

The Timeliness of Prayer

by P.T. Forsyth

Prayer is a powerful means of shaping history and promoting social unity and well-being, and it can help individuals and societies recall their focus on God and cosmic love.

Scripture: Psalm 145:18, Matthew 6:6, Romans 12:12, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, 1 Timothy 2:1, James 5:16

Topics: "Prayer Life", "Moral Crisis"

Description

P.T. Forsyth preaches about the power and importance of prayer, emphasizing the paradoxes and complexities that come with a life of prayer. He discusses the need for a balance between private and public prayer, highlighting the significance of prayer in times of adversity and moral crises. Forsyth stresses the necessity of prayer in shaping individual lives, society, and history, especially during times of war and uncertainty. He underscores the transformative and unifying nature of prayer, connecting it to the eternal moral crisis of the Cross and the foundational principles of the kingdom of God.

Transcript

Let him pray now that never prayed before,

And him that prayed before but pray the more.

The nearer we are driven to the God of Christ, the more we are forced on paradox when we begin to speak. I have been led to allude to this more than once. The magnalia dei are not those great simplicities of life on which some orders of genius lay a touch so tender and sure; but they are the great reconciliations in which life's tragic collisions come to lie "quiet, happy and supprest." Such are the peaceful paradoxes (the paradox at last of grace and nature in the Cross) which make the world of prayer such a strange and difficult land to the lucid and rational interpreters of life.

It is as miraculous as it is real that the holy and the guilty should live together in such habitual communion as the life of prayer. And it is another paradox that combines the vast power of prayer for the active soul, whether single or social, with the same soul's shyness and aloofness in prayer. There is a tendency to lose the true balance and adjustment here. When all goes well we are apt to overdo the aloofness that goes with spiritual engagement, and so to sacrifice some of its power and blessing for the soul.

Prayer which becomes too private may become too remote, and is apt to become weak. (Just as when it is too intimate it becomes really unworthy, and may become absurd even to spiritual men; it does so in the trivialities associated sometimes with the answer to prayer.) It is neither seemly nor healthy to be nothing but shy about the greatest powers in life. If we felt them as we should, and if we had their true vitality in us, we could not be so reserved about them. Some churches suffer much from extempore prayer, but perhaps those suffer more that exclude it.

It at least gives a public consecration to prayer private and personal, which prayer, from the nature of it, must be extempore and "occasional." The bane of extempore prayer is that it is confused with prayer unprepared; and the greatest preparation for prayer is to pray. The leader of prayer should be a man of prayer--so long as prayer does not become for him a luxury which really unfits him for liturgy, and private devotion does not indispose him for public worship. Delicacy and propriety in prayer are too dearly bought if they are there at the cost of its ruling power in life, private and public, and of its prevailing power with God.

It is one of the uses of our present dreadful adversity^[4] that we are driven to bring the great two-handed engine of prayer frankly to the fore. There is probably a greater volume of personal prayer to-day than for generations we have had in this somewhat silent people, and there is less embarrassment in owning it. One hears tales of the humour in the trenches, but not so much of the prayer which appears, from accounts, to be at least equally and visibly there. And it is not the prayer of fear, either at home or abroad, but of seriousness, of a new moral exaltation, or at least deepening, a new sense of realities which are clouded by the sunshine of normal life.

How can we but pray when we send, or our hearts go out to those who send, the dearest to the noble peril, or lose them in a noble death; or when we melt to those who are cast into unspeakable anxiety by the indirect effects of such a war upon mind or estate? We are helpless then unless we can pray. Or how can we but pray as we regain, under the very hand and pressure of God, the sense of judgment which was slipping from our easy and amiable creed? Above the aircraft we hear the wings of the judgment angel; their wind is on our faces; how should we not pray?

We now discuss with each other our prayers as we have seldom done before; and we do it for our practical guidance, and not merely our theological satisfaction. We ask our neighbours' judgment if we may pray for victory when we can be so little sure as we are in the increased complexity of modern issues that all the right is on one side; or when our enemy is a great nation to which the Christianity and the culture of the world owe an unspeakable debt, whether for reformation or illumination.

And if Christian faith and prayer is a supernatural, and therefore an international rivalries and tutelary gods? Truly the course of events has been the answer to this question easier than at first. We are driven by events to believe that a great moral blindness has befallen Germany; that its God, ceasing to be Christian, has become but Semitic; that it has lost the sense of the great imponderables; that the idolatry of the State has barrack-bound the conscience of the Church and stilled that witness of the kingdom of God which beards kings and even beheads them.

We are forced to think that the cause of righteousness has passed from its hands with the passing from them of humanity, with the submersion of the idea of God's kingdom in nationality or the cult of race, with the worship of force, mammon, fright, and ruthlessness, with the growth of national cynicism in moral things, and with the culture of a withering, self-searing hate which is the nemesis of mortal sin, and which

even God cannot use as He can use anger, but must surely judge.

This people has sinned against its own soul, and abjured the kingdom of God. That settles our prayer for victory. We must pray for the side more valuable for the kingdom of God--much as we have to confess. It would more than repay much calamity if we were moved and enlarged to a surer sense, a greater use, and a franker confession of the power of prayer for life, character, and history. There is plenty of discussion of the present situation, historic, ethical, or political, and much of it is competent, and even deep.

There is much speculation about the situation after the War, at home and abroad. But its greatest result may be the discredit of elegant, paltering, and feeble types of religion, the end of the irreligious wits and fribbles, and the rise of a new moral seriousness and a new spiritual realism. Many will be moved, in what seems the failure of civilization, to a new reliance on the Church, and especially on the more historic, ethical, and positive Churches, which have survived the paganism of culture and which ride the waves of storm.

Yet even these impressions can evaporate unless they are fixed by action. And the action that fixes them in their own kind is prayer--prayer which is really action. A religion of prosperity grows dainty, petty, sentimental, and but pseudo-heroic. We unlearn our fathers' creed that religion is, above all things, an act, that worship is the greatest act of which man is capable, and that true worship culminates in the supreme labour, and even sorrow, of real prayer. This is man at his utmost; and it has for it near neighbours all the great things that men or nations do.

But when a nation must go to righteous war it embarks on one of the very greatest acts of its life, especially if its very existence as a servant of God's kingdom hang on it. A state of war is really the vast and prolonged act of a corporate soul, with a number of minor acts organized into it. It is capable of being offered to a God whose kingdom is a public campaign moving through history, and coming by the faith, toil, peril, sacrifice, grief, and glory of nations, as well as the hearts and souls.

It is not possible to separate moral acts so great and solemn as the act of prayer (especially common and corporate prayer) and the act of war; nor to think them severed in the movement, judgment, and purpose of the Eternal. And we are forced into paradox again. The deeper we go down into the valley of decision the higher we must rise (if we are to possess and command our souls) into the mount of prayer, and we must hold up the hands of those whose chief concern is to prevail with God.

If we win we shall have a new sense of power amid all our loss and weakness; but what we shall need most of all if the power to use that power, and to protest us from our victory and its perilous sequels, whether of pride or poverty. And if we do not win we shall need it more. There will be much to sober us either way, more perhaps than ever before in our history. But that is not all, and it is not enough. As Christian people we need something to sanctify that very sobering and to do for the new moral thoughtfulness itself what that does for the peace-bred levity of the natural man.

For such a purpose there is no agent like prayer--serious, thinking, private prayer, or prayer in groups, in small, grave, congenial, understanding groups--prayer with the historic sense, church-nurtured and Bible-fed. Public prayer by all means, but, apart from liturgical form, the more open the occasions and the larger the company the more hard it may be to secure for such prayer the right circumstances or the right lead. Public facility is apt to outstrip the real intimacy and depth with God.

While on the other hand, the prayer that freely rises and aptly flows in our audience of God may be paralyzed in an audience of men. So that public prayer does not always reflect the practice of private petition as the powerful factor it is in Christian life and history. It does not always suggest a door opened in heaven, the insight or fellowship of eternal yet historic powers in awful orbits. It does not always do justice to our best private prayer, to private prayer made a business and suffused with as much sacred mind as goes to the more secular side even of the Christian life.

Should ministers enlist? it is asked. But to live in true and concrete prayer is to be a combatant in the War, as well as a statesman after it, if statesmen ought to see the whole range of forces at work. The saintly soldier still needs the soldier saint. Yet so much prayer has ceased to be a matter of thought, will, or conflict, and religion therefore has become so otiose, that it is not easy even for the Christian public to take such a saying as more than a phrase. This is but one expression of a general scepticism, both in the Church and out, about prayer, corporate or private, as power with God, and therefore as momentous in the affairs of life and history.

But momentous and effectual it must be. Other things being equal, a voluntary and convinced army is worth more than a conscript one. So to know that we are morally right means worlds for our shaping of the things that face us and must be met; and we are never so morally right as in proficient prayer with the Holy One and the Just. It has, therefore, a vast effect on the course of things if we believe at all in their moral destiny. More it wrought by it than the too wise world wots; and all the more as it is the prayer of a great soul or a great Church.

It is a power behind thrones, and it neutralizes, at the far end, the visible might of armies and their victories. It settles at last whether morality or machinery is to rule the world. If it lose battles, it wins in the long historic campaign. Whereas, if we have no such action with God, we lose delicacy of perception in the finer forces of affairs; we are out of touch and understanding with the final control in things, the power that is working to the top always; we become dense in regard to the subtle but supreme influences that take the generals and chancellors by surprise; and we are at the mercy of the sleepless action of the kingdom of evil on the world.

It is a fatal thing to under estimate the enemy; and it is in Christian prayer, seriously and amply pursued, that the soul really learns to gauge evil's awful and superhuman power in affairs. I am speaking not only of the single soul, perhaps at the moment not chiefly, but of the soul and prayer of a society like the true Church or a sobered people. The real power of prayer in history is not a fusillade of praying units of whom Christ is the chief, but it is the corporate action of a Saviour-Intercessor and His community, a volume and energy of prayer organized in a Holy Spirit and in the Church the Spirit creates.

The saints shall thus judge the world and control life. Neither for the individual nor for the Church is true prayer an enclave in life's larger and more actual course. It is not a sacred enclosure, a lodge in some vast wilderness. That is the weak side of pietism. But, however intimate, it is in the most organic and vital context of affairs, private and public, if all things work together, deeply and afar, for the deep and final kingdom of God. Its constant defeat of our egoism means the victory of our social unity and its weal.

For the egoist neither prays nor loves. On the other hand, such prayer recalls us from a distraught altruism, teeming with oddities, and frayed down to atomism by the variety of calls upon it; because the prayer is the supreme energy of a loving will and believing soul engaged with the Love that binds the earth, the sun, and all the stars. So far it is from being the case that love to God has no sphere outside

love to man that our love to man perishes unless it is fed by the love that spends itself on God in prayer, and is lifted thereby to a place and a sway not historic only, but cosmic.

Our communion with God in Christ rose, and it abides, in a crisis which shook not the earth only, but also heaven, in a tragedy and victory more vast, awful, and pregnant than the greatest war in history could be. Therefore the prayer which gives us an ever-deeper interest and surer insight into that eternal moral crisis of the Cross gives us also (though it might take generations) a footing that commands all the losses or victories of earth, and a power that rules both spirit and conscience in the clash and crash of worlds.

As there is devoted thought which ploughs its way into the command of Nature, there is thought, still more devoted, that prays itself into that moral interior of the Cross, where the kingdom of God is founded once for all on the last principle and power of the universe, and set up, not indeed amid the wreck of civilization, but by its new birth and a baptism so as by fire. Prayer of the right kind, with heart and soul and strength and mind, unites any society in which it prevails with those last powers of moral and social regeneration that settle history and that reside in the creative grace of the Cross, which is God's true omnipotence in the world.

"O God, who showest Thine almighty power most chiefly in having mercy and forgiving." Such speech as this may to some appear tall and rhetorical; but it would have so seemed to no father of the church, ancient or modern, taking apostolic measure of the place and moment of Christ in society, history, or the universe. If war is in any sense God's judgment on sin, and if sin was destroyed by the judgment in Christ and on Him, let us pray with a new depth and significance to-day, "O Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, grant us Thy peace.

Send us the peace that honours in act and deed that righteous and final judgment in Thy Cross of all historic things, and that makes therein for Thy Kingdom on earth as in heaven. Give peace in our time, O Lord, but, peace or war, Take the crown of this poor world."

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