

Prayer and the Future

by Ian Murray

Ian Murray's sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer about the future while affirming God's sovereignty over all events.

Duration: 51:09

Scripture: Psalm 32:8, Proverbs 16:9, Isaiah 45:11, Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 6:34, Romans 8:28, Ephesians 2:10

Topics: "Prayer Power", "Gods Guidance"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the power of prayer and the importance of seeking God's will. He references the story of Elijah and the drought, highlighting how Elijah fervently prayed for rain and sent his servant to check for any signs of God's fulfillment. Eventually, after the seventh time, a small cloud appears, indicating that God is about to end the drought. The preacher also mentions the parable of the man in bed at midnight, emphasizing the need for persistence in prayer. Additionally, he refers to the vision given to Nebuchadnezzar, where Daniel interprets the dream and reveals that Nebuchadnezzar represents the head of gold in the image. The sermon encourages believers to seek God's guidance for the future and trust in His plans.

Transcript

Thank you, Mr. McKinney, for your welcome. We've been greatly looking forward to this conference and we pray that God's help and Spirit may be given to us all as we wait upon Him in these days together. Now let us read the Word of God in the Prophet Isaiah, the 45th chapter.

Isaiah chapter 45 I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in thunder the bars of iron. I will give thee the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant's sake and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name, I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me.

I am the Lord, and there is none else. There is no God beside me. I girded thee, though thou hast not known me, that they may know from the rising of the sun and from the west that there is none beside me.

I am the Lord, and there is none else. I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil.

I, the Lord, do all these things. Drop down, ye heavens from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness. Let the earth open and let them bring forth salvation and let righteousness spring up

together.

I, the Lord, have created it. Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! Let the potsherds strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou? Or thy work, he hath no hands.

Woe unto him that saith unto his father, What begetteth thou? Or to the woman, What hast thou brought forth? Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and His Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons and concerning the work of my hands. Command ye me. I have made the earth and created man upon it.

I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded. I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways, and he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the Lord of hosts. Thus saith the Lord, the labour of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabaeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine.

They shall come after thee. In chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee. They shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee, and there is none else.

There is no God. Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. They shall be ashamed and also confounded, all of them, that go to confusion together.

They shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols. But Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation. Ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded, world without end.

For thus saith the Lord that created the heavens, God Himself that formed the earth and made it. He hath established it. He created it not in vain.

He formed it to be inhabited. I am the Lord, and there is none else. I have not spoken in secret in a dark place of the earth.

I said not unto the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain. I, the Lord, speak righteousness. I declare things that are right.

Assemble yourselves and come. Draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations. They have no knowledge that set up the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a God that cannot save.

Tell ye and bring them near. Yea, let them take counsel together. Who hath declared this from the ancient time? Who hath told it from that time? Have not I, the Lord, and there is no God else beside me, a just God and a Saviour? There is none beside me.

Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is none else. I have sworn by myself the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness and shall not return, that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. Surely shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength.

Even to Him shall men come that all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory. Let us turn this morning to the words that we find in the eleventh verse of this chapter.

The eleventh verse of Isaiah 45. Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and His Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons and concerning the work of my hands. Command ye me.

There are texts in different parts of the Bible that when they are first compared together appear to be in disagreement. And I think that this is perhaps one of those texts. You will remember how our Lord commanded us to take no thought for the morrow.

And yet here we have a text which tells us very clearly that tomorrow, that the future, is to be the subject of prayer and thought. Ask me, God says, of things to come and concerning the work of my hands. Command ye me.

But of course in this case as in all those other supposed cases, there is no real disharmony or disagreement between those two texts. Our Lord's prohibition and the exhortation in these words. Our Lord forbids unbelieving thought about the future.

He forbids that kind of thought which leads to anxiety, which leads to fear. In that sense it is our duty to take no thought for the morrow. But there is another sense in which thought for the future is obligatory for the Christian.

And it is that sense of course which is found in our text. A certain attitude to the future is laid down in these words. Ask me of things to come concerning my sons.

Now it seemed to me as I considered the first session this morning and the part that I had been invited to take in it that it would be suitable to turn our minds to the future rather than to the past. I say that because of course in a great deal of our time in this week we look forward to thinking about the past. We have already begun to do that last evening and I am sure that all of us who have gathered in this conference are aware and convinced of the importance of looking back.

We know that history is the work of God and that therefore we have a duty to listen to it and to read and hear of God's mighty works. But at the same time we also have an obligation to look to the future. And as we may not perhaps have much occasion to do that in these days I was led to take this text which is before us this morning.

I suppose there is a sense in which it is more difficult to look to the future than to look to the past. I think it is also true to say that the way in which the church looks at the future is a very accurate test of her spiritual condition. Or to put it more personally, the way that we individually look at the future is an accurate test of our spiritual condition.

How do we think of the future? How do we anticipate it? What kind of confidence do we have when we contemplate that which is still to come? It's easier for the world to look back. We know that worldly people are not over fond of doing that even. But it is perfectly possible for unregenerate people to look back at the past with a great deal of nostalgia and interest, and you are quite familiar with that at the present time.

And Christians look back in a different way. But I say, how do we look forward? And in what kind of way do the Scriptures exhort us to look forward? We are not to make the future a subject of anxious thought and prayer, but concerning the things which are to come, we are commanded in these words, Ask Me, saith the Holy One of Israel. Now, in the day when Isaiah first wrote these words, there was a great division amongst the people just on this subject.

Their attitude to the future. And the division occurred in this way. I suppose we would have to cast our minds back a little earlier than Isaiah's time to put the thing in its context.

You remember how in the days of David and Solomon, Israel had been at her greatest power and influence. She was everywhere respected. It was not simply the Queen of Ethiopia that came and did homage in the days of Solomon.

It was the position and the regard with which Israel was held among the nations. And then after the death of Solomon about 930 B.C., there came the commencement of the decline, the division between Israel and Judah. The beginnings, the development of political corruption, of social decay.

Israel, instead of remaining a prince among the nations, is gradually overshadowed by Syria and Egypt and then supremely the great empire of Assyria. And when Isaiah wrote and ministered some 200 years after the death of Solomon, the message that God gave him to proclaim in the first instance was the message of a coming desolation and destruction and captivity. When he is commissioned, as we read there in Isaiah chapter 6, you will recall how God says that that ministry was to continue until the cities be wasted without inhabitants and the houses without a man.

And the Lord have removed men far off. Upon the land of my people, says Isaiah, shall come up thorns and briars. There was, in other words, the clear prediction that captivity was going to come to the people of God.

And that was the point at which the people were divided. How did they regard the future? How did they regard that particular message which was preached to well, we read in Isaiah chapter 22 how the majority regarded it. In that day we read in that day the Lord of hosts called for weeping and mourning and girding with sackcloth.

And behold, says the Prophet, joy and gladness. Slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine, let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Their attitude was that whatever is coming tomorrow, there is nothing we can do about it.

We'd better enjoy today. And we'd better enjoy today because we've made provision for the day. In other words, the people were immersed in materialism, in the lust for pleasure and entertainment.

Let us eat and drink for tomorrow. Why worry for tomorrow? Tomorrow when death comes there is nothing that we can do about it. And it is that attitude towards the future which is here condemned in this prophecy.

And the people of God are charged, ask me of things to come. And concerning the work of my hands, command ye me. Now as we look at the words of this text, let us note in the first place that God is able to give us information about the future because the future is planned and controlled by Him.

This exhortation in our text would make no sense if it wasn't for the fact that God orders and rules and plans and because therefore the future has been thus ordained by God He is able to make known to His people that which will come to pass. You notice how God describes Himself in the introductory sentence of the verse. Who are we to ask concerning things to come? It is thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel and His Maker.

It is the One who makes history, who fashions Israel, who controls, who determines, who appoints the destiny of men and nations. God has a plan and a program. The Lord, the Holy One of Israel and His former, His Maker, ask me, He says, of things to come.

So that the church was being told in Isaiah's day, in a day of trouble, a day when there were many shadows and fears to be, to exercise the people of God, in that day they were told that the future would not come as the result of accident or of chance or by the will of man, but that God had appointed it and God would rule it. Now of course the prophecy of Isaiah is almost full of statements concerning God's planning and control of that which would be. Let me remind you of some of those verses.

Surely as I have thought, God says, so it shall come to pass. And as I have purposed, so it shall stand. Or again, new things, new things do I declare, before they spring up, I tell you of them.

Or Isaiah 46 verses 9 and 10, I am God and there is none else declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times the things which are not yet done, saying my counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure. Now there are I almost said dozens of similar texts in the prophet Isaiah. There are very many speaking to us of the control of God over all things.

And this very chapter that we read of course is one of those amazing disclosures of such a program. Here when Isaiah was writing, as I said, the great empire of Assyria was bestriding the earth in its power. But Assyria would fall and fall before Babylon.

Babylon the great would rule. But not forever. In the year 539 B.C. Cyrus would enter Babylon and the gates would be opened and God would raise up Cyrus as his servant in order to direct that the Jews should be sent from the captivity in which they would then be found and back to Jerusalem and he says God shall build my city.

And what we have in Isaiah 45 is a very express and almost detailed prediction of how some 200 years after Isaiah's day, God would raise up this new leader, a new empire and through it he would accomplish his purpose in the ending of the captivity. I'm sure you are familiar with this in many portions of the Word of God. Think of that amazing vision which God gave to Nebuchadnezzar.

How he dreamt and saw in his dreams this image, this colossus standing upon the earth with a head of gold and breast of silver and belly of brass and legs of iron, feet of iron and clay and how Nebuchadnezzar is utterly confounded believing that it is a message from God but his wise men cannot interpret it. At last Daniel is called and Daniel makes known to him, thou art he says, that head of gold. The head was the ruling empire of Babylon but that empire would pass.

The Medes and the Persians would come and then Greece and then the legs of iron, the empire of Rome and in the days of those kings, Daniel too says, will God raise up a kingdom that would have no end? Just one of the many Old Testament examples of how God has not only foreordained that which comes to pass but He is sometimes pleased to make that knowledge known in the earth. Think of the scene when our Lord stood before Pontius Pilate. Was there ever a day in history when it seemed that man was ruling the earth, that sin prevailed, that God was silent in the heavens when Pilate said to Jesus speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to release thee and power to crucify thee? And Jesus says to Pilate thou couldest have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above.

Or think of the words when Jesus is speaking later after His resurrection to Simon Peter and assuring Peter that Peter would not fail again but he would live a long and full life in the service of Christ and when the final test came, Peter would be faithful unto death. And the words in which Jesus put that truth to Peter were those words we read in the last chapter of the Gospel of John. When thou wast young thou girded thyself and went whither thou wouldst.

But when thou shalt become old another shall gird thee and thou shalt stretch forth thine hands and thou shalt be carried whither thou wouldst not. And that rather mysterious statement is at once interpreted by John who says this he spake signifying by what death he would die. So you see the picture is of Simon Peter with liberty to act, to serve, girding himself, going forth, working in the cause of Christ and a day coming not chosen by Peter when he was stretched forth his hands in bonds and another would lead him and lead him to a place of death and of martyrdom.

This he spake of the death by which he would die. But it was all known to our Lord. Every moment of Peter's future existence.

And so when in Acts chapter 12 we find Peter in prison with James put to death by the sword and Herod about as he thinks to do the same for Simon Peter and Peter in prison the night before his execution, we find him between those two soldiers bound with a chain and sleeping as peacefully as a little child. Because, says the Apostle Paul, God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind. And having a sound mind means that we know that God rules and Peter is not disturbed and not fearful because he rests in that knowledge as he sleeps there in his prison.

A few weeks ago I read for the first time something about Mrs. James Durham. I don't recall reading of her before but some of you will know the name of James Durham, her husband. He was an eminent commentator.

He wrote on the Song of Solomon and on other books of the Scripture way back in the 17th century. And then he died as a young man and left his widow who lived in Edinburgh. And his widow lived through that fiercest time of persecution in Scotland which was called the Killing Time in the 1680s.

And what I read was this that during that period when persecution was at its worst Mrs. Durham met with a group of Christians for prayer and discussion in Edinburgh and their thoughts were upon the subject of God ruling and controlling and reigning. And as they dwelt upon that truth they had the assurance that this storm would pass that the gospel would go forward. And the old account says that Mrs. James Durham danced and skipped in the room as they had spoken of these things.

Now you understand this was when persecution was at its hottest. But faith was laying hold upon the knowledge that God is reigning and here is a sober Scots lady we read dancing and skipping in that room in Edinburgh. And that is what we have to know.

Known unto God says James are all his works from the foundation of the world. 200 years ago there were people who thought that the world was to be ruled from London or to be ruled from Paris. In the lifetime of many of us Hitler thought the world should be ruled from Berlin.

And there are those today who may imagine that the world should be ruled from Moscow or Peking or wherever. But the Christian knows that God is ruling. And God is ruling according to His own counsel and as He has purposed so it shall come to pass.

And therefore the first thing that we learn in this text is that God is able to give us information concerning the future because He has planned it and because He has appointed it. Thus saith the Lord the Holy One of Israel and His Maker, ask me of things to come. Now in the second place as we look at this verse let us observe that there are certain particular things about which we are to ask God.

This verse does not give us a general warrant to ask God all things about the future. Not at all. There is a limitation.

There is a strict restriction put upon our petitioning God. Ask me of things to come concerning my sons. That is the limitation.

And it's a very vital one. I don't need to remind you how unhappily there have been and still are many professing Christians who sometimes act as though the Bible was intended to give us a preview of what was to happen to our countries, to Britain or to America or to the Middle East or wherever. And they kind of read the Bible as though it's an advance record of what's going to happen here and there and God is therefore disclosing to us in advance the whole sort of panorama of future events.

Now the Bible does not profess to do that. And this text does not warrant us to ask such disclosures about the future. It warrants us, it obliges us to ask God of things concerning his sons.

As I say, I think that's a very vital distinction. Sometimes even good men have made a mistake at this very point. I hope God willing to say a little about one of those good and great men later this week.

But let me refer to him now. I read a sermon of C. H. Spurgeon recently in which he speaks of a Christian man, he says, one of the godliest men he ever knew who came to him and this man was full of forebodings about the future of Britain and of London. And this is what Spurgeon says.

He says, I walked some time ago with one of the most earnest Christians I know of. He told me he was afraid that one day the streets of London would run with blood. He was afraid of an educated democracy which, being uneducated in religion, in secular schools, public schools would become clever atheists and cast off all reverence for God and law.

And he gave me an awful picture of what was going to happen. But, says Spurgeon, but I touched him on the arm and said there is one thing you have forgotten dear friend. God is not dead yet.

What you are dreading will never occur in this land. I am sure. Now, probably both these good men were making a mistake.

One was being too gloomy. The other was being too confident. We don't have any grounds to make any predictions about the future of our particular nations.

They are secret things that belong unto the Lord. Spurgeon had no warrant to make any such firm, confident assertion regarding what might or might not happen in London. But, as we have said, what our text asserts is that there are things to come concerning God's sons which we are to know.

Now, that being the case, how are we to know these things to come concerning God's sons? And I believe there is only one answer to that. We are to know them through God's promises. The same God who told Isaiah to ask him of things to come gave Isaiah those promises of many things to come.

The same in the prophet Jeremiah. Call upon me, God said to Jeremiah, and I will answer thee and show thee great and mighty things which thou knowest not. In promises.

Or again, when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, said Jesus to the disciples, He will lead you into all truth and He will show you things to come. In promises. Or again, the Apostle Paul says, I have not seen nor ear heard the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him, but He hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit.

That is to say, in the written word, in promises, which things the Apostle therefore says, which things we also speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth. God speaks to His people concerning the future and He does it in the promises which He has given through Apostles and Prophets and through our Lord Jesus Christ. These are the things which God makes known.

And what are these promises about? Well, they are about His sons. Now, in the prophet Isaiah, you may observe how continually God speaks of His sons and also His Son, in the plural, or The Son. And the plural and the singular are bound up with each other.

One is dependent upon the other. Think of the verse in Isaiah chapter 7. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and thou shalt call His name Emmanuel, a Son God with us. For the next chapter of Isaiah, unto us a child is born.

Unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulder and He shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. A son is given. A son is born.

And the prophet Isaiah, as you know, is full of promises concerning this Son. What is He to do? He is to govern men. He is to justify many.

He is to sprinkle many nations. He will not fail nor be discouraged, says the prophet. He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.

He shall see His seed. He shall prolong His days and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hands. The Son and this Son of whom Isaiah speaks so often is the one to whom it is said in His role as the Saviour, the Governor, the Father says to Him, Bring my sons from far and my daughters from the ends of the earth.

And of these sons it is Jesus who says in that word of prophecy, He hath sent Me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to captives, the recovery of sight to the blind. This Son is bringing sons unto glory. And what Isaiah teaches us as the whole Gospel is that everything that belongs to Jesus, the Captain of our salvation, belongs also to the sons who are being brought to glory through Him.

So that His obedience and death is their death. It is counted as their obedience. By that they will be justified.

His resurrection is the guarantee of theirs. His riches are their riches. His Holy Spirit which dwells in Him without measure is the Spirit by which they will be anointed.

They belong to Christ and they are sons of God. And God says, ask Me of things to come concerning My sons. That's the limitation.

And that is what we have to do. And as I say, this prophecy of Isaiah is full of promises concerning the sons. What is going to happen to them? Well, Isaiah says, the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.

They shall not hunger nor thirst. Neither shall the sun light on them nor any heat. They are not only going to be justified, they are going to be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.

And so when we pray and petition God concerning things to come, concerning His sons, what we learn is this, that God is ruling and governing the earth, not in the interest of any nation, not in the interest of any empire, but in the interest of His Son and in the interest of that people who belong to His Son, who are also God's sons. And therefore, all events, all things, war and peace, light and darkness, good and evil, all things are being appointed by God for the building of the kingdom of these sons of whom we read here. And so when Paul in Romans chapter 8 asks the question whether tribulation or death or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword are able to separate us from the love of Christ, his answer is that they are not because God is for us and it is God who is using even all these things for the furtherance and the interests of His Church.

Those great nations which existed in the ancient world, Assyria and then Babylon and Egypt and Rome, what were they? They were, as we read there in Isaiah 40, they were counted to Him less than nothing and vanity. And so are all earthly kingdoms and empires in the sight of God. God is building a kingdom, a kingdom at whose head is the Lord Jesus Christ and in that kingdom He is bringing many sons unto glory.

Now in the third and last place, and this is the very heart of our text, we have to observe the holy familiarity which God here encourages His people to use in prayer. I don't know what better way to say it. The holy familiarity, the boldness which God here encourages His people to employ in prayer.

God makes known the future in promises. But the stupendous truth is this, that the God who foreordains, the God who has perfectly planned all things, the end from the beginning, is the same God who says that He will be inquired of of the house of Israel to do it for them. Ask Me of things to come, and concerning the work of My hands, command ye Me.

There is hardly a more remarkable verse in the Bible. This verse does not say that God has purposed certain things, but we are responsible by the work of our hands to fulfill His purposes. He doesn't say that.

He says that it's the work of His hands. The building of the church, the conversion of men, the sanctification of the body of Christ, this is the work of God's hands. But the very God who is supreme and who controls all says that concerning that work we are to command Him.

In other words, that by pleading, by praying, by wrestling with God, God will bring to pass the blessings He has promised. God requires prayer. God will bring to pass what He has designed as His people wait upon Him.

Later in Isaiah we read, as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth children. That's God's way of working. And there is a mystery there which is utterly beyond the comprehension of our finite minds.

The God who is so supreme in power and glory is the same God who thus tells us to command Him. Now, some of you may have some modern translations in your hands, and if you have, you will notice in some of them that the King James Version has been revised on this text. Some versions read verse 11 as a question, as a rebuke in fact.

Do you command me concerning the work of my hands? Or some such translation. But there is no warrant for that change. The King James translation at this point is thoroughly adequate as a translation of the original.

And if you have the great commentary by E.J. Young on the Prophet Isaiah, you will see that Young doesn't even consider the other translations that have been offered. There is no warrant for them. But you can understand, I suppose, especially perhaps to someone who doesn't understand a great deal about prayer, how they thought that the King James Version was a kind of improbable translation.

Concerning the work of my hands, command ye me. But it's not improbable. In fact, it's the very thing that Isaiah himself does.

Read over again the praying of Isaiah. And you hear him saying things like this. Awake! Awake, O arm of the Lord! Awake as in ancient days.

That's commanding God. That's pleading with God. Awake, O arm of the Lord! For again he says in Isaiah 63, look down from heaven and behold from the habitation of thy glory, where is thy zeal and thy strength? The sounding of thy heart and of thy mercies towards us, are they restrained? And then Isaiah tells us, ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence and give him no rest until he establish, until he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

It's a staggering truth that God is to be prevailed upon by prayer. And there is nothing more unchristian and more unspiritual than to imagine that somehow we are living in a world in which events have to take their course. We are sort of puppets on the stage of history.

There is really nothing we can do to change what will happen. That is not true! Because God has appointed that we will pray. And God has said that He Himself is prevailed upon by the praying of His people.

The Holy One, this verse says, the Holy One of Israel. Where did that name come from? What is it we read in Genesis 32? When Jacob came to the brook Jabbok, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. The angel of the covenant.

And how as the day breaketh the angel of the covenant said let me go for the day breaketh. But Jacob said, I will not let thee go except thou bless me. What is that? That is doing what is commanded in this text.

That is pleading with God. And that is prevailing with God for we read that God said, thy name shall be no more Jacob, but Israel, for as a prince thou hast had power with God and hast prevailed. Think of Moses at Sinai.

Pleading with God when the people had worshipped the golden image. Look at Elijah on top of Mount Carmel with his head between his hands. What is he doing? He is commanding God.

He is pleading that those three years and six months of drought will be ended. He casts himself down upon the earth, we read. And he sends his servants to the sea to see if God is about to fulfill his word.

But there is no sign until the seventh time the servant goes and behold a cloud about the size of a man's hand. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Or read that eleventh chapter of

Luke again.

And what Jesus tells us in this very connection. The parable he draws of the man in bed at midnight with his children about him and his door shut and his friend comes at that hour wanting some loaves for a friend who has come in his journey and he has nothing to set before him. And the man tells him to go away.

He can't get out of bed at that hour, but, says Jesus, for his importunity, for his importunity, he will arise and give him as much as he asketh. And I say unto you, says our Lord, ask and it shall be given you. That is to say, ask in that way.

Seek and he shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you. How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? Or read that story of the Syro-Phoenician woman again.

How she pleaded and almost argued with Jesus. She comes to him, the woman of Canaan, and she cries out, Lord, help me! And Jesus doesn't answer her. Complete silence.

She has to go away. She pleads with the disciples. They come to Jesus and they say, send her away because she keeps on crying after us.

And Jesus says, he's not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But the woman comes back again and she worships him and says, Lord, help me! The first cry, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy upon me! He didn't seem to hear that cry. She comes back with another one.

And then he tells her straight, it's not fitting to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs. But she won't have it. She says, I don't need to be treated as a child.

Let me eat the dog's crumbs. Truth, Lord, she says, that is true what you say, but... And she goes on wrestling with him. And why? Because that's the work of the Holy Spirit.

That is prayer. He only appears that he's not going to answer. But she pleads with him, concerning the work of his hands, command ye him.

That is our duty. And that is what the church has done in all her brightest and her best days. Listen to these words from Tertullian, one of the early church fathers.

He describes how they used to pray. He says, we beset God, as it were, by troops. We offer violence unto Him, but of the kind He well likes.

We pour forth our prayers, we send up our cries, we rap at Heaven's gate, we rest and ring mercy and grace out of God's hands. That's a right understanding of God's promises. We rest mercies out of God's hands.

That's how the Reformation happened. That's what William Carey and his friends did when people thought they were mad in thinking they could go to India in 1792. A little group of them.

What did they do? Well, they opened the prophets. They read that the Lord, the God of the whole earth, shall thou be called. They read in large the place of thy tent, lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes.

And they took these promises and they pleaded them with God. And then they said, we're going to act on these promises. We're going to believe them.

And God met with them. So this morning as we think of these words, it seems to me they come to us as a great rebuke. It's not surprising the world doesn't pray.

But is there anything more surprising than the fact that Christians should be so weak in prayer when God has promised so much to us? Is there any way to account for it except by our lack of love and our unbelief in the face of the promises of God? And I'm sure as we go on and look forward this week to hearing more of God's servants of a past generation, one of the things we will constantly notice is how they hung upon God in prayer. Those founding fathers, the men and the women of Plymouth and Massachusetts, they were men and women of prayer. They came, yes, into a wilderness, but they weren't looking to the wilderness.

They were looking to the future. They were praying for the future. They were doing what is commanded in our text.

It was true of the Christians of 200 years ago. How often, as you read the history of those days in Virginia and in New England and so on, they had days of fasting and of prayer. They were looking to God.

They weren't looking in the first instance to their arms or to their success, but there were a multitude of people in the thirteen colonies who knew that it is only as God blesses that any good will come. And is there any greater difference between them and ourselves than the prayerlessness of our day? How little we are praying for our posterity, for that which is to come. That is what we are to do, my friends.

We shall meet in vain this week if we only look back to the past. The purpose of looking back is to gain new strength and hope and faith as we prepare for the future. And as we prepare for the future, our greatest need is the need of prayer, to plead with God, to come and revive His work.

O arm of the Lord, awake as in ancient days. May God help us so to wait upon Him.

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