

VI

"Nothing is impossible to industry," said one of the seven sages of Greece. Let us change the word industry for persevering prayer, and the motto will be more Christian and more worthy of universal adoption. I am persuaded that we are all more deficient in a spirit of prayer than in any other grace. God loves importunate prayer so much that He will not give us much blessing without it. And the reason that He loves such prayer is that He loves us and knows that it is a necessary preparation for our receiving the richest blessings which He is waiting and longing to bestow.

I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything but it came at some time--no matter at how distant a day, somehow, in some shape, probably the last I would have devised, it came.--Adoniram Judson

It is good, I find, to persevere in attempts to pray. If I cannot pray with perseverance or continue long in my address to the Divine Being, I have found that the more I do in secret prayer the more I have delight to do, and have enjoyed more of the spirit of prayer; and frequently I have found the contrary, when by journeying or otherwise, I have been deprived of retirement.--David Brainerd

Christ puts importunity as a distinguishing characteristic of true praying. We must not only pray, but we must pray with great urgency, with intentness and with repetition. We must not only pray, but we must pray again and again. We must not get tired of praying. We must be thoroughly in earnest, deeply concerned about the things for which we ask, for Jesus Christ made it very plain that the secret of prayer and its success lie in its urgency. We must press our prayers upon God.

In a parable of exquisite pathos and simplicity, our Lord taught not simply that men ought to pray, but that men ought to pray with full heartiness, and press the matter with vigorous energy and brave hearts.

"And He spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint; saying, There was in a city, a judge, which feared not God, and regarded not man: and there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterwards he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge saith. And shall not God avenge His elect, which cry to Him day and night, and He is longsuffering over them? I say unto you, that He will avenge them speedily. Howbeit when the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?"

This poor woman's case was a most hopeless one, but importunity brings hope from the realms of despair and creates success where neither success nor its conditions existed. There could be no stronger case, to show how unwearied and dauntless importunity gains its ends where everything else fails. The preface to this parable says: "He spake a parable to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint." He knew that men would soon get faint-hearted in praying, so to hearten us He gives this picture of the marvellous power of importunity.

The widow, weak and helpless, is helplessness personified; bereft of every hope and influence which could move an unjust judge, she yet wins

her case solely by her tireless and offensive importunity. Could the necessity of importunity, its power and tremendous importance in prayer, be pictured in deeper or more impressive colouring? It surmounts or removes all obstacles, overcomes every resisting force and gains its ends in the face of invincible hindrances. We can do nothing without prayer. All things can be done by importunate prayer.

That is the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Another parable spoken by Jesus enforces the same great truth. A man at midnight goes to his friend for a loan of bread. His pleas are strong, based on friendship and the embarrassing and exacting demands of necessity, but these all fail. He gets no bread, but he stays and presses, and waits and gains. Sheer importunity succeeds where all other pleas and influences had failed.

The case of the Syrophenician woman is a parable in action. She is arrested in her approaches to Christ by the information that He will not see anyone. She is denied His presence, and then in His presence is treated with seeming indifference, with the chill of silence and unconcern: she presses and approaches, the pressure and approach are repulsed by the stern and crushing statement that He is not sent to her kith or kind, that she is reprobated from His mission and power. She is humiliated by being called a dog. Yet she accepts all, overcomes all, wins all by her humble, dauntless, invincible importunity. The Son of God, pleased, surprised, overpowered by her unconquerable importunity, says to her: "O, woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt." Jesus Christ surrenders Himself to the importunity of a great faith. "And shall not God avenge His own elect which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them?"

Jesus Christ puts ability to importune as one of the elements of prayer, one of the main conditions of prayer. The prayer of the Syrophenician woman is an exhibition of the matchless power of importunity, of a conflict more real and involving more of vital energy, endurance, and all the higher elements than was ever illustrated in the conflicts of Isthmia or Olympia.

The first lessons of importunity are taught in the Sermon on the Mount--"Ask, and it shall be given; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened." These are steps of advance--"For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."

Without continuance the prayer may go unanswered. Importunity is made up of the ability to hold on, to press on, to wait with unrelaxed and unrelaxable grasp, restless desire and restful patience. Importunate prayer is not an incident, but the main thing, not a performance but a passion, not a need but a necessity.

Prayer in its highest form and grandest success assumes the attitude of a wrestler with God. It is the contest, trial and victory of faith; a victory not secured from an enemy, but from Him who tries our faith that He may enlarge it: that tests our strength to make us stronger. Few things give such quickened and permanent vigour to the soul as a long exhaustive season of importunate prayer. It makes an experience, an epoch, a new calendar for the spirit, a new life to religion, a soldierly training. The Bible never wearies in its pressure and illustration of the fact that the highest spiritual good is secured as

the return of the outgoing of the highest form of spiritual effort. There is neither encouragement nor room in Bible religion for feeble desires, listless efforts, lazy attitudes; all must be strenuous, urgent, ardent. Inflamed desires, impassioned, unwearied insistence delight heaven. God would have His children incorrigibly in earnest and persistently bold in their efforts. Heaven is too busy to listen to half-hearted prayers or to respond to pop-calls.

Our whole being must be in our praying; like John Knox, we must say and feel, "Give me Scotland, or I die." Our experience and revelations of God are born of our costly sacrifice, our costly conflicts, our costly praying. The wrestling, all night praying, of Jacob made an era never to be forgotten in Jacob's life, brought God to the rescue, changed Esau's attitude and conduct, changed Jacob's character, saved and affected his life and entered into the habits of a nation.

Our seasons of importunate prayer cut themselves like the print of a diamond, into our hardest places, and mark with ineffaceable traces our characters. They are the salient periods of our lives! The memorial stones which endure and to which we turn.

Importunity, it may be repeated, is a condition of prayer. We are to press the matter, not with vain repetitions, but with urgent repetitions. We repeat, not to count the times, but to gain the prayer. We cannot quit praying because heart and soul are in it. We pray "with all perseverance." We hang to our prayers because by them we live. We press our pleas because we must have them or die. Christ gives us two most expressive parables to emphasise the necessity of importunity in praying. Perhaps Abraham lost Sodom by failing to press to the utmost his privilege of praying. Joash, we know, lost because he stayed his smiting.

Perseverance counts much with God as well as with man. If Elijah had ceased at his first petition the heavens would have scarcely yielded their rain to his feeble praying. If Jacob had quit praying at decent bedtime he would scarcely have survived the next day's meeting with Esau. If the Syrophenician woman had allowed her faith to faint by silence, humiliation, repulse, or stop mid-way its struggles, her grief-stricken home would never have been brightened by the healing of her daughter.

Pray and never faint, is the motto Christ gives us for praying. It is the test of our faith, and the severer the trial and the longer the waiting, the more glorious the results.

The benefits and necessity of importunity are taught by Old Testament saints. Praying men must be strong in hope, and faith, and prayer. They must know how to wait and to press, to wait on God and be in earnest in our approaches to Him.

Abraham has left us an example of importunate intercession in his passionate pleading with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, and if, as already indicated, he had not ceased in his asking, perhaps God would not have ceased in His giving.

"Abraham left off asking before God left off granting." Moses taught the power of importunity when he interceded for Israel forty days and forty nights, by fasting and prayer. And he succeeded in his importunity.

Jesus, in His teaching and example, illustrated and perfected this principle of Old Testament pleading and waiting. How strange that the only Son of God, who came on a mission direct from His Father, whose only heaven on earth, whose only life and law were to do His Father's will in that mission--what a mystery that He should be under the law of prayer, that the blessings which came to Him were impregnated and purchased by prayer; stranger still that importunity in prayer was the process by which His wealthiest supplies from God were gained. Had He not prayed with importunity, no transfiguration would have been in His history, no mighty works had rendered Divine His career. His all-night praying was that which filled with compassion and power His all-day work. The importunate praying of His life crowned His death with its triumph. He learned the high lesson of submission to God's will in the struggles of importunate prayer before He illustrated that submission so sublimely on the cross.

"Whether we like it or not," said Mr. Spurgeon, "asking is the rule of the kingdom." "Ask, and ye shall receive." It is a rule that never will be altered in anybody's case. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the elder brother of the family, but God has not relaxed the rule for Him. Remember this text: Jehovah says to His own Son, "Ask of Me, and I will give Thee the heaven for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession." If the Royal and Divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that He may have, you and I cannot expect the rule to be relaxed in our favour. Why should it be? What reason can be pleaded why we should be exempted from prayer? What argument can there be why we should be deprived of the privilege and delivered from the necessity of supplication? I can see none: can you? God will bless Elijah and send rain on Israel, but Elijah must pray for it. If the chosen nation is to prosper, Samuel must plead for it. If the Jews are to be delivered, Daniel must intercede. God will bless Paul, and the nations shall be converted through him, but Paul must pray. Pray he did without ceasing; his epistles show that he expected nothing except by asking for it. If you may have everything by asking, and nothing without asking, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is, and I beseech you to abound in it."

There is not the least doubt that much of our praying fails for lack of persistency. It is without the fire and strength of perseverance. Persistence is of the essence of true praying. It may not be always called into exercise, but it must be there as the reserve force. Jesus taught that perseverance is the essential element of prayer. Men must be in earnest when they kneel at God's footstool.

Too often we get faint-hearted and quit praying at the point where we ought to begin. We let go at the very point where we should hold on strongest. Our prayers are weak because they are not impassioned by an unfailing and resistless will.

God loves the importunate pleader, and sends him answers that would never have been granted but for the persistency that refuses to let go until the petition craved for is granted.
