

“Be constant in prayer”

The principles and practice of prayer

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WHEN, SOME years ago, *The Testimony* sought the views of readers on a number of issues, including what subjects they would like to see dealt with in the magazine, three subjects stood out above all others: the Apocalypse, practical issues of Christian living, and prayer. The Apocalypse has subsequently been the subject of two series of articles, the 2002 Special Issue dealt with a wide variety of practical issues under the title “Be worthy of your calling”, and now, rather belatedly perhaps, we are devoting a Special Issue to the subject of prayer.

Constant in prayer

The title of this Special Issue is taken from Romans 12:12: “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (RSV). This chapter is full of pithy instruction for disciples to follow, given in the context of their life’s work of being “not conformed to this world: but . . . transformed by the renewing of [their minds]” (v. 2). Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul puts it in terms of “[putting] off the old man with his deeds; and . . . [putting] on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him That created him” (Col. 3:9,10).

The transforming influence in the believer’s life, that which renews the believer’s mind, is, of course, the Word of God, but the Word of God is not transforming the believer’s mind unless it changes the believer’s way of life, and there is much about how the believer should behave in both Romans 12 and Colossians 3. Reading and considering God’s Word and developing right attitudes and actions must, however, be accompanied by communication with God in prayer. Or perhaps we ought to put it a different way: receiving God’s communication to us, His Word, must be accompanied by communicating with Him in prayer if our lives are to develop in right ways.

God’s relationship with man

Before Adam and Eve sinned, it appears that they had regular communication each evening with an angel acting as God’s representative

(Gen. 3:8). Prayer as we think of it was therefore not necessary. Their sin destroyed this close relationship between the human and the Divine, and Genesis 3 ends with access to the Divine barred. The immortal saints in the Kingdom will have this close relationship restored. Though praise and thanksgiving to God and His Son will surely continue throughout eternity, there will no longer be any need to pray for the things we now pray for.

The barrier between God and His holiness and man and his sin was emphasised in the tabernacle (and later the temple) that God commanded Israel to build. There, at the heart of the nation, was the most holy place, symbolising the Divine presence, able to be entered by one man only, on one day of the year only, and only by carefully following an elaborate ritual. Yet this same structure contained within it many foreshadowings of the way entry to the Divine was to be made possible through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who are ‘in’ Jesus by belief and baptism can now “enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us” (Heb. 10:19,20).

Believers can thus have free access at all times in prayer to God through the work of Jesus. We can think of having access to God in this way as being a kind of interim phase or halfway house between the separation from God that comes from sin and the full fellowship and communion with God and His Son that immortal believers will enjoy. Besides giving the praise and thanksgiving to God which it is appropriate for both mortal and immortal beings to offer, believers now, in this time when sin and death prevail in the earth, can—indeed must—petition God regularly, both for the fulfilment of His purpose, and for their own and others’ personal needs.

What do we mean by prayer?

There is a certain ambiguity about the word ‘prayer’. Strictly speaking it means to implore or to entreat, being derived from the Latin *prex*, meaning an entreaty. Yet we commonly use the

word of all speech addressed to God, which we usually divide into three types: petition (that is, prayer in its most basic meaning), praise and thanksgiving.

There seems no need to attempt to define prayer any further than in the previous paragraph. We have a hymn (omitted once, then restored) that has as its opening verse the following:

“Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,

Uttered or unexpressed;

The motion of a hidden fire

That trembles in the breast” (*Hymn 164*).

It seems to me, however, that such sentiments are a hindrance rather than a help in understanding what prayer is about. I cannot think of any Scriptural support for the idea that an unexpressed sincere desire is prayer, for example, nor that a hidden fire in the breast is prayer.

There is in truth nothing mysterious or mystical about our communications to God, just as there is nothing mysterious or mystical about His communications to us. It is true that God knows our inmost thoughts and emotions better than we know them ourselves, but this is not prayer. We sometimes struggle to express ourselves adequately in prayer, or have difficulty in knowing what we should pray for (Rom. 8:26), but prayer does not exist without some expression in words.

Why pray?

The appropriateness of believers praising and thanking God is surely clear to all, but some may wonder why we should petition God for things when He knows we need them anyway (as with our daily food) or will do them anyway (like set up His Kingdom). The short answer to this is, ‘Because He has told us to’. We should indeed be prepared to try to obey the commands of our heavenly Father, even if we do not understand the reason for them; but it is always better if we can arrive at an understanding of why we do what we do.

As far as our own needs are concerned, praying for God to provide for them means acknowledging our needs and acknowledging that God fulfils them. We should not simply take it for granted that God will just provide us with what we need without us asking. In praying for others we are bringing to mind their needs, and thus cultivating a less selfish attitude of mind. In praying for God’s Kingdom we are showing our desire for it, rather than the things of this life. If we are sincere in our prayers, however, they will be

accompanied by appropriate action. We cannot sincerely pray for others and then not help them when we have opportunity; it is no use praying for God’s Kingdom unless we endeavour to live now in preparation for it, rather than seeking what this world has to offer.

But does prayer actually have any effect, apart from on ourselves? The answer from Scripture is clear, it does: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas. 5:16). God does act in response to prayer. This opens up questions which are difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer. If God has foreknowledge of the future and has planned the end from the beginning, how can prayers offered by His people affect what He does? How can one Who says of Himself, “I change not” (Mal. 3:6), respond to the pleas of His people?

The answer to these things is surely to be found in what God declares through Isaiah: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8,9). We must recognise the limitations of our own feeble understanding of things, and accept in faith that it is the wish of our heavenly Father that we should petition Him, and do so in that faith.

Who should pray?

One way of answering this question is to make the point that all believers in Christ should pray. We need no human intermediaries to present our prayers to God; the way is open for us all to approach Him through Christ, and we are all equal before Him when we do so. Though, in accordance with Scriptural teaching, public prayer is offered on behalf of all by one brother, any brother capable of offering public prayer may do so; there is no special class that offers prayers on behalf of the rest.

Another aspect of this question is that of who is in a position to offer acceptable prayer, and this is addressed in more detail in the article, “The basis of prayer” (p. 145). Acceptable prayer requires both knowledge of God and His ways, and for the person offering prayer to be in a right relationship with God. A person cannot pray for God’s Kingdom to come if he does not know what the Kingdom is; a person cannot pray for the forgiveness of sins if he has not taken the necessary steps to put himself in a right relationship with God by belief and baptism.

These are general points, however, and need qualifying. Those who do not understand the gospel may, in response to their prayers, be brought to a situation in which they do understand it, and can then enter into the right relationship to God. We should set out to others the principles of approach to God, but it is God's prerogative whether or not He responds to a prayer offered by one unenlightened by the gospel. Cornelius prayed, and Peter came and preached the gospel to him. A young physician called John Thomas prayed in the extremity of a storm at sea, and undertook to search the Scriptures for the truth of things if he was saved. He was saved, and he did search the Scriptures, to the eternal benefit of us all.

But what of the unbaptized children of brethren and sisters? One could argue that they are in no different a position from others who are not baptized. In a sense this is true, for an individual response to the gospel is required for anyone to be in a right relationship to God. However, it would seem from Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 7:14 to the children of brethren and sisters being holy that such do have a different status from people in general in the world. It is the duty of all Christadelphian parents to instruct their children in the things of the Truth, and this will include the fact that seeking God in prayer is an important part of living the Truth, along with reading the Word of God and attendance at meetings. Children will be involved in giving thanks for food and in other simple prayers, and by the time they come to accept the Truth themselves prayer will seem a natural part of life in the Truth.

Principle and practice

This Special Issue on prayer is in two parts. The first is to do with the principles of prayer, and the second the practice of prayer.

In the first section we first look at some basic principles to do with prayer under the following titles:

- The basis of prayer
- The importance of prayer.

Our prayers will become more powerful if we discipline ourselves to express them, recognising them as part of a divine channel of grace. Grace is favour, and it is part of the condescending favour of Yahweh, to permit this great privilege of communing with Him . . . But our prayers lack power because they are . . . devoid of a sense of urgency. Let us really want something, let us be in dire need, let us be really moved by gratitude at some great blessing received, and suddenly our prayers will be charged with power.

We then look at some questions to do with prayer, as follows:

- How should we pray?
- What should we pray for?
- How is prayer answered?
- What hinders prayer?

Finally we consider some aspects of prayer which it is thought deserve separate treatment:

- Praise and thanksgiving
- Public prayer
- Prayer and meditation.

In the second part we consider the prayers of various men and women in the Bible in a number of articles, some longer, some shorter, beginning with a consideration of our Lord Jesus Christ as the supreme example of prayer, and all with the aim of improving our own prayers by considering good examples of prayer.

With twenty-two articles (besides this introduction) and nineteen different authors, there is inevitably some repetition between articles, but it has been decided generally to leave such repetition in rather than try to edit it out. This is perhaps most noticeable in the fact that four authors draw lessons from the offering of incense under the Law, and this may be taken to indicate that, despite efforts that have been made to disprove the idea that incense represents prayer, the case is a good one, being established by Revelation 5:8, which refers to "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (RV).

The subject of prayer is a vast one, and no claim is made that this Special Issue is comprehensive in its treatment of such an important subject. Besides repetition, there will also be omissions, some important ones. By no means every important prayer in Scripture is covered, and, in particular, justice is not really given to that vast reservoir of material about prayer, the book of Psalms. Nevertheless it is hoped that readers will find the articles that follow helpful in their individual prayer life, to the end that the quality of their approaches to the Father's throne of grace might be improved, and that the Brotherhood might be strengthened individually and collectively as we wait for our Lord's coming.

H. P. Mansfield, *Making Prayer Powerful*