

I. PRAYER ESSENTIAL TO GOD

"Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. 14th verse: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."--Isaiah 58:9.

It must never be forgotten that Almighty God rules this world. He is not an absentee God. His hand is ever on the throttle of human affairs. He is everywhere present in the concerns of time. "His eyes behold, his eyelids try the children of men." He rules the world just as He rules the Church by prayer. This lesson needs to be emphasized, iterated and reiterated in the ears of men of modern times and brought to bear with cumulative force on the consciences of this generation whose eyes have no vision for the eternal things, whose ears are deaf toward God.

Nothing is more important to God than prayer in dealing with mankind. But it is likewise all-important to man to pray. Failure to pray is failure along the whole line of life. It is failure of duty, service, and spiritual progress. God must help man by prayer. He who does not pray, therefore, robs himself of God's help and places God where He cannot help man. Man must pray to God if love for God is to exist. Faith and hope, and patience and all the strong, beautiful, vital forces of piety are withered and dead in a prayerless life. The life of the individual believer, his personal salvation, and personal Christian graces have their being, bloom and fruitage in prayer.

All this and much more can be said as to the necessity of prayer to the being, and culture of piety in the individual. But prayer has a larger sphere, a more obligated duty, a loftier inspiration. Prayer concerns God, whose purposes and plans are conditioned on prayer. His will and His glory are bound up in praying. The days of God's splendour and renown have always been the great days of prayer. God's great movements in this world have been conditioned on, continued and fashioned by prayer. God has put Himself in these great movements just as men have prayed. Present, prevailing, conspicuous and mastering prayer has always brought God to be present. The real and obvious test of a genuine work of God is the prevalence of the spirit of prayer. God's mightiest forces surcharge and impregnate a movement when prayer's mightiest forces are there.

God's movement to bring Israel from Egyptian bondage had its inception in prayer. Thus early did God and the human race put the fact of prayer as one of the granite forces upon which His world movements were to be based.

Hannah's petition for a son began a great prayer movement for God in Israel. Praying women, whose prayers like those of Hannah, can give to the cause of God men like Samuel, do more for the Church and the world than all the politicians on earth. Men born of prayer are the saviours of the state, and men saturated with prayer give life and impetus to the Church. Under God they are saviours and helpers of both Church and state.

We must believe that the divine record of the facts about prayer and God are given in order that we might be constantly reminded of Him, and be ever refreshed by the faith that God holds His Church for the entire world, and that God's purpose will be fulfilled. His plans concerning

the Church will most assuredly and inevitably be carried out. That record of God has been given without doubt that we may be deeply impressed that the prayers of God's saints are a great factor, a supreme factor, in carrying forward God's work, with facility and in time. When the Church is in the condition of prayer God's cause always flourishes and His kingdom on earth always triumphs. When the Church fails to pray, God's cause decays and evil of every kind prevails. In other words, God works through the prayers of His people, and when they fail Him at this point, decline and deadness ensue. It is according to the divine plans that spiritual prosperity comes through the prayer-channel. Praying saints are God's agents for carrying on His saving and providential work on earth. If His agents fail Him, neglecting to pray, then His work fails. Praying agents of the Most High are always forerunners of spiritual prosperity.

The men of the Church of all ages who have held the Church for God have had in affluent fullness and richness the ministry of prayer. The rulers of the Church which the Scriptures reveal have had preeminence in prayer. Eminent, they may have been, in culture, in intellect and in all the natural or human forces; or they may have been lowly in physical attainments and native gifts; yet in each case prayer was the all potent force in the rulership of the Church. And this was so because God was with and in what they did, for prayer always carries us back to God. It recognizes God and brings God into the world to work and save and bless. The most efficient agents in disseminating the knowledge of God, in prosecuting His work upon the earth, and in standing as breakwater against the billows of evil, have been praying Church leaders. God depends upon them, employs them and blesses them.

Prayer cannot be retired as a secondary force in this world. To do so is to retire God from the movement. It is to make God secondary. The prayer ministry is an all-engaging force. It must be so, to be a force at all. Prayer is the sense of God's need and the call for God's help to supply that need. The estimate and place of prayer is the estimate and place of God. To give prayer the secondary place is to make God secondary in life's affairs. To substitute other forces for prayer, retires God and materializes the whole movement.

Prayer is an absolute necessity to the proper carrying on of God's work. God has made it so. This must have been the principal reason why in the early Church, when the complaint that the widows of certain believers had been neglected in the daily administration of the Church's benefactions, that the twelve called the disciples together, and told them to look out for seven men, "full of the Holy Ghost, and wisdom," who they would appoint over that benevolent work, adding this important statement, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." They surely realized that the success of the Word and the progress of the Church were dependent in a preeminent sense upon their "giving themselves to prayer." God could effectively work through them in proportion as they gave themselves fully to prayer.

The Apostles were as dependent upon prayer as other folks. Sacred work, --Church activities--may so engage and absorb us as to hinder praying, and when this is the case, evil results always follow. It is better to let the work go by default than to let the praying go by neglect. Whatever affects the intensity of our praying affects the value of our work. "Too busy to pray" is not only the keynote to backsliding, but it mars even the work done. Nothing is well done

without prayer for the simple reason that it leaves God out of the account. It is so easy to be seduced by the good to the neglect of the best, until both the good and the best perish. How easily may men, even leaders in Zion, be led by the insidious wiles of Satan to cut short our praying in the interests of the work! How easy to neglect prayer or abbreviate our praying simply by the plea that we have Church work on our hands. Satan has effectively disarmed us when he can keep us too busy doing things to stop and pray.

"Give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word." The Revised Version has it, "We will continue steadfastly in prayer." The implication of the word used here means to be strong, steadfast, to be devoted to, to keep at it with constant care, to make a business out of it. We find the same word in Col. 4:12, and in Romans 12:12, which is translated, "Continuing instant in prayer."

The Apostles were under the law of prayer, which law recognizes God as God, and depends upon Him to do for them what He would not do without prayer. They were under the necessity of prayer, just as all believers are, in every age and in every clime. They had to be devoted to prayer in order to make their ministry of the Word efficient. The business of preaching is worth very little without it be in direct partnership with the business of praying. Apostolic preaching cannot be carried on unless there be apostolic praying. Alas, that this plain truth has been so easily forgotten by those who minister in holy things! Without in any way passing a criticism on the ministry, we feel it to be high time that somebody or other declared to its members that effective preaching is conditioned on effective praying. The preaching which is most successful is that ministry which has much of prayer in it. Perhaps one might go so far as to say that it is the only kind that is successful. God can mightily use the preacher who prays. He is God's chosen messenger for good, whom the Holy Spirit delights to honour, God's efficient agent in saving men and in edifying the saints.

In Acts 6:1-8 we have the record of how, long ago, the Apostles felt that they were losing--had lost--in apostolic power because they did not have relief from certain duties in order that they might give themselves more to prayer. So they called a halt because they discovered to their regret that they were too deficient in praying. Doubtless they kept up the form of praying, but it was seriously defective in intensity and in point of the amount of time given to it. Their minds were too much preoccupied with the finances of the Church. Just as in this day we find in many places both laymen and ministers are so busily engaged in "serving tables," that they are glaringly deficient in praying. In fact in present-day Church affairs men are looked upon as religious because they give largely of their money to the Church, and men are chosen for official positions not because they are men of prayer, but because they have the financial ability to run Church finances and to get money for the Church.

Now these Apostles, when they looked into this matter, determined to put aside these hindrances growing out of Church finances, and resolved to "give themselves to prayer." Not that these finances were to be ignored or set aside, but ordinary laymen, "full of faith and the Holy Ghost" could be found, really religious men, who could easily attend to this money business without in the least affecting their piety or their praying, thus giving them something to do in the Church, and at the same time taking the burden from the Apostles who would be able now to pray more, and praying more, to be blessed themselves in soul, and at

the same time to more effectually do the work to which they had been called.

They realized, too, as they had not realized before, that they were being so pressed by attention to material things, things right in themselves, that they could not give to prayer that strength, ardour, and time which its nature and importance demanded. And so we will discover, under close scrutiny of ourselves sometimes, that things legitimate, things right in themselves, things commendable, may so engross our attention, so preoccupy our minds and so draw on our feelings, that prayer may be omitted, or at least very little time may be given to prayer. How easy to slip away from the closet! Even the Apostles had to guard themselves at that point. How much do we need to watch ourselves at the same place! Things legitimate and right may become wrong when they take the place of prayer. Things right in themselves may become wrong things when they are allowed to fasten themselves inordinately upon our hearts. It is not only the sinful things which hurt prayer. It is not alone questionable things which are to be guarded against. But it is things which are right in their places, but which are allowed to sidetrack prayer and shut the closet door, often with the self-comforting plea that "we are too busy to pray."

Possibly this has had as much to do with the breaking down of family prayer in this age as any other one cause. It is at this point that family religion has decayed, and just here is one cause of the decline of the prayer meeting. Men and women are too busy with legitimate things to "give themselves to prayer." Other things are given the right of way. Prayer is set aside or made secondary. Business comes first. And this means not always that prayer is second, but that prayer is put entirely out. The Apostles drove directly at this point, and determined that even Church business should not affect their praying habits. Prayer must come first. Then would they be in deed and truth God's real agents in His world, through whom He could effectually work, because they were praying men, and thereby put themselves directly in line with His plans and purposes, which was that He works through praying men.

When the complaint came to their ears the Apostles discovered that that which they had been doing did not fully serve the divine ends of peace, gratitude, and unity, but discontent, complainings, and division were the result of their work, which had far too little prayer in it. And so prayer was put prominently to the front.

Praying men are a necessity in carrying out the divine plan for the salvation of men. God has made it so. He it is who established prayer as a divine ordinance, and this implies men are to do the praying. So that praying men are a necessity in the world. The fact that so often God has employed men of prayer to accomplish His ends clearly proves the proposition. It is altogether unnecessary to name all the instances where God used the prayers of righteous men to carry out His gracious designs. Time and space are too limited for the list. Yet one or two cases might be named. In the case of the golden calf, when God purposed to destroy the Israelites because of their great sin of idolatry, at the time when Moses was receiving the law at God's hands, the very being of Israel was imperilled, for Aaron had been swept away by the strong popular tide of unbelief and sin. All seemed lost but Moses and prayer, and prayer became more efficient and wonder-working in behalf of Israel than Aaron's magic rod. God was determined on the destruction of Israel and Aaron. His anger waxed hot. It was a fearful and a

critical hour. But prayer was the levee which held back heaven's desolating fury. God's hand was held fast by the interceding of Moses, the mighty intercessor.

Moses was set on delivering Israel. It was with him a long and exhaustive struggle of praying for forty days and forty nights. Not for one moment did he relax his hold on God. Not for one moment did he quit his place at the feet of God, even for food. Not for one moment did he moderate his demand or ease his cry. Israel's existence was in the balance. Almighty God's wrath must be stayed. Israel must be saved at all hazards. And Israel was saved. Moses would not let God alone. And so, today, we can look back and give the credit of the present race of the Jews to the praying of Moses centuries ago.

Persevering prayer always wins; God yields to importunity and fidelity. He has no heart to say No to such praying as Moses did. Actually God's purpose to destroy Israel is changed by the praying of this man of God. It is but an illustration of how much just one praying is worth in this world, and how much depends upon him.

When Daniel, in Babylon, refused to obey the decree of the king not to ask any petition of any god or man for thirty days, he shut his eyes to the decree which would shut him off from his praying room, and refused to be deterred from calling upon God from fear of the consequences. So he "kneeled upon his knees three times a day", and prayed as he had before done, leaving it all with God as to the consequences of thus disobeying the king.

There was nothing impersonal about Daniel's praying. It always had an objective, and was an appeal to a great God, who could do all things. There was no coddling of self, nor looking after subjective or reflex influences. In the face of the dreadful decree which is to precipitate him from place and power, into the lion's den, "he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and gave thanks to God as aforetime." The gracious result was that prayer laid its hands upon an Almighty arm, which interposed in that den of vicious, cruel lions and closed their mouths and preserved His servant Daniel, who had been true to Him and who had called upon Him for protection. Daniel's praying was an essential factor in defeating the king's decree and in discomfiting the wicked, envious rulers, who had set the trap for Daniel in order to destroy him and remove him from place and power in the kingdom.