

Times of Refreshing

THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

L.R. SHELTON, JR. (1923-2003)

TIMES OF REFRESHING

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TIMES OF REFRESHING

*“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that
your sins may be blotted out, when
the times of refreshing shall come
from the presence of the Lord.”*

—Acts 3:19

1. Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

Our need

Revival: what does it mean? Peter tells us in Acts 3:19 that it is a “time of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord,” a time when God visits us with a refreshing of His blessings, by reviving the hearts of His people and convicting and regenerating¹ precious lost souls.

Most of us will agree that today we need a definite, positive refreshing from the presence of the Lord. I know, without the shadow of a doubt, without the Spirit of God being poured out upon us as water upon the thirsty and floods upon the dry ground (Isa 44:3, we can do nothing. Without the Spirit of God, we are as ships with no wind for our sails, as branches with no sap to give life, as coals with no fire. Truly, “without me ye can do nothing” (Joh 15:5). And when the Lord begins to pour out His Spirit, there will be times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. The hearts of God’s people will be revived; prayer will be finding its way to the throne of God’s eternal grace,² and God’s people, like Jacob of old, will wrestle with Him and will not be denied until they receive the blessings from on high.

God’s outpouring

When God pours out His Spirit as floods upon dry ground, *sinner*s will be convicted and brought guilty before the triune God. They will be made to turn to God from their sins. Cries of repentance will go up to God and hearts will be broken. Homes will be made over; whole communities will be stirred; and sinners will be delivered by the power of God. They will be taken out of the kingdom of Satan and translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light in the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ **regenerating** – God’s creating new life in a sinner by the power of the Holy Spirit, resulting in repentance and faith in Christ and holiness of life; God’s giving the new birth.

² **grace** – God’s favor freely shown to those that deserve His wrath.

When God begins to pour, His people will become very *fervent for the truth*. They will be fearless and bold as they are filled with the Spirit of the living God, and none of Satan's strongholds will be able to stand before them all the days of their lives.

When the Spirit of God is poured out upon us in times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, our *petty differences will be put away*. Love will be manifested; our lives will be changed; and the holy boldness of our God against sin will be upon us. The world also will take note that we have been with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I will...they shall

You may ask, "Will God do this for us? Will He yet return and be gracious? Will He yet revive His work in the midst of the years? Will He yet in wrath remember mercy?" Yes, I firmly believe in my soul that God has given us a very special and precious promise for our times and our lives, and that He can and will fulfill His precious Word to our hearts by giving good things to them that ask.

His promise is found in Isaiah 44:3-5:

"I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses. One shall say, I am the LORD's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the LORD, and surname himself by the name of Israel."

This is a precious promise, a great promise, given to us by the One Who cannot lie, the eternal, triune God Himself. The sovereign God of the universe says "I will," and when He says "I will," you can rest assured that we shall. That is what the promise says, with no *if, and, maybe so, or but* about it: They shall say, "I am the Lord's."

Yes, when God *wills*, then we *shall*—we have the word of Him Who cannot lie! Christ said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me" (Joh 6:37). Why will they come? Because the Father willed it. In another place we read that Christ shall see the travail of His soul and be satisfied (Isa 53:11). Why shall He see of the travail of His soul? Because the Father willed it.

So it is in our text: "I will pour...and they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses...[and] shall say, I am the LORD's."

Unconditional

This is a promise for us to lay hold of, one of the unconditional promises of God's Word. Plead this promise before the One Who cannot lie: for times of refreshing to come from the presence of the Lord.

My sinner friend, you cannot stand before the potent gale of God's Holy Spirit. My atheistic friend, my agnostic friend, my unbelieving friend, you are no hard case with God. If at this very moment the Lord pours out His Spirit upon you—which I am trusting He will do—you will fall down upon your knees, crying unto God to be merciful to

you, a sinner. My church friend, you are no hard case with God. You who are eaten up with the sin of lust, with the unbelief of your heart and the wickedness of your mind, you are no hard case with God! My God is able to save. My God is able to deliver, and when He pours His Spirit upon your barren, dry heart, you will be made to live in the Lord Jesus Christ. His blood cleanses and washes whiter than snow. His power breaks your heart; His love makes you understand what your sins have done to Him, and then you will cry for mercy and say, "I am the Lord's."

You wives and mothers, will you hear this promise? "God will pour." Here is the promise; plead it for your husbands and children, for herein lies our hope: "God will pour." Here is the promise; put your finger on it and tell God about it. Plead it before His throne of grace, and then believingly expect Him to do what He said He will do. As Isaiah 43:26 tells us, put God in remembrance of the promise and do not let Him go until He has fulfilled His Word.

Broad

Notice another thing about this promise: it is very liberal, very broad. For the Lord Whom I serve, the God of the Bible, is not like man. My heavenly Father gives "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20). When the Lord gives a blessing, He gives like a king, for truly He is the King! He doesn't give as man gives, which is grudgingly. He gives liberally, out of a heart of love. It would not exhaust nor diminish His treasure to pour out abundantly upon a hundred thousand souls today. "I am God, and there is none else" (Isa 45:22). He says, "I will pour." He did not say, "I will sprinkle" or "I will give a few bucketfuls"! But He says, "I will pour"—not only water upon him that is thirsty, but "floods upon the dry ground." He is going to open up the very reservoir of heaven and pour down into our souls, so that where sin abounds, grace will much more abound. He is going to pour such a volume that all unbelief will be swept away; all our prejudice will become a thing of the past; and we will be swept into His kingdom with broken hearts and broken spirits. Nothing will be able to stand before this flood!

Come now, look at the promise with me; don't limit the Holy One of Israel! Look at all its breadth and length and see that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think. Remember, when God sends the rain from heaven, He does not ask us if we want it: He just sends it. He does not stop to ask any earthly monarch if he is ready for the snow to fall or the winds to blow or the tornadoes to come: He just sends them. So it is when He pours out His Spirit. He does not ask us if we want to be broken, but He pours out His Holy Spirit upon us and makes us willing in the day of His power. When He comes, He will work effectually. He will break the stony heart; He will give conviction. He will grant repentance; He will give faith to lay hold of the Lord Jesus, the only Substitute for sinners.

This is our hope, hope in our sovereign God Who works all things after the counsel of His own will, Who wills to pour His Spirit out in refreshing from His presence.

Our children

Notice that this promise also includes our children. Oh, how great is our God that He does not leave out our offspring! He says, “I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.” Look at it! “The promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Act 2:39).

Here is a promise, believer, that God will not deny us. Let us try Him and prove Him. He cannot lie; He will not send us away empty handed. Let us bring this promise with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and plead it for our children and our loved ones. We will surely hear Him say, “Go in peace, I have heard your cry; as you have asked, so shall you receive.”

Results of this promise

When the Spirit of God is poured out upon you, as water upon the thirsty and floods upon the dry ground, and you are delivered by God’s grace, the power of sin is broken in your heart and life, and you are made a new creature in the Lord Jesus Christ. You will then be bold in the Lord, for the our text says, “One shall say, I am the Lord’s.” You will cry, “The Lord is mine, I am His, and I will not be ashamed of what the Lord Jesus has done for my never-dying soul.” There will be a holy boldness to stand and witness of God’s saving grace. There will be a holy confidence and assurance in your soul that your sins have been washed away, that you stand justified before God only in Christ, and that the precious righteousness of the Lord Jesus has been imputed³ to your account.

What will be the result of such a promise? When this promise is fulfilled, there will be the reviving of the children of God. The spirit of prayer and supplication will be upon us. Our spirits will be fervent in prayer for others, and we shall see the enlargement of the work of the Lord upon the earth as many souls are brought to Christ. When God’s Spirit is poured out from His presence, it will first affect His people.

2. Intercessory Prayer

The importance of intercession

One of the first evidences of a spiritual awakening and a new refreshing from the presence of the Lord will be that God’s people will begin to pray with that definite, confident assurance that their God will hear and answer their prayers of intercession.⁴ It has always been true down through the ages that when God began to pour, the first result was the cry of His people unto Him for the deliverance of the dead souls around them, or intercessory prayer.

The relationship between prayer and heaven, prayer and God’s purpose for the sons of men, will only be fully understood when we reach heaven, but the Bible speaks much

³ **imputed** – placed into; reckoned.

⁴ **intercession** – pleading on behalf of others.

of prayer and its place in God's economy. If we were all honest before God, we would confess that prayer, real intercessory prayer, is something that most of us know little about, and yet God speaks much about it.

Most of us would admit that we "say our prayers," perhaps before each meal or at some set time during the day; but where is the praying one who intercedes for others, who is used of God to pray down blessings upon others? Perhaps there may be an earnestness in our Christian life in which there is just enough prayer to keep us from going back, maintaining the position we have attained, and without much growth in spirituality or Christ-likeness. But where is the prayer of intercession? If there is to be a large experience of God's power to sanctify ourselves and to bring down real blessings on others, there must be more definite and persevering⁵ prayer. The Scriptures teach this very forcibly, speaking of crying day and night, continuing steadfastly in prayer, watching unto prayer, being heard for our importunity.⁶ This must in some degree become our experience if we are really to be intercessors.

Gracious promises

If we did not have such gracious promises for the encouraging of prayer, then perhaps there would be excuses we could offer, but the promises and examples are many in Scripture. Isaiah 66:8 tells us, "As soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children." "As soon as" means that when you and I begin to pray the real prayer of intercession, God begins to hear and to answer. The result will be the salvation of sinners, the edification of God's people, and the bringing in of the kingdom of God as never before.

"Travailed" is not a light word, for it means very hard work, toil, intense pain, agony; it is used mostly in connection with the labor-pains of childbirth. Thus we see one reason why so very few people enter into the work of intercession, because it means hard work, something that is going to cost us something, even intense pain and agony. Yet if we do not enter into it, we are not going to see the blessings of God upon us, nor enter into the work that God has called us to do in His kingdom. God is looking today for intercessors; He is looking for the person or group who will enter into the arena with Him and pray for the souls of men.

In Luke 11 we read, "As [Christ] was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of His disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray" (v. 1). After giving them the model prayer, He proceeded to give them instructions concerning the matter of intercessory prayer.

"Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he

⁵ **persevering** – persistent, consistent, and ultimately victorious.

⁶ **importunity** – insistent, urgent requests, without giving up.

is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth” (vv. 5-8).

Here our Lord teaches us persistence in prayer. He uses the word “importunity” in regard to our praying. Like the word “travail,” it is not a light word. It means to pray with urgency, to pray refusing to be denied, to pray with a persistent attitude that will not let go until the blessing comes, until the blessing is received for your friend, loved one, or even your enemy.

Urgent need

There are in this example several things for us to understand in regard to intercessory prayer. First, there was an urgent need. Here is where intercession begins: the friend came at midnight. Always the need comes at an untimely hour for our flesh, but here was a need. The friend was hungry and could not buy bread. If you and I are to pray aright and enter into the work of prayer with the Lord, we must open our eyes and our hearts to the need of those around us. And the needs are great: lost souls are everywhere. Christ-less souls are in darkness, perishing of hunger, and we have bread enough and to spare. Wickedness is abounding all around us: apathy of so-called Christians; a lack of a missionary spirit; Christ-less preachers, teachers, and workers—everywhere the need abounds.

Compassionate love

Second, if we are to pray aright, we must feel compassionate love toward others. The friend took his weary, hungry visitor into his house and his heart. He did not excuse himself by saying he had no bread; he gave himself at midnight to seek it for him. He sacrificed his night’s rest, his comfort, to find the needed bread. We need to understand that love “seeketh not her own” (1Co 13:5). It is the very nature of love to give up and forget self for the sake of others. Love takes others’ needs and makes them her own. Love finds real joy in living and dying for others as Christ did.

It is the love of a mother for her prodigal son that makes her pray for him. True love for souls will become the spirit of intercession in us. True love must pray! If we would be delivered from the sin of restraining and limiting prayer, we must enlarge our hearts for the work of intercession. To be praying constantly for ourselves will end in failure; it is in intercession for others that our faith and love and perseverance will be aroused and the power of the Holy Spirit will be found to enable us to follow in the footsteps of our blessed Lord.

Helplessness

Third, note the sense of impotence⁷ and helplessness in intercessory prayer. A mother might be willing to give her life for her dying child, and yet not be able to save it. The friend at midnight was willing to give his guest bread, but he had none to give. It was this sense of impotence, or his inability to help, that sent him begging. “My friend is

⁷ **impotence** – having no power; unable to act in one’s own strength.

come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.” It is this sense of our impotence that is the very strength of intercession, for it will drive us to our knees to plead with the only One Who can help us, the Lord of glory Himself.

“...I have nothing to set before him.” I may have knowledge and truth, a loving heart, and the readiness to give myself for my friend, but the Bread of heaven I cannot give him (Joh 6:33). Oh, that this would grip us: “I have nothing”! May this ring in our hearts and drive us to the One Who has everything for the souls of men. As we point them to Christ, let us go to Christ and urge their need upon Him. The sense of our helplessness, our impotency, is the soul of intercession.

Faith

Fourth, see the faith in prayer! What one man did not have, another could supply. He had a rich friend nearby who would be both able and willing to give the bread. He was sure that if he only asked, he would receive. This faith made him leave his home at midnight. If he had not the bread himself to give, he could ask another. This is simple, confident faith: that God will give what we need. The Scriptures reveal that God is waiting, delighting to bestow His heavenly blessings in answer to prayer. A thousand and one are the promises and testimonies that call us to believe that prayer will be heard, that what we cannot possibly do ourselves for those whom we want to help can be gained by prayer.

Prevail

Fifth, observe that importunity prevails! The faith of the friend met a sudden and unexpected setback. The rich friend refused to hear: “I cannot rise and give thee.” The loving heart had not counted on this disappointment; he could not accept it. The suppliant presses his plea: “Here is my needy visitor, you have an abundance, I am your friend.” He refuses to accept a denial. The love that opened his house at midnight, and then left it to seek help, must win out.

So many times the very ones we pray for go deeper into sin, turn on us, laugh us to scorn, and have no regard for God or His Christ. We are left to wonder what is the use of praying, for they only get worse. But blessed is the man or woman who is not staggered by God’s delay or His silence or apparent refusal, or the sinner’s hardened condition, but is strong in faith, giving glory to God. Such faith perseveres importunately, if need be, and cannot fail to inherit the blessing.

Look at these words: “I say unto you...he will rise and give him as many as he needeth” (Luk 11:8). Our Lord here gives us the greatest reason for praying: We shall have an answer! He follows it with these great promises: “I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Luk 11:9-10). The meaning is to ask and keep on asking; seek and keep on seeking; knock and keep on knocking. We must never stop until we have God’s answer!

Blessed Lord, teach us to pray; teach us to forget self and to intercede for others! Give us Your grace to enter into the work of intercession with You, O God.

3. Definite Need and Assurance of Answer

Assurance of answer

As we consider the spirit and purpose of prayer, our blessed Lord assures us of the certainty that our prayers will be answered in Luke 11:9-13.

“I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?”

Here our Lord wants to teach us what in all Scripture is considered the greatest thing in prayer: the assurance that prayer will be heard and answered. One thing is sure, and the Lord wants us to count on it: asking, seeking, and knocking cannot be in vain. The opened heart and love of God are the certain fruit of prayer.

Definite asking

We see also that prayer consists of two parts: human and divine. The human part is the asking; the divine part is the giving. This has always been God’s way and always will be—asking and receiving.

Our asking must be definite; our prayers must not be a vague appeal to God’s mercy, an indefinite cry for blessing, but the distinct expression of a definite need. When blind Bartimaeus was brought to our Lord and after crying to the Lord for mercy (Mar 10:51), Jesus said unto him, “What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? The blind man said unto him, Lord, that I might receive my sight.” Notice that he had a definite plea, a definite need: that he might receive his sight. Then listen to the answer of our blessed Lord: “Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Jesus in the way” (v. 52).

A definite need must send us to Christ, and there at His throne of grace we can spread it all out before Him, knowing that He hears us and will answer us. This truth is brought out again in Hebrews 4:15-16.

“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities...Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

To encourage our hearts to pray, to seek His face and call upon His name with definite needs, He gives us these words in 1 John 5:14-15:

“This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

Parents praying for their children

I direct this message towards parents especially, including myself, that we would carry the need of our children unto the Lord in prayer. Concern for our children and their walking in the truth as it is Christ Jesus should drive us to intercessory prayer, praying with definite need and request for their salvation.

Let us use 3 John 1:4 as a starting point. There we read of the apostle John saying, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children⁸ walk in truth.” What a word! This should bind our hearts together in prayer, praying that we may have this greatest of joys, to hear, to see, to know that our children are saved and walking in the truth of God’s Word. Do we take joy in the fact that they are walking in health, yet have no concern that they walk in the leprosy of sin? Do we take joy in the fact that they make good grades in school, show cleverness in their work and play, or that they are sharp in business, getting along well in the world, are fitted for the toils and tasks of this life, and are happily married? Is this the only joy we have? Do we have no concern for the renewing of their blackened nature, or that they are not safe in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Is it true that though our sons and daughters show no sign of the new birth, give no evidence of being rich toward God, manifest no traces of electing love or redeeming grace or the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, we as parents are content with their condition? Let’s examine ourselves! Are we content that our children are not saved? Let this text search our hearts: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”

May these words come home to our hearts, that the greatest joy is to see not only our own souls safe in Christ, but the precious souls of our children. May this sense of need send us to our closets today, and there before God intercede in prayer for the souls of our children. Let us plead the promises of God’s Word; let us cry day and night until we see our children walking in the truth in Christ!

Teach them the gospel

Do our children know the doctrine of the gospel? Do we as parents see that they sit under a God-honoring, God-fearing ministry, both at home and at church? These are definite objects of prayer to bring before our God, that our children would hear the Word of life.

Do our children hear the truth that they may walk in it by God’s grace? They must first hear it before they can learn it and walk in it. This also is grounds for prayer, a defi-

⁸ **my children** – Many commentators understand this to refer to the apostle John’s spiritual children.

nite need to bring to our Great High Priest at His throne of grace: “O Lord my God, cause my children to hear the truth of Thy Word that is able to make them wise unto salvation!”

Have we taught our children the holiness of God and the deep depravity of their hearts by nature? Do they know something of their sinner-ship? Without this knowledge, they will not and cannot be saved and walk in the truth.

Have we taught them their deep need of the righteousness that God requires, which can only be found in Christ? Knowing their awful condition outside of Christ, do they understand the great need of Christ’s becoming what we are, that we may become what He is? He could only save us if He Himself died in our place and became in the sight of God what we are: *sin*. And only then could we become what He is: *perfect righteousness before God* (2Co 5:21).

Oh, that this definite need would lead us to the throne of grace, crying unto our living God that He would by His Spirit reveal Christ in all His glory unto our children out of His Word! Pray and pray again that they will see that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; that Christ is the gospel—His work for us in substitution.

Source of joy

This should be our great joy: to know that our children know these precious truths of God’s Word and walk in the experiential knowledge and joy of these truths. Oh, to hear them say: “I am of the Lord”! To hear them say, “Mother, Dad, I trust by the grace of God that Christ is mine, and that I am saved by the grace of God and have been made a new creature in Christ”!

Why does the salvation of the souls of our precious children rejoice our hearts? Because we have made it a subject of importunate prayer. If we have asked for their souls in tears, we shall rejoice greater when they say, “I am of the Lord.” If our hearts have been broken over their sinfulness, their stubbornness, their rebellion, their unbelief, their unconcern, their far distance from a holy God, then surely we shall weep with joy when our prayers are heard and they come home to Christ, praising Him for saving their never-dying souls. No wonder Hannah sang so sweetly after the birth of Samuel, because she had prayed so earnestly and the Lord had heard her. The joy of the answer was increased by the former anguish of her prayer (1Sa 1:10-13; 2:1-10).

Assurance of the answer

You may be asking the question, “Pastor, will God hear my importunate cry?” He heard the cry of the woman of Canaan who came praying for her demon-possessed daughter (Mat 15:22-28). This mother overcame every difficulty and would not let go. She cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil” (v. 22). She pressed in with her one petition, even though at first she was not answered; the disciples wanted to send her away. She was told that Christ was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; and she was even called a dog. Still, she

pressed in with her one petition: “Lord, have mercy upon my daughter.” And she went home with the victory, for she had the Word of the Lord Himself: “O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour” (v. 28).

Will He hear your cry and mine for our children? Yes, He will. Did He not hear the cry of Jairus for his daughter (Mar 5:23), the cry of the father for his lunatic son (Mar 9:22, 24), the cry of the nobleman for his sick son (Joh 4:49)? Surely He did; and if our God was pleased to hear and answer their prayers, surely He will answer ours. Let us press on in!

Are we content to let them go to hell? If not, then let us press in by faith, crying, “Oh, my heavenly Father, I beseech Thee in the name of Christ Jesus my Lord and Thy precious Son, look in favor upon my household, my children; save them for Thy name’s sake. I cannot bear that any of my children should choose to remain Thine enemies and continue on the road to hell. Lord, let my whole household eat of the Pascal Lamb; let them all come out of Egypt, through Thy grace. I can’t leave one of them out. No, Lord, I cannot see them die; spare them, I pray Thee; O look upon them in mercy, for Thou art a merciful God. Remember them for Christ’s sake.”

Cry aloud; wrestle like Jacob, for God will hear! “I will not let Thee go except Thou bless my children, every one of them. Their unregenerate state is my deepest sorrow. For Christ’s sake, for His glory, be pleased to save them and to deliver them from going down to the pit.”

4. God Beckons Us to Pray.

Prayer, I believe, is the most needed thing in this hour by God’s children, for I believe it is the *restraint of prayer* that keeps the “times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord” from coming. The Holy Spirit of supplication has been grieved, and there needs to be a turning back unto the Lord in full confession and forsaking of our own prayerlessness. Our prayer again should be, “Lord, teach me to pray; give me by Thy Spirit the grace of supplication that I may pray in the Spirit and be used in the ministry of intercession.”

What the Scriptures say

Yes, the great need today is prayer, and our Lord has certainly given us great encouragement to pray. “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not” (Jer 33:3). “Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee” (Psa 55:22). “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee” (Psa 50:15). “Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near” (Isa 55:6).

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Mat 7:7). “Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation” (Mar 14:38).

“Pray without ceasing” (1Th 5:17). “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace” (Heb 4:16). “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (Jam 4:8). “Continue in prayer” (Col 4:2). “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1Pe 5:7).

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luk 18:1). “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal 6:9). “Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1Co 15:58). He “always causeth us to triumph in Christ” (2Co 2:14). Are not all these verses of Scripture great encouragements to pray and to seek the face of our living God in Christ?

The nature of prayer

Prayer is the heart going out to the living God in Christ Jesus. It is He Who has opened the door of access to the throne of grace. It is He Who bids us come and cast all our care upon Him, for He cares for us. It is He Who bids us have no anxious moments, but by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make our requests known unto the Father by Him. It is He Who bids us come by the new and living way which He has consecrated for us, into the very holiest of all by His precious blood, which was shed for the remission⁹ of our sins. We have in Him a great High Priest Who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He was made like His brethren in all things, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, making reconciliation for the sins of His people. He bids us come into His courts with gladness, for we are coming into the presence of our King. We come into the presence of Him Who is waiting to hear our voice and see our face, and stands ready to answer our prayers. So let us come to Him!

To me, the greatest privilege in the world is to call upon the name of my living God, to tell Him all that is on my heart. This is a privilege—not a duty, not a yoke of bondage—but a blessed privilege, to lay all my needs at His feet and call upon His name for others.

Jeremiah 33:3

When you look at prayer in the light of Jeremiah 33:3—“Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not”—then you know that it is His very nature in Christ Jesus to answer our prayers. Our God has revealed Himself in the gospel as a God of love, full of grace and truth. How can He refuse to help those of His creatures who humbly seek His face and favor in God’s appointed way? He can’t, for we find in Scripture that *it is His nature to receive me in Christ, for He is my refuge and hiding place*. It is His nature to answer prayer, to bend His ear to hear our call. O that we would understand the nature of prayer and the nature of Him upon Whom we call! We do not have to overcome His reluctance, for He delights to give us the desires of our hearts. He wants us to know that He willingly gives: “Therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you” (Isa 30:18).

⁹ **remission** – forgiveness; putting away.

In the expression “I will answer thee,” we see that it is God’s character to answer prayer, for He gives us His Word in Romans 8:32: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” Yes, He says He freely gives us all things in Christ. Why we don’t pray and ask more and expect more, I will never know. Here we have the very nature and character of our living God expressed in saying that if Christ is truly ours, then our God will freely give us all things in Christ. What a word! What an expression: “all things”!

From the words “I will answer thee,” I can only take it that God means exactly what He says. My own experience leads me to believe that God will answer prayer. If no one else believes that, I do. I can boldly say that *God answers prayer*. Answered prayer is written upon every page of every day of my life. I have written “tried and proven” by Jeremiah 33:3. I can say that the God of the Bible, the God Whom I serve, hears and answers prayer. He has not and will not put me to shame. He has answered my weakest cry, and I believe He will do so till I get to glory.

Practice prayer

May I urge you to *pray*. Set aside a certain time each day to call upon the Name of the Lord. Enter into your secret closet, close the door, and pray to your living God in Christ. He will hear in secret and reward you openly. There tell Him what is on your heart. Remember, He is the Shepherd Who watches over us, so tell Him your need. He is the Priest Who represents us, so confess to Him your sins. He is the Friend Who understands and comforts, so lay bare your heart. He is the Brother Who cares for us, so tell Him your problems. He is the Savior Who can save your friends and loved ones, so tell Him of them. He is the living God Who has power to uphold us and supply all of our needs, so tell Him what is on your heart. He is the Lover of our souls, so let us tell Him we love Him and desire to be with Him. He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; therefore, He sympathizes with us, so let us tell Him all about the things that trouble us.

Tell Him your trouble, as the disciples of John the Baptist did when they went to Christ to inform Him that their teacher was beheaded. Tell Him your sorrow and grief, as Mary did when she went to Christ about the death of her brother, Lazarus. Tell Him your pain, as when Paul prayed about the thorn in the flesh. Tell Him your grief, as when the woman of Canaan cried to Christ about her demon-possessed daughter. Tell Him your joy, as when the disciples spoke of the demons they had cast out in His name. Tell Him your difficulty, as when the disciples asked to be taught how to pray. Tell Him the needs of His people, as Paul quoted over and over in his epistles. Tell Him of your lack of faith, your need for growth in grace, your desire to walk in righteousness and true holiness. Tell Him all that is upon your heart!

We could go on and on, but this is enough to show that others have called upon God’s name in prayer and have been heard. So then I encourage you to pray, for He is listening. Tell Him all that is on your heart; tell Him often, tell Him always. Yes, tell Him now, for He cares, He knows, He loves, and He understands.

Cautions

Now you understand a little of what a privilege prayer is, a blessed privilege, to come before His throne of grace to find mercy and grace to help in time of need. But I must bring this before your hearts also: *Prayer is always to be offered in submission to God's will.* When we say God hears prayer, we do not intend by this to mean He always gives us literally that for which we ask. We mean, however, that He gives us what is best for us, what is for our good. This is brought out in that blessed portion in 1 John 5:14-15:

“This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.”

Also, I must advise you that Psalm 66:18 tells us God will not hear our prayer if we regard sin in our life. It must be confessed and forsaken. Proverbs 28:9 tells us He will not hear if there is a turning away from His Word, if we do not hear and practice it. But if we come believing, confessing, repenting, and humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God, then He will hear and turn our captivity into freedom and liberty in Christ.

Learning to pray

The question is often asked, “How do I learn to pray?” The only answer I have ever found is, Pray! Practice makes perfect. Pray and keep on praying. Pray in the morning, at noon and at night. Pray on the job, at school, in your home, and on the streets. Pray everywhere, over everything, and under every condition. Pray; pray and keep on praying; it is surely the work of a lifetime.

Pray and watch God work. Start a prayer meeting in your home, your place of business, and see God work. *Pray and keep on praying!*

5. The Grounds of Assurance

“Therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you...blessed are all they that wait for him...he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee”—Isaiah 30:18-19

Truly the Bible teaches that our Sovereign God in Christ hears and answers prayer. What a blessed encouragement we have in these verses to pray! He waits to be gracious. When He hears the voice of our cry, He will answer us! With this encouragement, how willing we should be to enter into our closet, shut the door, and pray to our Father, *knowing* that our heavenly Father will see us in this secret place of prayer and will reward us openly. He will hear and answer prayer.

God hears

Psalm 4:3 reads, “The LORD will hear when I call unto him.” Does this not correspond with what our Lord taught us in Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it shall be given you”? What a

blessed privilege, then, is prayer—asking and receiving! My God hears and answers prayer.

The psalmist said, “I have called upon thee, for thou wilt hear me, O God” (Psa 17:6). What a blessed truth is this: my God will hear me! The power of prayer rests in the faith that God hears. It is this faith that gives a man courage to pray and power to prevail with God. You see, dear friend, the moment I am assured that God hears me, then I feel drawn to pray and persevere in prayer. I feel strong to claim and to take in faith the answer God gives.

One great reason for the lack of prayer is the lack of a living, joyous assurance that “my God will hear me.” If we who claim to know our living God in Christ ever understand that He is waiting to grant our requests and bestow upon us all the heavenly gifts of the Spirit of which we are in need, I believe we would set everything aside to make time for this greatest of all blessings, *the prayer of faith*.

When I meditate upon this precious statement, “My God will hear me,” I can only bow at His feet, crying, “What wondrous grace!” Think of it, dear brother, dear sister in Christ! Think of it and take courage to pray in the Spirit. My dear seeking soul, if you do not yet have full assurance of faith, think of it: “My God will hear me!” Think of God in His infinite majesty, glory, and holiness, sitting upon a throne of grace, waiting to be gracious—inviting, encouraging you to pray with His promise, “Call unto me, and I will answer thee.” Think of yourself in your nothingness and helplessness as a creature, in your wretchedness and transgressions as a sinner, in your feebleness and unworthiness as a saint, and praise the glory of that grace which allows you and me to say boldly, “My God will hear me!”

Christ is with us

Think again of how you are not left to yourself in prayer; God has invited you to be co-laborers with Christ. In Him and in His name you can have confidence. On the throne He prays with you and for you; on the footstool before the throne you pray with Him and in Him. Think of what God can do in this wonderful fellowship with God in prayer! Oh, what grace this is! In the Son’s name, in His worth, and in the Father’s delight in hearing Him—these are indeed the grounds of our confidence and assurance of being heard.

The Spirit is with us

And if this is not enough to encourage our hearts to the ministry of prayer and supplication, there is Romans 8:26-27:

“Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”

What a blessed truth this is! The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God's own Son, is sent into your heart to cry, "Abba, Father," and to be in you a Spirit of supplication when you do not know how to pray as you ought!

Think of all your insignificance and unworthiness, and yet your being as acceptable to the Father as Christ Himself! Knowing all your ignorance and feebleness, think of the Spirit making intercession according to the will of God within you, and cry out, "What wondrous grace! Through Christ I have access to the Father by the Spirit. I can, I do believe it: My God will hear me!" Oh, what a blessing is prayer! What a privilege our living God has given us, that we should be anxious about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known unto Him, and then the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Phi 4:6-7)!

Pray according to the will of God

By praying according to the will of God, we have the assurance that He hears us and that He will grant to us the petitions we ask of Him. Let us look at the will of God in prayer and see some of the many things for which we can pray and know we are praying in the will of God.

Hebrews 10:38 tells us that "the just shall live by *faith*." It is the will of God that we should ask for this faith that saves and keeps, not only for ourselves but for others.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "In every thing give *thanks*: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Giving time in prayer to offer thanks unto our living God for the many blessings that He has bestowed upon us, is indeed praying according to the will of God.

Psalms 150:6 reads, "Let every thing that hath breath *praise* the LORD." This is the will of God, that in prayer and daily life we give praise unto His blessed, holy, and righteous Name, which Name is our refuge. Praise Him for all His attributes (what He is in Himself). That is the reason our Lord taught us first of all to say when we pray, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Mat 6:9).

1 Timothy 2:3-4 tells us that "this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; who will have all men to be *saved*, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." We can pray with faith and assurance for the salvation of the lost, pray with all the faith and assurance of our souls that He will pour water upon him that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground, and His Spirit upon our children and His blessing upon our offspring.

1 John 1:9 says, "If we *confess* our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." It is the will of God for us to pray the prayer of confession, to bring all of our sins to the mercy seat, confess them, forsake them, and be cleansed, washed whiter than snow! What a blessing is prayer, to know that if we call, God will hear us, even the confession of our sins!

1 Thessalonians 4:3 reads, "This is the will of God, even your *sanctification*," or, as 1 Peter 1:16 puts it, "Be ye holy; for I am holy." This is another thing for which we can

pray and cry unto God, knowing that it is His will and that we shall be heard of Him. He works into our hearts and lives the image of Christ, setting us apart from sin unto the fellowship and service of God in the Holy Spirit. We should pray that we by the Spirit will be changed into Christ's image and likeness from glory to glory. This being the will of God, even our sanctification, we can pray for it in our lives and in the lives of our children.

Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:19 tell us that we should *proclaim His gospel* and be witnesses of Christ, so this should also be the burden of our praying, knowing that we are praying according to the will of God and that He hears us. We should pray and intercede for God's ministers, His teachers, His missionaries, His translators in the field, and for all witnesses everywhere. What a privilege to pray for God's ambassadors and the furtherance of the gospel in all lands!

Do you see, my fellow believer, the many things for which we can pray that, according to God's Word, are His will, knowing that He will hear and answer prayer?

Surely we know that we are praying in the will of God when, like the apostle Paul, we pray for God's people everywhere with the prayer recorded in Ephesians 3:14-19.

"For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God."

What a petition! What intercession for God's people! This is the grace of prayer.

Our responsibility

What a solemn responsibility! Think of it: *A responsibility is laid upon us to pray*. How often we complain of darkness, of feebleness, of failure, as if there were no help—when God has promised to supply our every need and give us His light, strength, and peace in answer to prayer. Oh, that we would realize the responsibility of having such a God and such promises, with the sin and shame of not availing ourselves of them to the uttermost! How confident we should feel that the enabling grace to pray *will be given!*

Remember, "my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phi 4:19). So pray and keep on praying; our God hears and answers prayer. And "when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" we shall praise Him and give thanks to His holy name for all He is in Himself, as our God in Christ. Amen!



Questions for personal reflection and group discussion

The following questions are designed to reinforce understanding and application.

A separate study guide with complete questions covering all aspects of the text also is available, for correspondent, independent, or group study. Contact Mount Zion Bible Institute at the same address or school@mountzion.org.

1. Describe some of the effects when the Holy Spirit is poured out.
2. What is intercessory prayer?
3. What is meant by *importunity* in prayer?
4. Summarize the instructions for intercessory prayer given in Luke 11:5-8.
5.
 - a. What is it to pray according to God's will?
 - b. Why must prayer always be offered in submission to God's will?
 - c. What can we pray for, knowing that we are praying according to God's will?
6. Why can we be certain God will hear our persistent prayers?
7. Cite some of the Scriptures that tell us God desires or commands us to pray.
8. Describe the role Christ serves in our prayer life?
9. What is the meaning of each of the following Scriptures as it relates to prayer?
 - a. Acts 3:19
 - b. Luke 11:9-13
 - c. Romans 8:26-27
 - d. James 1:5-8
 - e. Psalm 66:18
 - f. Hosea 10:12