

XII. MODERN EXAMPLES OF PRAYER (Continued)

"Edward Bounds did not merely pray well that he might write well about prayer. He prayed for long years upon subjects to which easy-going Christians rarely give a thought. He prayed for objects which men of less faith are ready to call impossible. Yet from these continental, solitary prayer-vigils, year by year there arose a gift of prayer-teaching equaled by few men. He wrote transcendently about prayer because he was transcendent in its practice."--C. L. Chilton, Jr.

Lady Maxwell was contemporary with John Wesley, and a fruit of Methodism in its earlier phases. She was a woman of refinement, of culture and of deep piety. Separating herself entirely from the world, she sought and found the deepest religious experience, and was a woman fully set apart to God. Her life was one of prayer, of complete consecration to God, living to bless others. She was noted for her systematic habits of life, which entered into and controlled her religion. Her time was economized and ordered for God. She arose at four o'clock in the morning, and attended preaching at five o'clock. After breakfast she held a family service. Then, from eleven to twelve o'clock she observed a season of intercessory prayer. The rest of the day was given to reading, visiting and acts of benevolence.

Her evenings were spent in reading. At night, before retiring, religious services were held for the family and sometimes in praising God for His mercies.

Rarely has God been served with more intelligence, or out of a richer experience, a nobler ardour, a richer nobility of soul. Strongly, spiritually and ardently attached to Wesley's doctrine of entire dedication, she sought it with persistency, and a never flagging zeal. She obtained it by faith and prayer, and illustrated it in a life as holy and as perfect as is given mortals to reach. If this great feature of Wesley's teaching had, today, models and teachers possessed of the profound spiritual understanding and experience as had Fletcher of Madeley and Lady Maxwell of Edinburgh, it would not have been so misunderstood, but would have commended itself to the good and pure everywhere by holy lives, if not by its verbiage.

Lady Maxwell's diary yields some rich counsel for secret prayer, holy experience, and consecrated living. One of the entries runs as follows:

"Of late I feel painfully convinced that I do not pray enough. Lord, give me the spirit of prayer and of supplication. Oh, what a cause of thankfulness is it that we have a gracious God to whom to go on all occasions! Use and enjoy this privilege and you can never be miserable. Who gives thanks for this royal privilege? It puts God in everything, His wisdom, power, control and safety. Oh, what an unspeakable privilege is prayer! Let us give thanks for it, I do not prove all the power of prayer that I wish."

Thus we see that the remedy for non-praying is praying. The cure for little praying is more praying. Praying can procure all things necessary for our good.

With this excellent woman praying embraced all things and included everything. To one of her most intimate friends she writes:

"I wish I could provide you with a proper maid, but it is a difficult matter. You have my prayers for it, and if I hear of one I will let you know."

So small a matter as the want of a housemaid for a friend was with her an event not too small to take to God in prayer.

In the same letter, she tells her friend that she wants "more faith. Cry mightily for it, and stir up the gift of God that is in you."

Whether the need was a small secular thing as a servant, or a great spiritual grace, prayer was the means to attain that end and supply that want. "There is nothing," she writes to a dear correspondent, "so hurtful to the nervous system as anxiety. It preys upon the vitals and weakens the whole frame, and what is more than all, it grieves the Holy Spirit." Her remedy, again, for a common evil, was prayer.

How prayer disburdens us of care by bringing God in to relieve and possess and hold?

"Be careful for nothing," says the Apostle, "but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

The figure is that of a beleaguered and distressed garrison, unable to protect the fort from the enemies which assault it, into which strong reinforcements are poured. Into the heart oppressed, distracted and discouraged, true prayer brings God, who holds it in perfect peace and in perfect safety. This Lady Maxwell fully understood theoretically, but which was better, experimentally.

Christ Jesus is the only cure for undue care and over anxiety of soul, and we secure God, His presence and His peace by prayer. Care is so natural and so strong, that none but God can eject it. It takes God, the presence and personality of God Himself, to oust the care and to enthroned quietness and peace. When Christ comes in with His peace, all tormenting fears are gone, trepidation and harrowing anxieties capitulate to the reign of peace, and all disturbing elements depart. Anxious thought and care assault the soul, and feebleness, faintness and cowardice are within. Prayer reinforces with God's peace, and the heart is kept by Him. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee." All now is safety, quietness and assurance. "The work of righteousness is peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever."

But to ensure this great peace, prayer must pass into strenuous, insistent, personal supplication, and thanksgiving must bloom into full flower. Our exposed condition of heart must be brought to the knowledge of God, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving. The peace of God will keep the heart and thoughts, fixed and fearless. Peace, deep, exhaustless, wide, flowing like a river, will come in.

Referring again to Lady Maxwell, we hear her saying:

"God is daily teaching me more simplicity of spirit, and makes me willing to receive all as His unmerited gift, and to call on Him for everything I need, as I need it, and He supplies my wants according to existing needs. But I have certainly felt more of it this last eighteen

months than in former periods. I wish to pray without ceasing. I see the necessity of praying always, and not fainting."

Again we hear her declaring: "I wish to be much in prayer. I greatly need it. The prayer of faith shuts or opens heaven. Come, Lord, and turn my captivity." If we felt the need of prayer as this saintly woman did, we could bear her company in her saintly ascension. Prayer truly "shuts or opens heaven." Oh, for a quality of faith that would test to the uttermost the power of prayer!

Lady Maxwell utters a great truth when she says:

"When God is at work either among a people, or in the heart of an individual, the adversary of souls is peculiarly at work also. A belief of the former should prevent discouragement, and a fear of the latter should stir us up to much prayer. Oh, the power of faithful prayer! I live by prayer! May you prove its sovereign efficacy in every difficult case."

We find a record among Lady Maxwell's writings which shows us that in prayer and meditation she obtained enlarged views of the full salvation of God, and what is thus discovered, faith goes out after, and according to its strength are its returns.

"I daily feel the need of the precious blood of sprinkling," she says, "and dwell continually under its influence, and most sensibly feel its sovereign efficacy. It is by momentary faith in this blood alone that I am saved from sin. Prayer is my chief employ."

If this last statement "prayer, the chief employ" had ever been true of God's people, this world would have been by this time quite another world, and God's glory, instead of being dim, and shadowy, and only in spots, would now shine with universal and unrivaled effulgence and power.

Here is another record of her ardent and faithful praying: "Lately, I have been favoured with a more ardent spirit of praying than almost ever formerly."

We need to study these words--"favoured with a more ardent spirit of praying"--for they are pregnant words. The spirit of prayer, the ardent spirit of prayer and its increase, and the more ardent spirit of prayer--all these are of God. They are given in answer to prayer. The spirit of prayer and the more ardent spirit are the result of ardent, importunate secret prayer.

At another time, Lady Maxwell declared that secret prayer was the means whereby she derived the greatest spiritual benefit.

"I do indeed prove it to be an especial privilege," she says. "I could not live without it, though I do not always find comfort in it. I still ardently desire an enlarged sphere of usefulness, and find it comfortable to embrace the opportunities afforded me."

An "enlarged sphere of usefulness" is certainly a proper theme of intense prayer, but that prayer must ever be accompanied with an improvement of the opportunities afforded by the present.

Many pages might be filled with extracts from Lady Maxwell's diary as

to the vital importance of, and the nature of the ministry of prayer, but we must forbear. For many years she was in ardent supplication for an enlargement of her sphere of usefulness, but all these years of ardent praying may be condensed into one statement:

"My whole soul has been thirsting after a larger sphere of action," she says, "agreeably to the promises of a faithful God. For these few last weeks I have been led to plead earnestly for more holiness. Lord, give me both, that I may praise Thee."

These two things, for which this godly woman prayed, must go together. They are one, and not to be separated. The desire for a larger field of work without the accompanying desire for an increase of consecration, is perilous, and may be supremely selfish, the offspring of spiritual pride.

John Fletcher, also a contemporary of John Wesley, was intimately associated with the founder of Methodism. He was a scholar of courtesy and refinement, a strong, original thinker, eloquent in simplicity and truth. That which qualified him as a spiritual leader was his exceedingly great faith in God, his nearness to God and his perfect assurance of dear unquestioned relationship to his Lord. Fletcher had profound convictions concerning the truth of God, a deep and perpetual communion with his Lord and Saviour, and was profound and humble in his knowledge of God and Christian experience. He was a man of deep spiritual insight into the things of God, and his thorough earnestness, his truth, and his consecration, marked him as a man of God, well equipped by all these things for a leader in Israel.

Unceasing prayer was the sign and secret of Fletcher's sainthood, its power and influence. His whole life was one of prayer. So intently was his mind fixed on God, that he sometimes said, "I would not rise from my seat without lifting up my heart to God." A friend relates the fact that whenever they met, his first salute was, "Do I meet you praying?" If they were talking on theology, in the midst of it he would break off abruptly and say, "Where are our hearts now?" If the misconduct of any person who was absent was mentioned, he would say, "Let us pray for him."

The very walls of his room--so it was said--were stained by the breath of his prayers. Spiritually, Madeley was a dreary, desolate desert when he went to live there, but it was so revolutionized by his prayers that it bloomed and blossomed like the garden of the Lord. A friend of his thus writes of Fletcher:

"Many of us have at times gone with him aside, and there we would continue for two or three hours, wrestling like Jacob for the blessing, praying one after another. And I have seen him on these occasions so filled with the love of God that he could contain no more, but would cry out, O my God, withhold Thy hand or the vessel will burst! His whole life was a life of prayer."

John Foster, a man of exalted piety and deep devotion to God, while on his dying bed, thus spoke concerning prayer when about to depart this life:

"Pray without ceasing has been the sentence repeating itself in my silent thoughts, and I am sure that it will be, it must be, my practice till the last conscious hour of my life. O why was it not my practice

throughout that long, indolent, inanimate half century past! I often think mournfully of the difference it would have made in me. Now there remains so little time for a mere genuine, effective spiritual life."

The Reformation of the fifteenth century owes its origin to prayer. In all his life-work, begun, continued and ended, Martin Luther was instant in prayer. The secret of his extraordinary activity is found in this statement: "I have so much work to do that I cannot get along without giving three hours daily of my best time to prayer." Another of his sayings was, "It takes meditation and prayer to make a divine," while his every day motto was, "He that has prayed well, has studied well."

At another time he thus confessed his lack: "I was short and superficial in prayer this morning," he says. How often is this the case with us! Let it be remembered that the source of decline in religion and the proof of decline in a Christian life is found just here, in "short and superficial praying." Such praying betokens and secures strangeness with God.

William Wilberforce once said of himself: "I have been keeping too late hours, and hence have had but a hurried half hour to myself. I am lean and cold and hard. I had better allow more time, say two hours, or an hour-and-a-half, daily to religious exercises."

He must be much skilled and habituated to long praying whose short prayers are not superficial. Short prayers make shallow lives. Longer praying would work like magic in many a decayed spiritual life. A holy life would not be so difficult and rare a thing if our praying was not so brief, cold and superficial.

George Muller, that remarkable man of such simple yet strong faith in God, a man of prayer and Bible reading, founder and promoter of the noted orphanage in England, which cared for hundreds of orphan children, conducted the institution solely by faith and prayer. He never asked a man for anything, but simply trusted in the Providence of God, and it is a notorious fact that never did the inmates of the home lack any good thing. From his paper he always excluded money matters, and financial difficulties found no place in it. Nor would he mention the sums which had been given him, nor the names of those who made contributions. He never spoke of his wants to others nor asked a donation. The story of his life and the history of this orphanage read like a chapter from the Scriptures. The secret of his success was found in this simple statement made by him: "I went to my God and prayed diligently, and received what I needed." That was the simple course which he pursued. There was nothing he insisted on with greater earnestness than that, be the expenses what they might be, let them increase ever so suddenly, he must not beg for anything. There was nothing in which he took more delight and showed more earnestness in telling than that he had prayed for every want which ever came to him in his great work. His was a work of continuous and most importunate praying, and he always confidently claimed that God had guided him throughout it all. A stronger proof of a divine providence, and of the power of simple faith and of answered prayer, cannot be found in Church history or religious biography.

In writing to a friend at one time. John Wesley helps, urges and prays, as we will see from the following from his own pen: "Have you received a gleam of light from above, a spark of faith? If you have, let it not

go! Hold fast by His grace that earnest of your inheritance. Come just as you are, and come boldly to the throne of grace. You need not delay. Even now the bowels of Jesus yearn over you. What have you to do with tomorrow? I love you today. And how much more does He love you?

"He pities still His wandering sheep,

And longs to bring you to His fold.'

"Today hear His voice, the voice of Him that speaks as never man spake."

The seekings of Madame Guyon after God were sincere, and her yearnings were strong and earnest. She applied to a devout Franciscan friar for advice and comfort. She stated her convictions and told him of her long and fruitless seeking. After she had finished speaking to him, the friar remained silent for some time, in inward meditation and prayer. Then he said to her:

"Your efforts have been unsuccessful, because you have sought without what you can only find within. Accustom yourself to seek God in your heart, and you will not fail to find Him."

"When God has specially promised the thing," said Charles G. Finney, "we are bound to believe we shall receive it when we pray for it. You have no right to put in an if,' and say, Lord, if it be Thy will, give me Thy Holy Spirit.' This is to insult God. To put an if' in God's promise when God has put none there, is tantamount to charging God with being insincere. It is like saying, O God, if Thou art in earnest in making these promises, grant us the blessing we pray for.'"

We may fittingly conclude this chapter by quoting a word of Adoniram Judson's, the noted missionary to Burma. Speaking of the prevailing power of prayer he said:

"Nothing is impossible,' said one of the seven sages of Greece, to industry.' Let us change the word, industry,' to persevering prayer,' and the motto will be more Christian and more worthy of universal adoption. God loves importunate prayer so much that He will not give us much blessing without it. God says, Behold I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. This people have I formed for myself; they shall shew forth my praise.'"