

James Chapter 8 Practical Prayer

by A.B. Simpson

Prayer is essential in everyday life, in times of trial, and in seeking healing and deliverance, and is a powerful ministry for others and for the work of God.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 5:19, 2 Chronicles 33:12-13, Psalm 50:15, Proverbs 3:6, Isaiah 30:15, Jonah 2:7-9, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, James 1:5, James 5:13, James 5:16

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Practical Faith"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of practical prayer in everyday life, illustrating how prayer connects with wisdom, trials, joy, sickness, and intercession for others. He highlights that prayer is not just for grand occasions but is essential in mundane matters, guiding us through challenges and leading to healing and blessings. Simpson encourages believers to approach God with their needs, no matter how small, and to trust in His power to answer prayers, as demonstrated through biblical examples. He concludes by stressing the importance of fervent prayer for others, which can lead to profound spiritual outcomes.

Transcript

"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

PRACTICAL PRAYER. This is the kind that James describes: Something to lift up, something that comes down to the level of our everyday life, something that helps us in our business, that heals us in our sickness, that reaches beyond our need to others, and leads us to convert the sinner from the error of his way, and save a soul from death, and hide a multitude of sins.

I. THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN CONNECTION WITH THE COMMON AND EVERYDAY AFFAIRS OF LIFE.

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given" (James 1:5). This is the ministry of prayer in the ordinary affairs of life. Wisdom just means the ability to do the right thing, to suit the means to the end in view. And so it has to deal with all the things that concern our life. The housewife needs it to make ends meet. The skilled artisan needs it to give a finer touch to his hand. The businessman needs it to meet the difficulties and emergencies of his office, to take advantage of opportunities, to be prudent and farseeing, and make the best of things as they come in his

life. We need it in our domestic life in the training of our children. We need it in our spiritual work in rightly handling God's Word and dealing with the souls that come to us. And in our whole life we need a superintending hand, a wisdom greater than our own to suggest the right thing and to overrule our erring judgment and cause the best thing to come about, even if we ourselves did not choose it, making all things work together for good.

Surely this is intensely practical. We are to pray for wisdom. We are to bring to God everything that comes up in our life, and count nothing too small for His interest and interposing hand. The incense which was the type of prayer, was beaten very small, teaching us that nothing is too small to mingle with the cloud of prayer that goes from our closet to the throne of grace, and is presented by our Savior to His father for acceptance.

So as we look through the Word of God, we find that secular matters and everyday interests are constantly made the turning points of greatest events. A young farmer looking for his father's asses led to the establishment of the kingdom of Israel. A lad coming up to see his brothers from Bethlehem led to the selection of David as king. In reading the story of Daniel, we find an emergency too hard for him and his companions becoming the occasion through prayer of all his future history. They were in peril because they could not interpret the king's dream. Daniel and his companions prayed for wisdom to make known this dream and thus deliver them, and it was through this incident that all the mighty future of Daniel, affecting the history of two great kingdoms, came about. He simply asked for wisdom, and his prayer was answered; he and his friends were delivered, and the way was opened for the highest possible service.

So we find Ezra on his way back to Palestine suddenly losing his way in the Syrian desert. How did he act? He says, "We appointed a fast that we might ask of our God the right way, for we were ashamed to ask of the king a guard, for we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him, but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him." Nor did he pray in vain. The wisdom was given, the way was made plain, and the pilgrim caravan crossed the desert in safety, and restored the city and temple of the Lord.

So, again, we find David in his first campaign against the Philistines, after he had been crowned, inquiring of the Lord, "Shall I go up to the Philistines? Wilt thou deliver them into mine hand?" (2 Sam. 5:19.) Of course such a beginning was followed by victory. But a year later the enemy returned. Now naturally we would expect David to do just as he did before. But that is not the way of faith. It does not count on experience, but upon God, and notwithstanding all that God had told him and done for him hitherto, he returned implicitly to the oracle of prayer, as though he had never fought a battle before. And happy for him that he did so, for now the direction is entirely different from the former occasion. "Go not up against them," is the divine command, "but fetch a compass behind them, . . . and . . . when thou hearest the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, then thou shalt bestir thyself, for then shall the Lord go out before thee to smite the host of the Philistines." So prayer waits upon God and takes its instructions directly from the throne, even as the eyes of a servant wait upon the hand of her mistress.

It is said of Jotham that he became mighty because "he prepared all his way before the Lord." And the wisest of ancient teachers has told us, "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Prov. 3:6, 5.)

The writer recalls an incident in his ministry, a quarter of a century ago, when struggling with a great debt upon the house of the Lord which should never have been put there, he begged his people to unite with

him in prayer, and promised them that if they would do so sincerely, God would surely remove it. They told him that it was no use to pray about such a debt for it was too big -- sixty-five thousand dollars. It was all right to pray about reasonable things, but this thing was an impossibility, and beyond their power. It was in vain for him to say that those were just the things to pray about, that we did not need a God for the things that were within our power, but for the difficult and impossible tasks. Finally, however, the senior elder of the church very firmly said to him, "My dear pastor, we esteem you very highly, but we do not at all agree with your extreme views about prayer."

Acting from a conscientious impulse, the minister refused to dedicate the church until the debt should be removed, but consented to preach in it, until after a few months he was called to his present field so strongly that he felt reluctantly constrained to leave the scene of so many prayers and labor, and to commit to God the things yet unfinished. A few months after his arrival in New York, a telegram came one Sabbath morning, inviting him to go the next Sabbath and dedicate the old church in the West, adding that the debt had been paid that week, and that the old elder who had so strongly objected to his views of prayer, had answered those prayers himself by giving fifty thousand dollars. Of course the response was "Yes." The church was dedicated. The elder's house was his hospitable home for the next ten days, and when he thanked him for his noble gift, the modest reply that came with many tears, was, "Don't thank me, it was the Lord." It is needless to add that the dear old saint had revised his views about prayer, and had no question now that God could do the hardest things and that there was nothing too difficult for prayer to ask in Jesus' name for the Father's glory.

II. THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN CONNECTION WITH TRIAL.

"Is any among you afflicted? let him pray" (James 5:13). The book of Psalms is the prayer book of the afflicted. There is no form of trial which cannot find its appropriate expression in this sublime and simple liturgy. The experience of David was in accord with his poetry. He had learned to go to God in every dark and trying hour. In that supreme trial, just before his coronation, when he returned to Ziklag to find it burned with fire, and all his loved ones captives in the hands of the enemy, while his truest followers even threatened mutiny, and talked of stoning him, we are told that "David encouraged himself in the Lord." Turning to the oracle of prayer again he sought direction, and soon had the joy not only of recovering all that he had lost, but of seeing his waiting years crowned with triumph, and his throne at last established. Such is the story of all the saints. When Rabshakeh sent his impious challenge to Hezekiah, and Sennacherib's army invested Jerusalem with a hopeless cordon, the good king called Isaiah to his counsels and spread the matter before the Lord. That was all. They just prayed about it, and lo, before another sun had risen that mighty host lay dead beneath the blighting wing of God's angel of judgment.

Even when our troubles are our own fault, and have come to us through folly or disobedience, even then it is not too late to pray. When Jehoshaphat found himself, through his sinful alliance with Amaziah, the wicked king of Israel, without water in a desolate wilderness, and three armies were threatened with destruction, Amaziah, true to the spirit of wicked unbelief, turned from God and cried, "See how God hath called these three kings together to deliver them into the hand of Moab." It was the despair of the sinner in the dark hour of calamity. But that was just the time when Jehoshaphat thought of God and turned to prayer, and soon through the hand of Elisha the valley was flowing with water, and deliverance and victory came. Even Jonah, when he found himself in the "belly of hell," did not forget to pray, and out of the depths of despair the cry of faith met the hand of deliverance. "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord." (Jonah 2:7, 9.)

Yes, even the wicked Manasseh, after half a century of bloodshed, when overtaken by just retribution in Babylon, lifted his heart to God even amid his chains, and God heard his prayer, and restored him to his kingdom and his home. "When he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him: and he was entreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God." (2 Chron. 33:12, 13.)

And so the promise remains for all the tried ones, "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray." Is this what we are doing, beloved? Are we meeting God in our trials, or are we running to every expedient that our own minds suggest, and coming to Him only when every other resource has failed? How true to our experience is the reproof of God to Israel, "For thus saith the Lord God, ... in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not." (Is. 30:15.) Instead of trusting Him to work for them, they resolved to make alliance with the world, and borrow the swift horses of Egypt. "But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift. Therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you. . . . Blessed are all they that wait for him." (Is. 30:16.) Alas, how often have we delayed our blessing until we were through with all our earthly expedients and had learned to look to God alone! "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray."

III. THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN CONNECTION WITH JOY AND BLESSING.

"Is any merry? let him sing psalms" (James 5: 13). This is not so much prayer as praise, but praise is the better half of prayer. It is the amen of faith. It is the echo of confidence. It is the clinching of the nail that prayer has driven. It is prayer overflowing into praise. After Paul and Silas had prayed in the dungeon of Philippi, they just had to praise. And so all true prayer becomes praise, when it reaches its fullness.

The book of Psalms is much more a book of praise than even prayer, and it may well put to shame the unbelieving grumbling devotion of the modern saint. If we would praise more, we should have more to praise for.

IV. THE PLACE OF PRAYER IN SICKNESS.

"Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him."

The careful reader will not fail to note the distinction between affliction and sickness. In affliction we are to pray, but it may be for grace to endure the affliction quite as much as deliverance from it, but in the case of sickness prayer is described as a definite remedy, and we are commanded to claim positive deliverance. The promise is, "The Lord shall raise him up." This is very remarkable, and should not be overlooked. It seems to imply that disease is a special hindrance of the adversary, from which we should claim the Lord's protection. This is not only the prayer of the sufferer, but united prayer, and, of course, the prayer of faith.

Prayer and healing for the sick is no new teaching of James. Away back in the Old Testament we find Abraham praying for Abimelech, and Abimelech was healed. We find Moses interceding for Miriam, and her leprosy was taken away. We find David telling of God who healeth all his diseases, and redeemeth his life from destruction. We find Job receiving the healing touch of Jehovah's hand, and Elihu unfolding the

principles of the New Testament with reference to God's healing love and power. We find Hezekiah receiving back even his forfeited life, when he prayed to God in the darkest hour of his existence, and we find the life of Jesus crowded with answers to the helpless cries of those who came to Him for healing.

Beloved, are you thus walking in the footsteps of the flock? Are you looking to God first in the hour of sickness and pain? Are you honoring Him with your trust, and making even the attacks of the enemy an occasion for victory and glory to His name? "Is any sick? let him pray."

V. THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER FOR OTHERS AND FOR THE WORK OF GOD.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." And then he tells us of the prayer of Elijah, and the sinner converted from the error of his way, so that a soul is saved from death, and a veil is cast over a multitude of sins. This is the highest ministry of prayer, not for ourselves, but for others and for God. But such prayer is no idle play. The apostle calls it the "effectual fervent prayer." Rotherham translates it "the supplication of a righteous man availeth much, working inwardly." The idea is that of intense energy, a paroxysm of internal force working out corresponding results. The illustration is Elijah on Mount Carmel. The vivid description of the sacred narrative presents us the picture of the prophet on his face with his head between his knees. It is a picture of strenuous inward conflict. Every nerve and muscle is intensely wrought to the highest strain. A mighty struggle is going on within. He is getting hold of God for something stupendous, and, lo, in a little while we see that inward conflict reproduced in the outer world, in the swift hurricane, the gleaming lightning, the reverberating thunder, the terrors of the tempest. This is but the outcome of the forces that had been working within, and that had touched the springs of omnipotence, and let loose the powers of heaven. The literal translation of the passage about Elijah is "Elijah prayed a prayer." He did not pray a phrase or a form, or a paragraph, but a prayer. It was a living force. It had momentum in it. It was like the sure projectile that speeds from that piece of artillery. It reached somewhere. It accomplished something.

You have heard of the Boer hunter who went out with an American sportsman to shoot antelope. The American took his belt full of cartridges. The Boer took just one. "Why," said the other, "don't you intend to take some cartridges?" "Oh," said he, "I have taken my cartridge." "Yes, but," replied the other, "don't you want more?" "Oh, no," said he, "I just want one antelope." The Boer meant that he expected to hit his target the first shot, and saw no use in wasting ammunition. The American probably expected one antelope too, but a score of spent shots. This is not a bad illustration of the different kinds of prayer. Most of our petitions go up like soap bubbles, vanishing as we gaze. True prayer is pointed, real, and expects to reach the ear of God, and bring the answer from above every time. There is no higher service for the Master than to stand in such holy priesthood, and bear the burdens of other souls, and the kingdom of our Lord.

"I am one of eleven children," said an old lady. "My brothers and sisters were all smarter and stronger than I. I am a poor shrunken cripple. I have no talent or influence. But I know how to pray, and God has let them all die, and it seemed as though He needed me more than all." This old lady used to lie upon her bed and have her attendant read the letters of friends, or the newspapers of the day, while she would stop between sentences, and take hold of God for each need, waiting until she had claimed the answer and recorded it in the Lord's book of remembrance. Need we doubt that the answer came? These are the forces that are making the history of eternity. God help us to be among them.

Lord, teach us to pray!

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