

The Life of Faith Chapter 5 The Scriptures and Prayer

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Transcript

The Life of Faith

Chapter 5

The Scriptures and Prayer

A prayerless Christian is a contradiction in terms. Just as a still-born child is a dead one, so a professing believer who does not pray is devoid of spiritual life. Prayer is the breath of the new nature in the saint, as the Word of God is its food. When the Lord would assure the Damascus disciple, Ananias, that Saul of Tarsus had been truly converted, he told him, "Behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11). On many occasions had that self-righteous Pharisee bowed his knees before God and gone through his "devotions", but this was the first time he had ever really prayed. This important distinction needs emphasizing in this day of powerless forms (2 Tim. 3:5). They who content themselves with formal addresses to God know him not; for "the spirit of grace and supplications" (Zech. 12:10) are never separated. God has no dumb children in his regenerated family: 'shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him?' (Luke 18:7). Yes, "cry" unto him, not merely 'say' their prayers. But will the reader be surprised when the writer declares it is his deepening conviction that, probably, the Lord's own people sin more in their efforts to pray than in connection with any other thing they engage in? What hypocrisy there is, where there should be reality! What presumptuous demands, where there should be submissiveness! What formality, where there should be brokenness of heart! How little we really feel the sins we confess, and what little sense of deep need for the mercies we seek! And even where God grants a measure of deliverance from these awful sins, how much coldness of heart, how much unbelief, how much self-will and self-pleasing have we to bewail! Those who have no conscience upon these things are strangers to the spirit of holiness. Now the Word of God should be our directory in prayer. Alas, how often we have made our own fleshly inclinations the rule of our asking. The Holy Scriptures have been given to us "that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:17). Since we are required to "pray in the Spirit" (Jude 20), it follows that our prayers ought to be according to the Scriptures, seeing that he is their Author throughout. It equally follows that according to the measure in which the Word of Christ dwells in us "richly" (Col. 3:16) or sparsely, the more or the less will our petitions be in harmony with the mind of the Spirit, for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34). In proportion as we hide the Word in our hearts, and it cleanses, moulds and regulates our inner man, will our prayers be acceptable in God's sight. Then shall we be able to say, as David did in another connection, "Of thine own

have we given thee" (1 Chron. 29:14). Thus the purity and power of our prayer-life are another index by which we may determine the extent to which we are profiting from our reading and searching of the Scriptures. If our Bible study is not, under the blessing of the Spirit, convicting us of the sin of prayerlessness, revealing to us the place which prayer ought to have in our daily lives, and actually bringing us to spend more time in the secret place of the Most High; unless it is teaching us how to pray more acceptably to God, how to appropriate his promises and plead them before him, how to appropriate his precepts and turn them into petitions, then not only has the time we spend over the Word been to little or no soul enrichment, but the very knowledge that we have acquired of its letter will only add to our condemnation in the day to come. "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (Jam. 1:22) applies to its prayer-admonitions as to everything else in it. Let us now point out seven criteria. 1. We are profited from the Scriptures when we are brought to realize the deep importance of prayer. It is really to be feared that many present-day readers (and even students) of the Bible have no deep convictions that a definite prayer-life is absolutely essential to a daily walking and communing with God, as it is for deliverance from the power of indwelling sin, the seductions of the world, and the assaults of Satan. If such a conviction really gripped their hearts, would they not spend far more time on their faces before God? It is worse than idle to reply, "A multitude of duties which have to be performed crowd out prayer, though much against my wishes." But the fact remains that each of us takes time for anything we deem to be imperative. Who ever lived a busier life than our Saviour? Yet who found more time for prayer? If we truly yearn to be suppliants and intercessors before God and use all the available time we now have, he will so order things for us that we shall have more time. The lack of positive conviction of the deep importance of prayer is plainly evidenced in the corporate life of professing Christians. God has plainly said, "My house shall be called the house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13). Note, not "the house of preaching and singing", but of prayer. Yet, in the great majority of even so-called orthodox churches, the ministry of prayer has become a negligible quantity. There are still evangelistic campaigns, and Bible-teaching conferences, but how rarely one hears of two weeks set apart for special prayer! And how much good do these "Bible conferences" accomplish if the prayer-life of the churches is not strengthened? But when the Spirit of God applies in power to our hearts such words as, "Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38), "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6), "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col. 4:2), then are we being profited from the Scriptures. 2. We are profited from the Scriptures when we are made to feel that we know not how to pray. "We know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Rom. 8:26). How very few professing Christians really believe this! The idea most generally entertained is that people know well enough what they should pray for, only they are careless and wicked, and so fail to pray for what they are fully assured is their duty. But such a conception is at direct variance with this inspired declaration in Romans 8:26. It is to be observed that that flesh-humbling affirmation is made not simply of men in general, but of the saints of God in particular, among which the apostle did not hesitate to include himself: "We know not what we should pray for as we ought." If this be the condition of the regenerate, how much more so of the unregenerate! Yet it is one thing to read and mentally assent to what this verse says, but it is quite another to have an experimental realization of it, for the heart to be made to feel that what God requires from us he must himself work in and through us. I often say my prayers. But do I ever pray? And do the wishes of my heart Go with the words I say? I may as well kneel down And worship gods of stone, As offer to the living God A prayer of words alone.

It is many years since the writer was taught these lines by his mother—now "present with the Lord"—but their searching message still comes home with force to him. The Christian can no more pray without the direct enabling of the Holy Spirit than he can create a world. This must be so, for real prayer is a felt need

awakened within us by the Spirit, so that we ask God, in the name of Christ, for that which is in accord with his holy will. "If we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1 John 5:14). But to ask something which is not according to God's will is not praying, but presuming. True, God's revealed will is made known in his Word, yet not in such a way as a cookery book contains recipes and directions for preparing various dishes. The Scriptures frequently enumerate principles which call for continuous exercise of heart and Divine help to show us their application to different cases and circumstances. Thus we are being profited from the Scriptures when we are taught our deep need of crying "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), and are actually constrained to beg him for the spirit of prayer.

3. We are profited from the Scriptures when we are made conscious of our need of the Spirit's help. First, that he may make known to us our real wants. Take, for example, our temporal needs. How often we are in some external strait; things from without press hard upon us, and we long to be delivered from these trials and difficulties. Surely here we "know" of ourselves what to pray for. No, indeed; far from it! The truth is that, despite our natural desire for relief, so ignorant are we, so dull is our discernment, that (even where there is an exercised conscience) we know not what submission unto his pleasure God may require, or how he may sanctify these afflictions to our inward good. Therefore, God calls the petitions of most who seek for relief from external trials "howlings", and not a crying unto him with the heart (see Hos. 7:14). "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life?" (Eccl. 6:12). Ah, heavenly wisdom is needed to teach us our temporal "needs" so as to make them a matter of prayer according to the mind of God. Perhaps a few words need to be added to what has just been said. Temporal things may be scripturally prayed for (Matthew 6:11, etc.), but with this threefold limitation. First, incidentally and not primarily, for they are not the things which Christians are principally concerned with (Matthew 6:33). It is heavenly and eternal things (Col. 3:1) which are to be sought first and foremost, as being of far greater importance and value than temporal things. Second, subordinately, as a means to an end. In seeking material things from God it should not be in order that we may be gratified, but as an aid to our pleasing him better. Third, submissively, not dictatorially, for that would be the sin of presumption. Moreover, we know not whether any temporal mercy would really contribute to our highest good (Ps. 106:18), and therefore we must leave it with God to decide. We have inward wants as well as outward. Some of these may be discerned in the light of conscience, such as the guilt and defilement of sin, of sins against light and nature and the plain letter of the law. Nevertheless, the knowledge which we have of ourselves by means of the conscience is so dark and confused that, apart from the Spirit, we are in no way able to discover the true fountain of cleansing. The things about which believers do and ought to treat primarily with God in their supplications are the inward frames and spiritual dispositions of their souls. Thus, David was not satisfied with confessing all known transgressions and his original sin (Ps. 51:1-5), nor yet with an acknowledgment that none could understand his errors, whence he desired to be cleansed from 'secret faults' (Ps. 19:12); but he also begged God to undertake the inward searching of his heart to find out what was amiss in him (Ps. 139:23, 24), knowing that God principally requires "truth in the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). Thus, in view of 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, we should definitely seek the Spirit's aid that we may pray acceptably to God.

4. We are profited from the Scriptures when the Spirit teaches us the right end in praying. God has appointed the ordinance of prayer with at least a threefold design. First, that the great triune God might be honored, for prayer is an act of worship, a paying homage; to the Father as the Giver, in the Son's name, by whom alone we may approach him, by the moving and directing power of the Holy Spirit. Second, to humble our hearts for prayer is ordained to bring us into the place of dependence, to develop within us a sense of our helplessness, by owning that without the Lord we can do nothing, and that we are beggars upon his charity for everything we are and have. But how feebly is this realized (if at all) by any of us until the Spirit takes us in hand, removes pride from us, and gives God his true place in our hearts and thoughts. Third,

as a means or way of obtaining for ourselves the good things for which we ask. It is greatly to be feared that one of the principal reasons why so many of our prayers remain unanswered is because we have a wrong, an unworthy end in view. Our Saviour said, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matthew 7:7); but James affirms of some, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (Jam. 4:3). To pray for anything, and not expressly unto the end which God has designed, is to "ask amiss", and therefore to no purpose. Whatever confidence we may have in our own wisdom and integrity, if we are left to ourselves our aims will never be suited to the will of God. Unless the Spirit restrains the flesh within us, our own natural and distempered affections intermix themselves in our supplications, and thus are rendered vain. "Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31), yet none but the Spirit can enable us to subordinate all our desires unto God's glory. 5. We are profited from the Scriptures when we are taught how to plead God's promises. Prayer must be in faith (Rom. 10:14), or God will not hear it. Now faith has respect to God's promises (Heb. 4:1; Rom. 4:21); if, therefore, we do not understand what God stands pledged to give, we cannot pray at all. The promises of God contain the matter of prayer and define the measure of it. What God has promised, all that he has promised, and nothing else, we are to pray for "secret things belong unto the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:29), but the declaration of his will and the revelation of his grace belong unto us, and are our rule. There is nothing that we really stand in need of but God has promised to supply it, yet in such a way and under such limitations as will make it good and useful to us. So too there is nothing God has promised but we stand in need of it, or are some way or other concerned in it as members of the mystical body of Christ. Hence, the better we are acquainted with the Divine promises, and the more we are enabled to understand the goodness, grace and mercy prepared and proposed in them, the better equipped are we for acceptable prayer. Some of God's promises are general rather than specific; some are conditional, others unconditional; some are fulfilled in this life, others in the world to come. Nor are we able of ourselves to discern which promise is most suited to our particular case and present emergency and need, or to appropriate by faith and rightly plead it before God. Wherefore we are expressly told, "For what man knoweth the things of a man save the spirit of man which is in him"? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (1 Cor. 2:11,12). Should someone reply, If so much be required unto acceptable praying, if we cannot supplicate God aright without much less trouble than you indicate, few will continue long in this duty, then we answer that such an objector knows not what it is to pray, nor does he seem willing to learn. 6. We are profited from the Scriptures when we are brought to complete submission unto God. As stated above, one of the Divine designs in appointing prayer as an ordinance is that we might be humbled. This is outwardly denoted when we bow the knee before the Lord. Prayer is an acknowledgment of our helplessness, and a looking to him from whom all our help comes. It is an owning of his sufficiency to supply our every need. It is a making known our "requests" (Phil. 4:6) unto God; but requests are very different from demands. "The throne of grace is not set up that we may come and there vent our passions before God" (William Gurnall). We are to spread our case before God, but leave it to his superior wisdom to prescribe how it shall be dealt with. There must be no dictating, nor can we "claim" anything from God, for we are beggars dependent upon his mere mercy. In all our praying we must add, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." But may not faith plead God's promises and expect an answer"? Certainly; but it must be God's answer. Paul besought the Lord thrice to remove his thorn in the flesh; instead of doing so, the Lord gave him grace to endure it (2 Cor. 12). Many of God's promises are promiscuous rather than personal. He has promised his Church pastors, teachers and evangelists, yet many a local company of his saints has languished long without them. Some of God's promises are indefinite and general rather than absolute and universal; as, for example Ephesians 6:2, 3.

God has not bound himself to give in kind or specie, to grant the particular thing we ask for, even though we ask in faith. Moreover, he reserves to himself the right to determine the fit time and season for bestowing his mercies. 'seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth... it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger' (Zeph. 2:3). Just because it "may be" God's will to grant a certain temporal mercy unto me, it is my duty to cast myself upon him and plead for it, yet with entire submission to his good pleasure for the performance of it. 7. We are profited from the Scriptures when prayer becomes a real and deep joy. Merely to 'say our prayers' each morning and evening is an irksome task, a duty to be performed which brings a sigh of relief when it is done. But really to come into the conscious presence of God, to behold the glorious light of his countenance, to commune with him at the mercy seat, is a foretaste of the eternal bliss awaiting us in heaven. The one who is blessed with this experience says with the Psalmist, "It is good for me to draw near to God" (Ps. 73:28). Yes, good for the heart, for it is quietened; good for faith, for it is strengthened; good for the soul, for it is blessed. It is lack of this soul communion with God which is the root cause of our unanswered prayers: "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Ps. 37:4). What is it which, under the blessing of the Spirit, produces and promotes this joy in prayer"? First, it is the heart's delight in God as the Object of prayer, and particularly the recognition and realization of God as our Father. Thus, when the disciples asked the Lord Jesus to teach them to pray, he said, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven." And again, "God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba (the Hebrew for "Father"), Father" (Gal. 4:6), which includes a filial, holy delight in God, such as children have in their parents in their most affectionate addresses to them. So again, in Ephesians 2:18, we are told, for the strengthening of faith and the comfort of our hearts, "For through him (Christ) we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." What peace, what assurance, what freedom this gives to the soul: to know we are approaching our Father! Second, joy in prayer is furthered by the heart's apprehension and the soul's sight of God as on the throne of grace—a sight or prospect, not by carnal imagination, but by spiritual illumination, for it is by faith that we 'see him who is invisible' (Heb. 11:27); faith being the "evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1), making its proper object evident and present unto them that believe. Such a sight of God upon such a "throne" cannot but thrill the soul. Therefore are we exhorted, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Thirdly, and drawn from the last quoted Scripture, freedom and delight in prayer are stimulated by the consciousness that God is, through Jesus Christ, willing and ready to dispense grace and mercy to suppliant sinners. There is no reluctance in him which we have to overcome. He is more ready to give than we are to receive. So he is represented in Isaiah 30:18, "And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you." Yes, he waits to be sought unto; waits for faith to lay hold of his readiness to bless. His ear is ever open to the cries of the righteous. Then "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22); "in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God", and we shall find that peace which passes all understanding guarding our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6, 7).

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