought against me, the thing for me to do is to leave my gift at the altar, go and be reconciled to my brother and then come back and offer my gift to God. This is the teaching of Matthew 5:23, 24. If I bear ill will toward anybody, and am unforgiving about people, I will have no power in prayer, and I must seek reconciliation with a brother who has something against me!

Another condition which will disqualify me in obtaining answers to prayer is a lack of Christian charity. If I am deaf to the cry of the poor, God will be deaf to my cry. If I do not respond to the will of God according to the Sight that I have, then He will not respond to me when I call upon Him.

Let us think briefly about the lack of charity, or love. The Bible says that "he that hath pity upon the poor lendeth to the Lord" (Prov. 19:17), and the Bible also says the person who "stoppeth his ears to the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, and shall not be heard" (Prov. 21:13). In other words, God is deaf to the cry of the uncharitable man.

The same holds true with reference to the matter of showing mercy. We read, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7), and the Scriptures seem to teach that if a man or a woman has shown a lack of mercy toward other people, God will be unmerciful to that individual.

Pride will hinder approach to God, as was shown in the case of the Pharisee and the publican. When the heart shows pride, God will resist that proud heart, but He giveth grace to the humble.

So we see that there are conditions and circumstances which cause prayers to be unheard, which disqualify a man when he tries to come into the presence of God. There are a good many people who never have had faith, never have called upon God, and they are disqualified because they do not believe. Again we remind you that these friends may come as sinners, accept Christ, and the gateway to God's presence will open to them!

Those of us who know Him and who believe in Him, have several things to remember.

I am thinking of the time when Moses was leading the Children of Israel toward the Promised Land, and he reached the place where he could just catch a glimpse of it. At that time he conducted himself in a way that was displeasing to God. Disobeying God, and because he did this thing that God did not want him to do, we read that God told Moses that he was not to enter into the land. (See Numbers 20:7-12). Moses lost patience with God's people. He had been leading them across the desert, and the people began to complain about the length of the way and especially about water. Now it happened that years before they had complained about water, and Moses had brought them water out of a rock, in answer to a plea to God. Now they were complaining about water again and Moses faced the same situation, this time with impatience. God told Moses to take the rod and gather the people together and "speak ye unto the rock before their eyes" (v. 8). But Moses spoke unkindly to the people, and "smote the rock twice" (v. 11), when God had said explicitly, "Speak." And God rebuked Moses. "Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the Children of Israel . . ." (v. 12). Not only did Moses disobey; he failed to

glorify God. Therefore, although Moses brought them up to the land, he was never allowed to go in.

Another instance in the Old Testament is both dramatic and rather pathetic. It is the story of David with his child, the child of Bathsheba, as told in 2 Samuel 12: 7-19. You know the sordid story of David's sin in taking Bathsheba to be his wife under circumstances which involved the death of his friend, Uriah the Hittite. We are naturally inclined to be harsh in our feelings as far as David is concerned. And yet we have to recognize that here was a good man, a servant of God; and none of us, who serve Him, are free from sin. When the child was born, Nathan the prophet told David that the child would not live, that the child would die (v. 14). When the child took sick, David began to pray. He prayed regularly and long. We read that he did not wash his face; nor shave, nor remove his clothes. Sometimes he did not even eat. He just prayed and prayed and prayed that God would spare this child and would take care of him in a gracious and good way. But God did not heed David's agony of petition — and the child died. How shall we understand that? The request from David was against God's announced judgment. God had already warned, through the lips of His prophet, what He would do.

Another instance of unanswered prayer comes to mind; in the New Testament we read of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul says that he asked the Lord three different times to remove it, but the Lord did not accede to Paul's request. Paul tells the story dramatically in 2 Cor. 12:1-9. In this instance, God's answer has been the comfort and help of His redeemed children ever since: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). Paul's praying was against God's wisdom and because of this, God had to say, "No."

Let us bear in mind that when God gives promises and you accept those promises, and accept the conditions set forth there is no human limit to what you may count upon in answer to prayer. But if God's judgment is against a thing, and then you pray for it, the prayer is useless.

Another instance of unanswered prayer was in the case of the sons of Zebedee, James and John (Mark 10:35-49). They asked the Lord Jesus that they be given places of prominence when He came in His glory. One asked to sit on the right hand and the other on the left. You will recall they did not receive such a promise.

One more instance is rather stirring, the case of the rich man in hell. The story is told in Luke 16. When the rich man was in hell and in torment, he cried out to Abraham, asking Abraham to send someone back to his brothers to tell them not to come where he was. Abraham, you will remember, said, "No." Then the rich man asked for a cup of water. He asked if Lazarus would only dip his finger in water and come and touch the tip of his tongue. But Abraham again said, "No." Every request of the rich man in hell was refused. It was too late! He had already passed the place where praying could help.

We have seen circumstances under which God could not answer prayer. Paul, James and Peter knew about this. But such knowledge was a source of warning and encouragement, and the Lord can make these lessons a blessing to us today, if we will, by His grace, profit from His dealings with others. Down through the centuries, God's people have had confidence in prayer and have received answers to prayer.

May we daily learn to seek His will, and pray "in faith, nothing wavering" (James 1:6), always remembering the blessed promise, "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22).

## **Intercessory Prayer**

Is intercessory prayer answered? Can you pray for me, and I for you, and confidently expect God to answer?

It is normal and proper to come into the presence of God with praise and thanksgiving. "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus . . ." (1 Thess. 5:18). This is a definite command, such praise and thanksgiving for blessing received brings yet new blessing. *If you want blessing from the gracious hand of God tomorrow, then thank Him for what He did today.*

When we think about coming to God in prayer, it is good for us to remember a promise found in the Old Testament: "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." So when we give thanks to God for what He has done, we are actually increasing our faith — and our expectation.

I want us to consider intercessory prayer, the burden, job, and responsibility of one person praying for another. Think of it! Friend praying for friend; brother praying for brother; wife praying for husband; children praying for parents! Let us study this aspect of intercessory prayer by bringing to our minds a number of illustrations from the Bible.

First, I want to draw your attention to the incident between Abram and Lot as found in Genesis, Chapter 13. You will remember that Abram was the uncle and Lot was the nephew, the two of them came out of Abram's home country, into the land of Canaan. Thus you will need to remember that Lot was also a believer. However, the time came when Abram and Lot were divided because of trouble between their herdsmen, and Abram proposed that they separate. "And Abram said to Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we be brethren" (Gen. 13:8). And so Lot chose the well watered plains of Sodom, and Abram went in the other direction, up into the mountains where he found a plain, the valley of Mamre and there he built an altar unto the Lord.

You will also remember that the time came when Lot moved into the city of Sodom, and was there by his own choice when certain enemies came, took the city, and carried Lot away captive, "And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive" (14:14), he pursued after these kings and defeated them, rescued Lot and restored him to the city, thus creating a very real bond between Abram and Lot.

The time came, however, when God was going to destroy the city of Sodom. In Genesis 18, we read, "And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do . . ." and he told Abraham that the city of Sodom was going to be destroyed.

Then in Genesis 18:20-33, we have this classic example of intercessory prayer, as Abraham began to pray for the city of Sodom. He started out by asking if God would destroy the city if there were fifty righteous men there, "And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous . . . then will I spare all the place for their sakes" (vs. 26). Then Abraham said if there were five less than that . . . just forty-five? And God's reply came back, He would spare the city for forty-five. The dialogue of prayer continued. For forty? Thirty? Twenty? Abraham said, "Oh, let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And he said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake" (v. 32). Abraham was not testing God. He had a deep and abiding sense of God's honor and glory and His hatred of sin, and he also had full confidence in God's justice and mercy. No doubt Abraham felt that Sodom, so wicked that even today its name is a reproach, deserved destruction. But he had a deep concern for any righteous souls in that sinful place, including members of his own family, and this gave him courage and faith to continue his intercession.

Note again that Abraham did not cease to pray! God stopped speaking with Abraham, as the Word states very clearly: "And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham . . ." (v.33).

You might think that this prayer was ineffectual. And yet look at verse 29 of Chapter 19 where you

find a very amazing statement. "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt." God remembered Abraham, His friend, and He spared Lot. What wonderful assurance to praying parents, and interceding friends. I am convinced that there is the original example, the basis, for blessing to the hearts and lives of countless multitudes of men and women, down through the years. A faithful parent, a believing grandparent, a conscientious Sunday School teacher, a wife, a child - prayed faithfully for a loved one, and the person thus held up before God in intercessory prayer received blessing, its source unknown to him, far beyond anything expected.

Lot was spared, but there is nothing to show that Lot was worthy of this, for he was in Sodom of his own free choice. Yet Abraham interceded for Lot, and God spared him. Here is an important lesson for us. Unworthy as we are, God yet hears and answers prayer in our behalf, blessed be His Name!

Now we come to an illustration of united intercession. In Exodus 17:8-16 we find the Children of Israel in battle with the people of Amalek. There was a time of conflict, with Joshua leading the Children of Israel in the battle. But Amalek was stronger, and Amalek would have defeated Joshua if it had not been that Moses was on the mount praying for them. While Moses was praying, by lifting up his hands to heaven, Joshua was actually winning. But if for any reason Moses let his hands drop Amalek prevailed. The Scripture says that "Moses' hands were heavy." As a human being, his arms grew weary. Here is an illustration of united intercession. Seeing Moses was physically exhausted, a stone was brought and he sat down upon it, and "Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady . . ." (v. 12)

I have often said that Aaron and Hur were not as strong as Moses or Joshua. They could not pray like Moses, nor fight like Joshua, but they united to help! Can you not see the picture? Until the going down of the sun, they held up the hands of Moses, and at the end of that day, Israel had won a notable victory as God took notice of this faithful, prevailing, united intercession.

How many of you who listen to our radio program know that we covet, we earnestly long for the help, day by day, of praying Christians? We need it! I need it week by week as I seek the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the preparation of over 300 messages a year for the broadcast. No man could complete such a task, year by year, without the strength and direct inspiration of God, and without the help of faithful friends who intercede.

After all, we are just human beings, and God does not promise that, as His servants, we will not grow weary. It is so easy to forget the end and purpose of the labor, in the moment of weariness.

We rely on the Lord's promises, "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9), and "If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14).

We need your help in our radio program, "The Bible for You," and we have a plan of a "prayer support fellowship." We call it the "A and H Club," whose membership is composed of people who have let us know they are going to pray for their pastor, and our radio work. If you will write and assure me of such prayer help, we will enroll you as a member of the "A and H Club" (A for Aaron and H for Hur). Then you will be on our mailing list, we will send you a Bulletin which will tell you of our ministry and our prayer needs. I am telling you this because God has blessed this method of operating and, by His grace, we count on it! I want to bear witness that for the last several years we have had hundreds of people praying for us in the "A and H Club," and I can actually feel the lift power of this prayer ministry. We regard this ministry as a battle for God! We want the Gospel to go out.

Another illustration concerning intercessory prayer. In 1 Kings 18:42-46, we find Elijah on Mount Carmel, praying that the rain should come. In the great conflict between the prophet Elijah and Ahab the

king, Elijah had told Ahab, in proof of the fact that he was really a prophet sent from God, it would not rain until Elijah gave the word for the rain to fall. And it did not rain for the space of three years and six months. The time came when God said, "Go and tell Ahab it is going to rain." Elijah went to Ahab and delivered God's message, that it would rain. Then Elijah went up on Mount Carmel and prayed that it should rain!

This gives us an important revelation about prayer. In prayer we do not try to persuade God to do something He doesn't want to do. We don't try to "twist God's arm" to obtain something from Him that He doesn't want to give us. Actually we are like a person who reaches up for a glass of water. So it is in prayer. God offers us the blessing, God gives us the promise. We reach up to the promise of God and with thankfulness ask for its fulfillment. This is praying with confidence. This is the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man that availeth much (James 5:16).

There are other instances of intercessory prayer. Let me draw your attention to one in Acts 12:5, 12-17. Here we find Peter in prison. You will read that "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (v. 5). Peter was in prison waiting for Herod to put him to death, as he had James, and the church was praying for him all night long. Have you ever wondered about that prayer meeting, as to what they were praying for? Were they praying for him to be released? Somehow, I don't think so. James was just as good a man as Peter; and James had been killed. And more than that, the Lord had told Peter (John 21:18, 19) that he would be put to death. Peter is now in jail and it is probable that the words of Jesus to him are to be fulfilled. Then for what are they praying? They are interceding that Peter's faith would not fail, that he might be kept strong in the hour of trial. They are asking God to enable Peter to go out triumphantly, quietly trusting in God. The answer was more than they could ask or think. As we know, Peter was actually delivered in a miraculous way, but the thing of interest to me is that the church prayed for Peter when he was in trouble. Here, again, is unity in intercessory prayer, with God answering! We can pray for each other when we are in trouble. If you think of somebody who is in danger, in real trouble, you should be constantly in prayer on their behalf that they would be given grace, that the Lord would be with them. Let us remember one thing with reference to trouble. This world has a lot of trouble in it, but you know we are not going to stay here. We are one day going out of this world into the presence of God. But even with that blessed truth in mind, we are still here on life's roadway, and in His gracious love and providential care, God permits temptation, testing, sorrow and trouble to come to His children. There is every reason to pray for one another. Indeed, long ago Samuel said, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you . . ." (1 Sam. 12:23).

You have both privilege and obligation to engage in intercessory prayer. We have seen several answers to such united prayer. I trust you will feel led to pray for one another, and for me, because God hears and answers prayer!

## **Prevailing Prayer**

Are we justified in continuing to pray, even if the answer has not come? James encourages and sets a prayer pattern in 5:13-16, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

I have been talking to you about intercessory prayer — praying one for another — and I have at least two more Scripture passages that I want to share with you. We are going to think about them before we consider "Prevailing Prayer." Here in this passage from the Book of James, we are urged to pray one for the other, and to seek prayer help from other people. I am not sure that this passage in itself necessarily means only those who are sick in body, that it is confined only to physical health. It seems to me that the passage points to any who are ill in body or spirit. The healing which is mentioned in verse 16 can obviously apply directly to the faults that are referred to in that very verse. We read, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed." I think those things go together! "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." If he is sick in spirit, if he is sick in soul, if he has committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. I have no objection to the other application, because I have heard a good many testimonies from people that have been blessed when they have trusted God for physical healing, but I think that there are many people who would benefit from this and get a truer meaning out of it, if we did not restrict this passage in James only to the physical. By all means, claim this promise! "Pray one for another that you may be healed."

There is, however, another even more wonderful verse than this found in 1 John 5:16-18. This is an amazing promise! "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin which is not unto death. We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not."

Consider particularly verses 16 and 17. Verse 16 says, "If any man see his brother sin a sin that is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death." Of course this means the man who sees his brother sinning shall ask, and He "shall give him life." Such a gift of life, eternal life, is not in your hand or mine, to give! This reminds us of an earlier instance, when Abraham prayed for Lot.

I do not think this sin unto death should bother us. Most of the sins that are indulged in and most of those about which we are concerned with reference to our loved ones, are not "sins unto death." The only "sin unto death" apparently is the "unpardonable sin," and I have a conviction that the unpardonable sin is the rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior, for which there could be no hope. But apart from that, I believe this promise will cover the great, wide range of experience of our loved ones and ourselves. Most of the sins that you see are not unto death. The sin which is unto death — the rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ — will quite probably be out of sight and known only to the sinner and God. But in any case, here is the written promise that you can ask, and that God will forgive! I cannot do otherwise than bring this verse to your attention. I do not want to burden you unduly as you pray for your loved one, but this is the most important thing in all the world — acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Perhaps someone you know is actually on the verge of this "unpardonable sin." If so, my brother, my sister, pray that this one will turn now, and confess and accept Christ. This is a wonderful promise.

If you see any of your own loved ones sinning in the sight of God, you can definitely pray for them that they may receive forgiveness. I think this is the blessed experience of many of us, as fellow Christians. There are many who do not pray for each other, but there are many, many more who do pray for each other, and rejoice in the evidence that God is gracious to those for whom we pray.

Now I want to draw your attention to what I will call "prevailing prayer." Perhaps the most satisfying aspect about praying is that results can follow. That's a marvelous thing! Something can actually

happen! Conversely, perhaps the most discouraging thing about prayer is that we can give up! And that's just as true with us as it was with Moses when he got tired. Patience is difficult for all of us, and we need to be careful about the meaning of the word "patience." As it is used in the New Testament, it does not primarily refer to long suffering. Long suffering has an element of patience in it, that is true, but long suffering does not especially refer to meekness. Meekness is a quality all its own. Patience refers more to perseverance, a sort of a "stick-to-it-iveness." When you stay with a project until the last report is in, when you see that everything is complete, then you are manifesting patience! And in the matter of praying, we are to be patient; we are to wait until the results come. This may be hard, but it is very important. In this connection, our Lord told a parable which I want to bring to your attention. As you read Luke 18:1-8, I am sure you will see the application.

"He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." When it says, "always to pray," I don't think it means to pray every minute of the day, nor that every word uttered is to be a word of prayer. But let us say again that "and not to faint" does mean "at any particular moment." This is a way of saying that a man ought to persevere in prayer and not quit! It refers to the quality of "stick-to-it-iveness," as far as the person's attitude of mind and heart is concerned.

So the Lord Jesus told this parable, recorded in Luke 18. It is the parable of the widow with the unjust judge. ". . . There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?"

It is faith on our part for which the Lord God is looking, and faith on our part is the disposition to keep on waiting with expectation for God to keep His promise. This is what the Lord Himself was urging these people to do when He said that "men ought always to pray and not to faint." Our Lord used many methods in teaching, and here He is teaching by contrast. Does it seem strange that He would use an illustration of an unjust judge? Not at all. In effect, He was saying, "Think of this unjust judge, who feared not God and regarded not man, if he could be affected by the woman, how much more would God, your Heavenly Father, be reached by the needs of His children!"

Let us think about this for a few moments. The widow was in need, she came because of her necessity, and she came to the right place, to the judge, who by virtue of his office, was the man to bring justice to bear. The strange thing about this story, through which Jesus was teaching the lesson, was that the judge did not answer by reason of his kindness or wisdom, and note that her answer did not come from the Lord, but from the judge. What qualified her was her importunity. She kept on and on and on, until the judge quite frankly "said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man, yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming, she weary me" (v. 4, 5). What Jesus is teaching here is that we must persevere in prayer. God wants us to recognize the fact of our utter dependence upon Him.

There is a similar case in 1 Samuel 1:4-28, the story of Hannah, who longed for a child, so she went to God to pray for a child, and "she wept, and would not eat." Hannah's husband chided her. "Am not I better to thee than ten sons? (v 8) and Eli the priest thought she was drunk, and rebuked her. "Put away thy wine from thee" (v 14). Hannah was undergoing an experience of deep trial. Verse 6 says, "Her

adversary provoked her sore, for to make her fret," because she had no child; her husband was angry; the priest misjudged her. Perhaps the Lord has denied to you the great gift of parenthood, and you will understand this woman's heart. She was sad, but not bitter toward God.

Let me point out to you, however, another aspect of *Prevailing Prayer*. Hannah's need was personal. For a woman in that age and civilization to be childless was a reproach and meant that God was withholding this gift.

Note again: Hannah was not pleading for the gift specifically to glorify God, nor seeking to serve the country, though when Samuel was grown, his life accomplished both of these things. Hannah's was simply a heart crying out for a child — a purely personal intercession. Not wrong, not sinful, but for herself.

And note once more: Hannah was cleansed of all personal pride. She could have been deeply humiliated by the scorn of a neighbor, the anger of her husband, the rebuke of God's priest, but her prayer was one of great faith and hope. "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine hand-maid . . . but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then will I give him unto the Lord all the days of his life . . ." (v. 11).

When Eli understood, he told her, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition . . ." (v. 17).

Hannah rose from her knees, "went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad" (v. 18). Would that we had more women today with faith like that! She had committed herself in advance to God as she waited upon Him in prayer. There is no need to complete the story. Hannah believed, and she dedicated the baby before his birth. And "when she had weaned him, she took him up with her . . . and brought him into the house of the Lord" (v. 24) This is an extraordinary record of persevering prayer which in great faith brought an answer from our faithful and loving God.

As we build this pyramid of "*Prevailing Prayer*," let us consider another classic example. Turning now to Genesis 32:24-32, here we see the case of Jacob at Peniel. Jacob not only wanted the blessing of God, he needed it. The story tells us that Jacob was left alone, "and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day" (vs. 24). The man said, "Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (vs. 26-28). Here is a striking example of prevailing prayer. Jacob wrestled with this angel all night long, waiting upon God for blessing. He would not settle for anything less than real blessing. So God answered and "blessed him there" (vs. 29), to his own spiritual growth and with subsequent advantage to other people.

As you are thinking about Jacob praying, I want to point out to you that Jacob was in real need, and his predicament was due to his own actions. It was the way he had treated his brother Esau that brought this result and he was in serious trouble. Esau was coming, and Jacob well remembered Esau's threat to kill him. Jacob had earlier received assurance from God that he would live in the land, and that the land should be his. This promise was given to him in grace, it is true, and since God had so graciously promised, Jacob could rely on God's promise. And yet, at Peniel, Jacob was in need. The need was due to his own actions, but he had a promise from God that would meet the need.

There is another aspect that needs our consideration. This was a time of definite "showdown" for Jacob, and his need of divine help "was urgent, that very night, that very moment. In his desperation, and yet with faith, he wrestled with God, and suffered personal consequences, for ". . . the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him" (v. 25). Elsewhere we read that Jacob was

crippled, he limped, for the rest of his life. But his heart was cleansed from pride, and his name was changed from Jacob to Israel, as witness of his power with God and with man. And as for the problem Jacob had with Esau, Genesis 33 shows how God answered.

We can profit so much from these lessons God has been teaching His own. Each one asked for an obvious favor; each one felt an urgent, desperate need; each one was humbled as God dealt with the need. Sinful pride was removed, and each was changed through suffering, to the glory of God.

In other words, prevailing prayer not only brings results in the outside world (and praise God, it does), it not only brings results in our affairs (for which we humbly thank Him), but prevailing prayer brings results *in us*, and we are actually changed by our experiences in prevailing prayer. We are brought more and more into the will of God.

God's will was actually accomplished in each one of these cases, through the urgency of their prayers. They *felt* the urgency, they *expressed* the urgency in their persistent prayer, and in that very way the will of God was done in and through each one.