

Mark 3:9 (George Hogarth Carnaby MacGregor) 122382

Lord, Teach Us to Pray, Lord, Teach Us to Pray

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One of the greatest needs of the world today, and one of the greatest needs of the Church, is men of prayer. But this need is not one that can easily be met, because it is a most wonderful thing, and very few of us really know what it means. It is by prayer that we get right into contact with God, into fellowship with Him: and the reason that the lives of many of us are so poor and weak is that we do not know how to pray. We do not know what that fellowship with God is, what that true prayer means; and because we do not know that, our lives are as they are.

Turn with me to the Scriptures, that we may learn some lessons about prayer, and that we may hear the voice of God Himself through His holy Word.

I propose to deal with some of the New Testament teaching about prayer, and to take four words, which each have a lesson for us, and in which we may trace the development of the teaching of the Word of God about prayer. I think that as we look into these words, we shall feel that in this matter of Prayer, notwithstanding how long we have known God, we are only beginners.

The first word we draw attention to brings this lesson to us—a very startling one: Be sober when you pray. You will find that startling message in 1 Peter 4:7. If you look at the Authorized Version you will find it runs thus: 'The end of all things is at hand; be ye therefore sober and watch unto prayer.' Did you ever look at the Revised Version, which often is more accurate? You will find that in it the words are, 'Be ye therefore of sound mind, and be sober unto prayer.' The word here used is a very startling one, and the literal meaning of it is to abstain from wine. It is used six times in the New Testament: three times by the Apostle Peter and three times by the Apostle Paul. In four cases out of the six, in our Bibles, it is translated to be sober, and in the other two cases it would have been better had uniformity of translation been observed, for this message is a message that is very much needed by us. The message here is so startling that commentators have tried to explain it away, yet the solemn lesson of it is so obvious that we all need to take it to heart, if we are ever to learn to pray, and in prayer to begin to have fellowship with God in which the soul finds a cure for all the soul's diseases, There are many things that intoxicate which are not wine. It is possible to be intoxicated with worldly gaiety, and, when the very brain is reeling after indulgence in the pleasures of the world, to try to come to God in prayer. How many a young lady has come home from a ball, and when the whole being was in a whirl, in the intoxication of worldly pleasure, she has tried to kneel down to pray, and has found it utterly impossible! How many a Christian man comes home from business, intoxicated with the affairs of business, with his whole mind submerged in business; below the flood of business cares, and with all this care on his mind, he kneels down to pray, and he cannot pray. How many Christian men or women can be intoxicated with pride, because some rival has outstripped them in the race, because some slight has been given, some insult has been offered, and with the whole spirit drunk with pride, these persons try to pray, and find it utterly impossible! Yes, and how many a man, and how many a woman, has come to God in prayer, drunk with vanity,—vanity to which friends have most injudiciously ministered, and the little soul, swelling with vanity, comes into the presence of the great and holy God!

Oh! how this cuts into our heart! Do you not think it is quite possible for a preacher of the Gospel, after he has preached, when he thinks he has done well, to close the service with prayer, and his mind be drunk with the thought of how well he has spoken?

Now this verse says, Be sober when you pray. It says that all these things must come out of our heart and spirit if we are to know what fellowship with God is. I think that many of us are lacking in reverence with regard to prayer. We dwell very much on the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of that wonderful access which He gives us into the Lord's presence. We dwell very much on the tenderness of God to poor sinners, and of His willingness to meet them. But I sometimes fear we lose sight of the greatness and majesty of God. When we are engaging in an exercise so tremendously solemn as prayer, what this would mean is in effect: Bring to the exercise of prayer a penitent, contrite, clear, sound mind, a mind from which these hindrances, and sins just referred to, have been definitely and by the help of God, put away.

Now, will you take it home as I try to take it home to myself. We have need to get truer thoughts of God, and it is the more needful to come near into His presence for that fellowship with Him, with that soberness of mind that the Apostle bids us here, when he says, 'Be sober unto prayer.'

Do we not get much the same teaching, in type, in Lev. 10:9 & 10? "Do not drink wine or strong drink, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations: and that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean."

But there is another word in the New Testament, a very remarkable one, which also has its lesson for us. Do you ever listen to the words of the Book of God? This Book is full of songs, and if you will only put it to your ear and listen, you will find it so. In the words that the Spirit uses there are often remarkable lessons. This second word brings with it this lesson, Be at leisure when you pray. You will find this word in 1 Cor. 7:5. 'Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves unto prayer (Revised Version & J.N.D. omit `fasting!)

The word used here occurs twice in the New Testament. If you turn to Matt. 12:44, you will find it in its literal meaning. It is used of a house that is empty, or lying vacant. We read, 'When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return unto my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and

garnished.'

Now the word used there is the word that I am referring to, it literally means to be vacant. And then it means to take a holiday, to be at leisure. And then it means to devote oneself entirely to some pursuit.

And the lesson it brings us is this, that prayer is not only to be sober, but prayer is not to be hurried. We are to bring to the exercise of prayer, not only a sober, sound mind, but a calm mind. We are told that dew falls only when the atmosphere is still, and it is perfectly certain that the dew of prayer falls upon the soul bountifully and abundantly only when the soul is quiet and calm before God. If there is to be overwhelming blessing, we must have time for prayer, and for definite calling upon God. We must be less taken up with the voices of men, and get to God. Himself, that He may deal with us directly under the power of His Holy Spirit.

If we are to know what prayer is, we must bring to the exercise of prayer a calm mind. We must be at leisure when we pray. I fancy some will say, 'That is quite impossible; my life is so tremendously full, I have so much work to do in these busy days; work crushes in upon the day so terribly that I cannot find time for prayer.' I know there are hundreds of Christian workers who say, 'That is just exactly my difficulty; I have this district to visit, that class to teach, this address to give, and I cannot find time for prayer.' What is the lesson? Take a holiday, do less that you may do more, do more by doing less; let the work fall that you may give yourselves unto prayer. I often think that activity is one of the greatest snares of the Church of God today. We are forgetful of the fact that five minutes' work in the power of the Spirit of God, is worth five years' work without the Spirit of God, and that if we were only more in fellowship with God, our words would have a power that at present they have not.

Luther, a far busier man than any of us is likely to be, used to say on some of his heaviest days, 'I have so much work to do today that I do not see how I can get on without two or three hours of prayer.' And if you read the biographies of the most eminent workers for God that the Church of God has ever had, you will find the secret of their power did not lie so much in what they did in the presence of men, as what they did in the presence of God. They waited until they got into touch with the power of God, and then they went forth to do God's work.

Then there is another word. It is a remarkable word, a delightful word, and the message it brings us is this: Make prayer the great business of your life. The word is a very interesting one. You will find it used in connection with prayer, in Col. 4:2, 'Continue in prayer and watch in the same with thanksgiving.' This word is used three times in the New Testament, and the various places where it is used throw great light upon it when it is used in connection with prayer. When you turn to Mark 3:9, you will find that the Lord there gave commandment that a little ship should wait upon Him. The word used there is this word I am referring to now. 'And He spake to His disciples that a small ship should wait on Him'. Then in Acts 10:7, you find that Cornelius sent to Peter a devout soldier that waited upon him continually. The word is the same. Then if you turn to Rom. 13:6, you will find there the words 'For this cause ye pay tribute also, for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing;' that is to say, making this administration of justice a chief business of their life.

Now you see how it comes out. When the Lord Jesus gave commandment to the little ship to wait on Him, those in that ship had to make it their great business to wait on the Lord. When Cornelius engaged that devout soldier to wait on him continually, to wait on Cornelius was the first business of that man. When the Emperor of Rome appointed magistrates to administer justice, that was their first business. And if the soldier had said, 'Really, Cornelius, I am very sorry, but I have so much work to do that I cannot wait on you today'. He would have said, 'You have no business to have so much work to do today. Your first business is to wait on me.' Supposing the magistrate were to say, 'My lord, I am so busy, I have to go away and see this friend, and visit that friend, that I cannot attend to the administration of justice.' The Emperor would say, 'Your first business is the administration of justice; you have no right to be too busy, and so omit that.' What does God think of our being so busy that we have not time for prayer? What does God think of our being so eager to get alongside of men, that we are knocking the time out of our days, when we ought to get before God?

Now these are the three words, and I wonder if we have learned them. I have not. As we face these words, do we not feel that we, too, need to come to the Lord Jesus Christ, as the disciples of old came, and say, 'Lord, Teach us to pray'? But even after we have learned these three lessons we are only beginning. That is the A B C; for there are riches of teaching in the Bible about prayer that go a long way beyond this.

Now, I want to draw your attention to a word that has brought a very solemn lesson to myself. When we listen to it, it brings the lesson to make prayer a matter of life and death. I do not know how I can translate it otherwise than this:—

PRAYER A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

You will find this remarkable word in Col. 4:12, 'Epaphras saluteth you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.' Now the word there used, laboring fervently, is striving, and it is the word from which our English word agonize is taken—agonizing in prayer. Is it not remarkable to find this word agony used in connection with prayer? As we get to know God better we get to find in prayer one of the deepest joys of our life. And yet here in the Bible is this word agony used in connection with prayer, and when we find it there we are apt to think that it repels and drives us away from prayer. We shall not know what prayer really is until we know what the agony of prayer is.

This word is used eight times in the New Testament, and it is most instructive to notice their cases, and find the light they throw on what laboring in prayer really means. If you take these passages where the word is used, you will find that to the work of prayer we have to call ourselves by every motive that can move the human will. The teaching of this word agonize is tremendously wide and deep, and when we are brought in contact with it, it is then we feel how little we know about prayer; that our prayer life is so shallow compared with what it ought to be if we were true to God's Word.

Now this word teaches us that we are to labor in prayer as a man labors at his daily task. You will find the word used in Col, 1:29, "Whereunto I also labor, striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily." Now we know that some laborers make their daily task as light as possible. I had a man doing some garden work for me a few weeks ago, and it was almost comical to watch the way that man labored. He cut off a leaf from some old ivy, and then afterward he took a little rest, and then cut off another leaf; and when he had cut off ten, twenty, or thirty leaves, he was so weary and tired with it, that he went away and had a rest. I do not think that man did two hours work in the course of

what I believe was three quarters of a day. I am afraid some of us labor in prayer like that. We do not bend our back to it, we do not put our will into it, laboring as the laborer labors, his eye on the sun, laboring till it dims over the horizon, and bids him go home to rest. It is because we have not got hold of the absolute necessity of prayer that we do not put ourselves to it, laboring at prayer as a task that God has given us to do.

But then we find that we are to labor in prayer as a man labors in the arena, striving to obtain the prize that he covets more than life; striving to avoid defeat, the shame of which he dreads more than death. You find that in 1 Cor. 9:25, where the figure is about the arena: 'Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.' Now, in this England of ours there is a passion for athletics, and any of you who care to go and see it, can see how they put their whole soul into sport. Would that God's people were as earnest in prayer as those people of the world are in their sport! Now watch two men running. How they strive! Watch two men rowing. How they try to outstrip one another! Watch an athletic contest and see how the men engaged in it bring to it not only the body, but the mind. How every faculty is alive that they may gain the prize! That is how you and I are to pray, that is what agony in prayer means—striving as the athlete strives in the arena. They strive for a corruptible and a perishing prize. When we pray, we strive for a prize that is above all price—fellowship with God, and knowledge of Him through His blessed Son.

Then there is another passage, and it teaches us that we are to strive as a soldier strives on the battle-field. 'Fight the good fight of faith.' (1 Tim. 6:12). I do not think any of us have a conception of the way in which soldiers labor on the battlefield. I have read accounts of many campaigns, and that is the impression left on my mind—that there is hardly any labor which man does that is so intense as the labor of the battle-field. Oh! how alive the commander-in-chief must be, and the officers must be, when the whole fate of a nation may turn on how the men struggle and strive in the battle. They have to put their whole heart into it, and if the soldier does not put his whole heart into it, he is sure of defeat.

Have we not often been utterly defeated in prayer? Have we not knelt down to prayer, and because the heavens seemed as brass, and the earth as iron, we have turned away from this blessed exercise, and been utterly defeated? We have not been true soldiers in this respect, striving as the soldier fights, until victory crowns his efforts. And yet, if we are to know what prayer is, we have to pray like that.

Then there are some verses that carry us even deeper. We are to labor as a man would labor to defend a friend from danger. I was greatly struck to find this passage, which brought great delight to my soul, John 18:36: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews.' These men would have fought for Christ if HE had given them permission. Of course we know that they fled panic-stricken. But Jesus would not allow them to fight, 'Put up thy sword into the sheath.' But these men loved Jesus, and they were brave men, and if the Lord had called them to His side, and said, 'Fight for me, keep me from the Jews,' they would have laid down their lives. Now the lesson is, we should bring to prayer all the chivalry and courage that we would bring to the defense of our homes and loved ones from danger, putting our whole soul into it.

Then there is another step. We should labor in prayer as a man labors to save his soul. Luke 13:24. 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate'. Perhaps this will carry the message home better than any other words. Those who are Christian workers, and have had the unspeakable privilege of leading souls into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ: Do you not know how an anxious soul, wakened to the guilt of sin, a soul that hears the thunder of the Divine wrath and sees the gates of hell open to receive him—how such a soul labors to be saved? You know the agony and the intense earnestness with which he flies from the wrath to come, to lay hold on eternal life. You have seen it, and thank God for it. You have welcomed that soul with joy into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. But have you ever prayed as that soul strives to escape condemnation and lay hold on eternal life? And yet until we know what it is to bring to prayer something of that strenuousness of desire that we brought to the salvation of our souls, we are not ready to be led on to those heights of spiritual blessing and power that God is willing to lead us on to.

Then there is one last step, and as we take it, we ought to take our shoes from off our feet, for the place whereon we stand is holy ground. Will you listen very reverently while I read you one or two verses? Luke 22:41-44: 'And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down and prayed, saying, Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me: nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done. And there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.' Only once in the whole of the New Testament is this word agony used, and it is here. What depths open as we read that story as to what prayer is! If you and I are to pray aright, if you and I are to know what it is to agonize in prayer we must be brought into fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. In regard to His view of sin, many of us know nothing as yet.

I think that by this passage we are brought right up to the lesson that if we are to know what true fellowship with God is, there must be the absolute assent on our part that there was on Christ's part to God's judgment about sin. We must give ourselves up to the death, and recognize that God is just, when He condemns sin utterly to the death. And it is when we get into sympathy with Christ's thought about sin that we shall get into sympathy with Christ's thought about salvation from sin—our own salvation, and the salvation of the world. It is only after we have been in the Garden with Him, and learned something of what sin means, that we shall come back to learn what agony in prayer is.

But now if we have learned these lessons, what will our prayers be like? First of all, our prayers will be very largely secret. You know that when prayer is secret that it is always best and most real. When a man is praying in the presence of his fellow men, the temptation to unreality is so terrific that very few altogether escape it. And it is when prayer is secret that it is deepest. It is a very striking testimony to the loneliness of a human soul, that those things that are deepest in our lives, we can share only with God. But when we learn what agony in prayer is, we shall not wear our heart on our sleeve. Do you notice in reading the Gospels, how often our Lord Jesus Christ is alone to pray? I believe the Lord Jesus prayed alone not only because the relation in which He stood to the Father was different from that in which the disciples stood to the Father, but because His prayers were so sacred, that no one could share in them. That is true of us. There are things in my life that I do not want anybody to share with me but God.

And these are the deepest things, and when God leads us by the way in which He led no other one than us into fellowship with Him, our prayer becomes secret in a sense in which it was not before.

But, although it is secret, it will affect everything in the life. The man who has learned to agonize in prayer, our prayers, I believe, will be self-denying. I do not need to dwell on this point, but it is brought out strikingly by the fact that so often in Scripture fasting is connected with prayer. There is to be discipline in it. That lesson runs right through the whole of the teaching about prayer. It will require discipline for prayer, and to make prayer the great business of our life and to enable us to bear the pains of prayer, which are as real as the pleasures and joys of prayer.

But then, if we have learned these lessons, our prayers will be sustained. You know how marvelous the teaching of the New Testament is about sustained prayer. Luke 18:1: 'That men ought always to pray' 1 Thess. 5:17: 'Pray without ceasing;' and so on in many other passages of the Word of God. Now I do not think many of us have realized the value of sustained prayer. I will tell you how it strikes me; when we begin to pray, I often think God begins to lead us along a path in which, the further we move in it, the more His glory and the wonders of His grace break in upon our souls; and the reason that we do not have a deeper and higher knowledge of God than we have, is that we turn back. We go a little way, and, as we go on, a further vision of His glory, and grace, and power, breaks in upon us. Oh, if we would only go on! The Lord Jesus spent whole nights in prayer. Oh, why are our prayers not more sustained?

And then our prayers will be taught by the Holy Spirit. 'Praying in the Holy Ghost.' Jude 20. We shall never know what it is to pray aright, until we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, until we are under His control, with the ear open to His voice, and the eye opened by Himself to see.

But if our prayers are secret, if our prayers are self-denying, if our prayers are sustained in the power of the Holy Spirit, it hardly needs to be added that they will be according to the will of God, and in His power. But what does this mean? Surely it means getting into the presence of the Lord Himself, and having to do with Him in truth.

This is what we want; oh, if only our lives were lived more in the very presence of God Himself, all these wretched things that trouble us would be swept out of sight, when the glorious ocean tide of prayer flows into it.

(G. H. C. MacGregor)

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men... to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

1 Tim. 2:1, 4

For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

1 Tim.

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Eph. 6:18

Remember them that are in bonds,... and them which suffer adversity.

Heb. 13:3

Pray ye the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth laborers into His harvest.

Matt. 9:38

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;... that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ. Col. 4:2, 3

That utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel.

Eph. 6:19

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