
XI. Faiith of Sinners in Prayer

A certain preacher whose sermons converted many souls received a revelation from God that it was not his sermons or works by all means but the prayers of an illiterate lay brother who sat on the pulpit steps pleading for the success of the sermon. It may be in the all-revealing day so with us. We may believe after laboring long and wearily that all honor belongs to another builder whose prayers were gold, silver, and precious stones, while our sermonizings being apart from prayer are but hay and stubble.--Rev. C. H. Spurgeon.

One of the peculiar features of prayer as we study the Old Testament on this subject is the faith of unrighteous and backslidden men in prayer, and the great confidence they had in the prayers of praying men of that day. They knew certain men as men of prayer, who believed in God, who were favored of God and who prayed unto God. They recognized these men as having influence with God in averting wrath and in giving deliverance from evil.

Frequently when in trouble, when God's wrath was threatened and even when there were visitations of evil upon them for their iniquities, they showed their faith in prayer by appealing to the men who prayed, to beg God to avert His displeasure and turn aside His wrath against them. Recognizing the value of prayer as a divine agency to save men, they made application to the men who prayed, to intercede with God for them.

It is one of the strange paradoxes of those early days that while people departed from God, and went into grievous sin, they did not become either atheists nor unbelievers when it came to the question of the existence of a prayer-answering God. Wicked men held fast to a belief in God's existence, and to faith in the power of prayer to secure pardon for sin and to deliver them from God's wrath. It is worth something as showing the influence of the Church on sinners, when the latter believe in prayer and beg Christian people to pray for them. It is an item of interest and an event of importance when a sinner on a dying bed calls for a praying man to come to his bedside to pray for him. It means something when penitent sinners, under a sense of their guilt, feeling the displeasure of God, approach a church altar and say, "Pray for me, ye praying men and women." Little does the Church understand its full import, and still less does the Church appreciate and take in the full import of praying, especially for the unsaved men and women who ask them to pray for their immortal souls. If the Church was fully alive to God and awake to the real peril of the unconverted all about it, and was in a thriving state, more sinners would be found seeking the altars of the Church and crying out to praying people, "Pray for my soul."

Much so-called praying for sinners there may be, but it is cold, formal, official praying, which goes nowhere, never reaches God, and accomplishes nothing. Revivals begin when sinners seek the prayers of praying people.

Several things stand out in bold relief as we look at those Old Testament days:

First, the disposition of sinners against God to almost involuntarily turn to praying men for help and refuge when trouble draws near, and to invoke their prayers for relief and deliverance. "Pray for us" was their cry.

Second, the readiness with which those praying men responded to these appeals and prayed to God for those who desired this thing. Moreover, we are impressed with the fact that these praying men were always in the spirit of prayer and ready at any time to inquire of God. They were always keyed up on prayer.

Third, we note the wonderful influence these men of prayer had with God whenever they made their appeal to Him. God nearly always quickly responded and heard their praying for others. So intercessory prayer predominated in those early days of the Church.

It is a question worthy of earnest consideration, how far the present-day Church is responsible for the unbelief of sinners of these modern times in the value of prayer as an agency in averting God's wrath, in sparing barren lives and in giving deliverance. How far is the Church responsible for the precious few mourners in Zion in these times, who ignore your altar calls and treat with indifference your appeals to come and be prayed for?

The first illustration we notice as showing the faith of wicked men in prayer and their appeal for a man of God to intercede for them is the case of the fiery serpents sent upon the Israelites. They were journeying from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea, seeking to compass the land of Edom, when they spoke against God and Moses, after this fashion:

"Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread."

The thing so sorely displeased God that He sent fiery serpents among the people, and many of the people of Israel died.

"Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned because we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us." And Moses prayed for the people.

As far as these people had departed from God, and as great as was their sin in complaining against God's dealings with them, they had not lost faith in prayer, neither did they forget that there was a leader in Israel who had influence with God in prayer, and who could by that means avert disaster and bring deliverance to them.

Jeroboam, first King of the ten tribes when the kingdom was divided, was another case in point. This was a most noted case because of the notoriety of his departure from God, which was often referred to in the after history of Israel, as "the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat," and shows that despite his great wickedness in the sight of God, he did not lose his faith in the efficacy of prayer. This king on one occasion presumed to take the place of the high priest, and stood by the altar to burn incense. A man of God came out of Judah and cried against the altar and proclaimed, "Behold the altar shall be rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out." This angered Jeroboam, who saw

that it was intended as a public rebuke for him, who had undertaken contrary to the Levitical law to assume the office of God's priest, and the king put forth his hand with the apparent purpose of arresting or doing violence to the man of God, saying, at the same time to those about him, "Lay hold upon him."

Immediately God smote the king with leprosy, so that he could not pull his hand back again, and at the same time the altar was rent. Astonished beyond measure at this sudden retribution for his sin, coming like lightning from heaven, and very much afraid, he cried out to the man of God, "Entreat now the face of the Lord thy God for me, that my hand may be restored again." And it is recorded that "the man of God besought the Lord, and the king's hand was restored him again, and became as it was before."

Let us keep in mind that we are not now considering the praying habits of the man of God nor the possibilities of prayer, though both face us here. But rather we are finding just here that a ruler in Israel, guilty of a grievous sin, and departing from God, when God's wrath falls upon him, he immediately calls upon a praying man to intercede with God in his behalf. It is but another case where a sinner against God showed his faith in the virtue of the prayers of a man of God. Sad is the day in a Christian land, not only where there is the decay of prayer in the Church, []but where sinners are so unaffected by the religion of the Church that they have no faith in prayer and care little about the prayers of praying men.

Another illustration follows this case very quickly. The son of King Jeroboam fell sick, and was about to die. And this wicked, indifferent king, posted his wife off to Ahijah, the prophet of God, to ask him to say what would be the result of the illness of the child. She attempted to practice a deception upon the old prophet who was nearly blind, intending not to make herself known to him. But he had the vision of a prophet even though dim in sight, and immediately revealed to her that she was known to him. After telling her many things of vast importance concerning the kingdom and charging her husband that he had not kept God's commandments, but had gone into idolatry, he said to her: "Arise, therefore, and get thee down to thy house; and when thy feet enter into the city, the child shall die."

How natural for a father in trouble to appeal to a praying prophet for relief? And as in the first mentioned case, his sin did not blind his eyes to the value of having a man of God intercede for him. It availed nothing as was proved, but it did prove our contention that in Old Testament times sinners, while they were not themselves praying men, believed strongly in the prayers of praying men.

Take the instance of Johanan, just as the Children of Israel began their life of captivity in Babylon. Johanan and Jeremiah, with a small company, had been left in their native land, and Ishmael had conspired against Gedaliah, the appointed governor of the country, and had slain him. Johanan came to the rescue and delivered the people from Ishmael who was taking them away from their land. But Johanan wanted to flee down into Egypt, which was contrary to the Divine plan. At this particular juncture of affairs, he assembled all the people, and they went to Jeremiah with the earnest appeal:

"We beseech thee, let our supplication be accepted before thee, and pray for us unto the Lord thy God, that the Lord thy God may show us

the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do."

Like all other appeals to good men for prayer, Jeremiah interceded for these inquirers after the right way, and after ten days the answer came, and they were informed by Jeremiah what God would have them do. This was to the effect that they should not go down to Egypt, but remain in and about Jerusalem, but the people and Johanan played Jeremiah false, and refused to do as God had told them in answer to prayer. But it did not disprove the fact that they had faith in prayer and in praying men.

Another case may be noticed as showing the truth of our proposition that sinners had faith in prayer in the Old Testament dispensation, thus indirectly proving the preeminence of prayer in those days, for certainly prayer must have had a prominent place and its necessity must have received general recognition, when even sinners by their actions give endorsement to its virtue and necessity. Surely if sinners bore testimony to its worth, and at that time displayed their need of prayer, even by the prayers of some one else, Church people of this day ought to have a deep sense of its need, and should have strong faith in prayer and its virtue. And certainly if the men of Old Testament times were such men of prayer, and had such a reputation as praying men, then in this favored day, Christian men should be so given to prayer that they also would have a wide reputation as praying men.

Zedekiah was king of Judah just as the captivity of God's people began. He was in charge of the kingdom when Jerusalem was besieged by the King of Babylon. And it was just about this time that Zedekiah sent two chosen men unto Jeremiah saying: "Inquire, I pray thee, of the Lord for us; for Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, maketh war against us; if so be that the Lord will deal with us according to all his wondrous works, that he may go up from us."

And God told Jeremiah in answer to this inquiry what to do, and what would occur, but as in another case, that of Johanan, Zedekiah proved false, and would not do as God instructed Jeremiah to tell him. At the same time it proved conclusively that Zedekiah had not lost his faith in prayer as a means of finding out the mind of God, nor did it affect him in his belief in the virtue of the prayers of a praying man.

Verily, prayer must have had a preeminent place in all Old Testament history when not only the men of God were noted for their praying habits, but even men who departed from God and proved false bore testimony to its virtue by appealing to the men of prayer to make intercessions for them. This is so notorious in Old Testament history that no careful reader of these old scriptures can fail to discover and notice it.