

## PREFACE

Why has a practice so passionately pursued by Jesus become so often ignored by those who call Him Lord? Where are the believers who have our Lord's passion for prayer? Of all the disciplines of the Christian life, it is perhaps the most neglected.

The brief years in the earthly life of our Lord were permeated with prayer. The greater the task, the greater the intensity with which He prayed. On some occasions He quietly slipped away to a place of communion with the Father. At other times the tremendous burdens of His ministry required that He send His followers away so He could gain precious moments for intercession. Our Lord prayed before the cross, on the cross and after His resurrection. And even now a significant aspect of our eternal salvation rests upon the fact that "He always lives to make intercession" (Heb. 7:25). Little wonder that His followers begged Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

The results of prayer can easily be seen in the life of our Lord. The practice of prayer enabled Him to recognize those demands and ministry opportunities that were truly important. Jesus wasted no words or motions; the priorities of His life were established through prayer.

What a contrast to believers who struggle with the nagging awareness that they are accomplishing little that is truly worthwhile. Pushed around by pressing circumstances, they feel

like they are winning some battles but losing the war. Minutes, hours, days and years seem to be wasted on matters that have little, if any, eternal significance.

Is there persevering prayer in *our* lives, any passion for conversation with God? The command to pray is not in question. God's Word abounds with commands, examples, promises and encouragements to pray. What is missing is the obedient, heaven-bending, hell-binding practice of prayer.

It is profitable to consider God's commands and then examine our own experience. We are told, for instance, that we "always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). But we generally do not think of prayer *until* we become disheartened. Many have reduced prayer to a matter of mere etiquette. Encouraged to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), we carefully ensure that our meetings never start or cease without praying. We are careful not to eat a meal before praying. But beyond that, do we pray?

Do you have a *praying habit*? Could you be accused of being called "Camel-knees" as was James, our Lord's half-brother and the pastor of the Jerusalem church, because of the calluses on his knees as a result of endless hours of prayer?

Do you have the *praying confidence* of George Müller, who sought God alone for the needs of thousands of orphans? He refused to ask any man for anything. Yet his carefully kept diary chronicles God's daily, sometimes hourly, never-failing provisions.

Can you claim the *praying consistency* of Hudson Taylor, founder of the great China Inland Mission? Those who traveled with him recorded that no matter how grueling the day, you would hear the rustle behind his curtain and see the flickering candle as he rose a few hours past midnight to have his time with God.

Have you experienced the *praying effectiveness* of John "Praying Hyde," missionary to India? Though his ministry spanned

only a few years, thousands were born into the kingdom in answer to the prayers of this man who trusted God for one, then two, then three and, before his death, four souls each day.

Do you know something of the *praying passion* of David Brainerd? Sickly, weak, destined to live only a few years, he determined to share the light of the gospel with the Indians on the eastern seaboard of America. Faithful in witness and intercession, sometimes praying for hours in knee-deep snow, he was privileged to see one of the greatest movings of God in the history of the North American continent.

Whether you are currently making a habit of prayer or are neglecting this essential spiritual discipline, you can today and tomorrow and the next day be faithful to your Savior in your prayer life. What a glorious calling is yours: to pray, to keep praying and to pray passionately—to persevere in communication with God until you have the assurance that God is answering and is working in the situation about which you have prayed.

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14–16)

# CALLED TO PRAY

God has given  
us prayer, not primarily  
as a method  
for getting things or  
changing circumstances,  
but as a means  
of cooperating  
with Him.

# 1

## A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

*If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

2 Chronicles 7:14

Several years ago I began to study the lives of great people of prayer. I could not escape the fact that God used men and women who were dedicated to the practice of prayer to change the course of history. The more I read, the more convicted I became of my own prayerlessness. I had seen a certain measure of success in the pastorate and was considered by some to have arrived at a most enviable position. But now I found myself, without benefit of either human criticism or encouragement, under the searching eye of God. Alone before Him, I could not defend my utter lack of prayer.

It was not that I did not *appear* to be a man of prayer. A few well-chosen words were available for any occasion. I preached about prayer, conducted prayer meetings and always responded in the affirmative to those who asked, “Pastor, will you pray for me?” “I’ll be praying for you” were the last words of every pastoral visit. Each letter closed with the assurance, “You can count on our continued prayers.” But in reality, my personal prayer

altar was in ruins. Except for spasmodic periods of renewed effort, I just did not pray.

Now God had found me out. Or rather, God was allowing me to find out about myself. My prayer famine had not disturbed me in times past. But now I felt as if my case had come before the court of heaven. The evidence was in; I was guilty of disobedience by gross negligence.

Unable to rest, I settled on somewhat of a trial run. Looking back now, in the light of God's promises, it all seems rather foolish. But it was serious business then—and God took me seriously. I determined to spend the morning hours in my study in uninterrupted prayer. To some people that may not sound like much. But to a pastor who considered the ministry as sort of a public relations position, it was difficult. Think of all the coffee breaks, jokes, telephone calls and fellowship I would miss, not to mention the seemingly endless list of administrative responsibilities!

When the office door closed behind me Monday morning, I took my Bible, fell to my knees and told the Lord an out-and-out lie: "Lord, You know I have desired to have time alone with You in prayer." In less time than it takes to tell, the Lord reminded me that for the most part, we do what we want to do. I was forced to agree that I had not had time for prayer because I had not taken the time to pray.

I confess that I frequently glanced at my watch during those first few minutes of prayer. Each minute seemed to take forever. I discovered that I was not really accustomed to communion with God. I felt uncomfortable as I framed the words, wondering how they would sound to others. Praying for all the usual people, events and needs did not dispel the uneasiness I felt.

It was obvious that God wanted to do business on a deeper level—He wanted to deal with my personal rebellion. A great barrier of unconfessed sin had to crumble under the forgiveness of God during the next few hours. Cleansed by the work of Je-

sus, according to First John 1:9, I began to see more clearly the issues confronting the members of my congregation. It was then that I began to pray in earnest for them.

At noon I opened the door of my study only to discover a stranger waiting to visit for “just a moment.” “Pastor,” he said, “you don’t know me. I was just driving by the church, and something told me to come in here and ask you how I could get saved.” In a matter of minutes he was born into God’s family. He then rushed to meet his wife and led her to Christ. At noon on the next two days similar experiences awaited me when I opened the door of my study after a morning of prayer. In addition, it seemed that God protected that time from any interruptions (unexpected phone calls, forgotten meetings, etc.). Church members clearly appreciated their pastor’s desire to be available to God.

God continued to deal with me graciously as I spent more time with Him. During the next two weeks, over one hundred individuals walked the aisle of our church during invitation times. More than half of them desired to profess Christ as Lord and Savior. In the events of those weeks, God convinced me that He intends prayer to be a vital tool in the Christian’s walk and warfare.

Twenty-five years have passed since God’s Spirit brought that prayer revival to my heart. Those years have taken me across the United States and to many countries of the world, including a brief time as a missionary in Africa. Today I am more convinced than ever that prayer is both the believer’s most powerful and most unused weapon.

I have learned that the secret is *praying a matter through* to its proper conclusion—to persevere in intercession until we receive God’s resolution of a needy situation. It is my intent in this book to share some of the basic principles of prayer and, more specifically, to show how these principles relate to persevering in prayer and to healthy, victorious Christian living.

I have also discovered that God is keenly interested in the personal life of the one who is praying. This is especially true when one assumes the position of an intercessor. God has given us prayer not primarily as a method for getting things or changing circumstances but as a means of cooperating with Him in His great plan for the redemption of the lost and other great spiritual exploits.

A clear example of intercession is recorded in Genesis 18, where we read about the Lord and two other messengers meeting with Abraham and Sarah to affirm God's promise of a son through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Afterward, as the visitors set their faces toward Sodom, the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing? . . . For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice" (18:17–19). The Lord then explained His purpose for going to Sodom and Gomorrah by noting that their "sin is very grave" (18:20).

Abraham became distressed because his nephew, Lot, lived in Sodom. The Scripture records that "the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD" (18:22). It was then that Abraham began to intercede for the welfare of Lot and his family. Persistent in prayer, he finally secured this promise from the Lord: "I will not destroy it [Sodom] for the sake of ten [righteous people]" (18:32). It was then that "the LORD went His way . . . and Abraham returned to his place" (18:33). Abraham had "prayed through" for Lot; he had interceded effectively, and as a result, Lot did not die along with the others in Sodom. Godly prayer makes a difference!

From these verses we see that intercession requires aggressive cooperation with God along the lines of His revealed will. Additionally, we see that intercession involves imploring God on behalf of a specific person or persons.



Other Bible portions also touch on this important topic, some of which are neglected by many believers. It is unfortunate, for example, that many Christians consider the passages of Scripture describing the tabernacle in the wilderness a drudgery to read. Actually, the tabernacle can be seen to represent three basic areas of our lives. The outer courtyard surrounded by a high curtain represents the externally visible part of our being—the body. The holy place, a place of daily activity within the confines of the tent-like structure, represents the soul. The Holy of Holies represents the spirit, or our capacity for communion with the Lord. Similarly, the altar of incense represents Christ’s ministry of intercession for us and the qualities in His life that we are to emulate. These qualities are specifically outlined in Exodus 30:1–10. Three of them appear to be of particular significance regarding the practice of prayer.

### POSITION

Intercession is as much the *taking of a position* as it is the *making of a petition*. Exodus 30:6 states that the altar of incense was to be placed “before the veil that is before the ark of the Testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the Testimony, where I [God] will meet with you.” In other words, the altar of incense was positioned between the mercy seat and everything else in the tabernacle. It was the last component the high priest saw before entering the Holy of Holies. An intercessor’s position is both *before God* and *between God and the person being prayed for*.

As we saw earlier, “Abraham still stood before the LORD.” Abraham was both *before* the Lord and *between* the Lord and Sodom, where Lot was living in sin. To position yourself before someone is to say, “There is a matter that you and I must settle before I can continue on.” That is what Abraham was saying, and that is what we will say if we engage in intercession.

## PERSEVERANCE

Furthermore, incense was to be burned on the altar both morning and evening, “a perpetual incense before the LORD throughout your generations” (Exod. 30:8). Here is where great spiritual battles are often won or lost. At issue is the willingness to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17) until God reveals His will about the issue of concern.

Persevering prayer is the experience of few Christians. They are willing, when asked, to pray for certain individuals. Perhaps they even enter that person’s name on a daily prayer list. But most believers know little about bowing before God and remaining there *until* He reveals His will.

Individuals wholeheartedly engaged in the ministry of intercession have a hard time thinking of anything else. They have before them the daily demands of their occupations, but even these are carried out with the inner man bowed before God.

Sometimes “concerned” Christians ask me to pray with them about certain people. But on subsequent days these Christians make no further mention of their concern. In contrast, others request prayer and really do appear to have assumed the position of an intercessor. Every time I see them, they report on the status of the individuals for whom they have asked prayer. Often they report with tears of joy how God is bringing blessing to their lives by allowing them to enter into aggressive cooperation in His great work.

Luke 11:5–8 records Jesus’ parable emphasizing the importance of shameless persistence in prayer:

Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him”; and he will answer from within and say, “Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you”? I say to

you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.

It was not the size of the need, the cause of the need or the credentials of the one in need that finally secured the answer. It was the man's persistence. The Lord concluded the parable with this statement: "Ask [literally, "keep on asking"], and it will be given to you; seek [literally, "keep on seeking"], and you will find; knock [literally, "keep on knocking"], and it will be opened to you" (11:9). It is little wonder that the Enemy seeks so actively to destroy the Christian's determination to *persevere* in prayer.

### PURITY

There was a strict formula for the type of incense to be burned on the altar in the tabernacle. God admonished the priests, "You shall not offer *strange* incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering; nor shall you pour a drink offering on it" (Exod. 30:9). Only *pure* incense was to be offered.

If there is one point more than any other at which we are defeated in prayer, it is at the point of personal purity. God hates sin. It is an abomination to Him; it cost Him His Son. We often fail to deal with sin in biblical terms, calling it instead a bad habit, a shortcoming or a character flaw. Some people hold to the notion that sin can be held at bay in an otherwise righteous life. This is like telling your friends that you are in perfect health even though you are aware of a malignancy growing in your body. Your sin, no matter how secret, affects your ability and the ability of your church to pray. Proverbs 15:8 reminds us that "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD." In other words, even our best efforts to please God fail as long as we harbor any wickedness or impurity in our heart.

Christians seem especially susceptible to sins of presumption (see Ps. 19:13)—sins that presume on God's love and forgive-

ness. Consider, for instance, a man seated in a worship service who can't wait for the service to end so he can indulge in his favorite sinful habit. By his life he is saying in essence, "God, You are loving and forgiving. Turn Your head while I sin. But be quick to forgive when I ask." We must weed out all such wrong thinking and improper living.

Our prayers are answered only when we pray "in Jesus' name," that is, on the basis of what He has accomplished and who He is. How many times we have knelt to pray, only to be confronted by the master of accusation, Satan himself. "You don't really think this is going to do any good, do you? Your life is no example of victory. How can *you* presume to be in touch with God?" Defeated by such words, and failing to see the effectiveness of the grace of God in our own lives, we question His power in the lives of others. Satan uses our sin to keep us from praying for others.

Intercession involves aggressive cooperation with the revealed will of Him who can have no fellowship with sin. The psalmist writes: "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:3–4). "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:1–2). The heart's cry of every Christian who yearns to labor in the fields of intercession should be, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

People who participate in Olympic competition spend years preparing their bodies and minds for a specific event of only temporal importance. In light of the billions of people who are alienated from God or who have been saved but are struggling or stumbling, how can we afford *not* to spend time preparing our hearts and lives for the eternally significant work of intercession?

We should each look closely at God's pattern for the intercessor. Ask Him for enough grace to assume the position, pray with perseverance and seek the purity that is crucial for effective intercession. Ask Him to enable you to persevere in prayer!

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND PRAYER

1. Do you have a faithful practice of prayer or merely an appearance of being a man or woman of prayer? Why? Are you content with this, or do you desire substantial change? Offer praise or prayer to God about this right now.
2. What are you willing to sacrifice in order to become a person of great prayer? What steps can you take to make this a reality in your life? What results do you hope will come from this? Talk to God in detail about this right now.
3. Making a petition; taking a position; persevering in intercession for others; praying with a pure heart—in which of these areas do you struggle most? Why? With what effects? In which areas do you experience the most victory? With what results? Discuss this with God right now.