



## Unanswered Prayer

Professor Donald Macleod, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College, Edinburgh

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There can be no denying the importance of prayer in the Christian life. J.C. Ryle even spoke of it as 'the most important subject in practical religion' and added, 'No man or woman can expect to be saved who does not pray'. It marks the difference between a vital interest in Christ and a merely academic interest in religion. 'Do you pray?' a modern theologian was asked. 'No!' he replied, 'I meditate, but I do not pray.' His God wasn't real enough to talk to.

It is probably because it is so sacred that we seldom submit prayer to any kind of theological analysis. To do so would savour of irreverence. Yet like every other area of discipleship our praying must live under the judgment of Scripture. There is already reason to fear that a pietism which scorns theology is producing an attitude to prayer which is biblically indefensible.

### Problems

There are three specific problems.

First, the constant reference to what is called 'the prayer life': as if prayer had a life of its own; as if it were a distinct, self-contained, area in our existence; and as if it were to be the object of deliberate (and highly self-conscious) cultivation. Into what biblical grid can such language fit? Prayer is nothing like as self-conscious and self-fulfilling as this phrase suggests. It is the soul wanting, not what the soul wants. And if it were important (which it probably isn't) that it be good or bad, enjoyable or otherwise, it would 'improve' only as it forgot itself and concentrated on the blessings we are meant to long for. A man will pray (maybe not elegantly, but sincerely) if he hungers and thirsts for God. Prayer which turns in upon itself, keeping a log of its own activity and carefully monitoring its own performance, is spiritual Narcissism: a refined form of self-obsession.

Secondly, there is the tendency to regard prayer as a resource in its own right. We speak of *prayer support* for our various activities. Tennyson put it more elegantly:

*More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of.*

In reality, prayer works nothing. It is God who achieves, in response to prayer. He is the resource; and what the modern attitude is doing, consciously or otherwise, is to give the human activity the glory which belongs to the divine agent alone. Faith in prayer is as misplaced as faith in faith: in fact, it is the same thing. Our faith is in God and it is to him, not to itself, that prayer

looks. Part of the relief this gives is that our hope does not rest on anything in our prayers themselves. Like everything else about us they are filthy rags (Is. 64:6). What we look to is the

infinite generosity of Love, the infinite might of Grace and the infinite credit of the Mediator. We stand not on the quality of our praying but on the grandeur of the Atonement.

Thirdly (and this is what we want to concentrate on) many Christians are approaching prayer with quite unsustainable expectations. They have been taught that 'God always answers prayer'; that if they really believe in what they are asking, God will give it to them; and that if he doesn't it is because there is something wrong with their faith and probably with their whole Christian lives.

### Comparative novelty

Such a view is now well-nigh universal. But it wasn't always so. In fact it is a comparative novelty. The American Southern Presbyterian theologian, R.L. Dabney, discusses it in a fascinating essay on the *Theology of the Plymouth Brethren*, clearly regarding it as one of the innovations associated with J.N. Darby, George Muller and (curiously) Horatius Bonar. These men (Muller in particular) advocated what they called *the prayer of faith*: when a man believes that he will receive what he asks he will literally receive it without fail. If he doesn't it is because his prayer wasn't offered in faith.

Two immediate responses may be made to this.

First, it contradicts the experience of many Christians. They have prayed with total confidence for the healing of loved ones and yet those prayed for have died. They have poured out their hearts for the salvation of their children and endured the grief of seeing them die Christless. They have prayed for the Second Coming or for Revival and gone to their graves without any answer to their cries. Are we to say that these people were faithless? That they weren't close to God? Are we going to pour salt into *their* wounds when the real problem is the theory of prayer on which they have acted?

Secondly, this view of prayer contradicts what we see happening in Scripture, where some of the most eminent saints cried to God most urgently and most specifically and yet he neither granted their requests nor rebuked them for asking. Take, for example, Paul's reaction to the thorn in his flesh: 'For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me' (2 Cor. 12:8). His prayer was urgent, specific and importunate. Yet God didn't grant it. We see the same thing even more solemnly in the

case of our Lord in Gethsemane. He threw himself on the ground in an anguish of fear and desire and pled that the Father would take away the cup and cause the hour to pass. But he didn't. Was this because the Lord didn't believe sufficiently in what he was asking?

**'Believing, you shall receive'?**

On the face of things, however, the New Testament itself seems to teach explicitly that God will give us whatever we ask. Jesus himself assures us that whatever we ask in prayer, believing, we shall receive (Matt. 21:22). James warns us to ask in faith, 'nothing wavering' (James 1:6). And John tells us that if we ask anything according to God's will he hears us (1 Jn. 5:14).

There are two crucial ideas in these passages: we are to pray *according to God's will*; and we are to pray *in faith*. But faith in what? Faith, surely, in the promises of God. 'What is it to pray in faith?' asked the Puritan, Thomas Watson. 'It is to pray for that which God has promised,' was his answer, adding, 'Where there is no promise, we cannot pray in faith.' It is in these promises that God indicates his will and as John Calvin pointed out (in his comments on Matthew 22:21) these promises are not only a stimulus to prayer but a bridle: 'Christ does not give a loose rein to the wishes of men, that they should desire anything at their pleasure, when he places *prayer* after the rule of faith; for in this way the Spirit must of necessity hold all our affections by the bridle of the word of God. Christ promises nothing to his disciples unless they keep themselves within the limits of the good pleasure of God.'

This needs some clarification, however. There are some things which God promises absolutely and unconditionally to all his children. Praying in faith for these things means that we can be totally confident of receiving them. For example, God promises that all things work together for good to those who love him (Rom. 8:28). This is something we can pray for with absolute certainty. The same is true of the promise in James 1:5, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously and doesn't hold things against us'. Whatever the spiritual prudence and insight we need, God will give it to us. We can argue similarly from the promises implied in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). We can be absolutely certain that God's kingdom will come; and that he will give us daily bread, forgiveness of sin and protection from the Evil One.

The same comfort can be drawn from the prayer of John 17. 'Christ's prayers are as good as so many promises,' said Thomas Manton, 'for he is always heard.' Here is the intercession of the Mediator, addressed to his Father and based on his finished work. It gives us an infallible insight into God's will for his church. He will keep us, sanctify us, maintain our unity and glorify us with the Son himself. These, too, are things we can pray for with absolute confidence.

It is even possible to find guidance for the prayer of faith in God's commandments. Every divine imperative is an implicit promise. Remember Augustine's prayer: 'Give what thou dost command, and command what thou wilt.' Whenever God lays an obligation on his people he is pledging himself to give them all the resources they need. This opens up a rich field for believing prayer. God commands us to witness; to make melody

in our hearts; to be thankful; to be content; to mortify the flesh. All of these are categorical imperatives. They bind us unconditionally; and precisely for this reason they carry the assurance that God will give us all we need in order to obey him. We can ask with total certainty for grace to perform them.

**What the promises don't include**

It would be impossible to exaggerate the value of such promises. If we honestly make the kingdom of God our priority they include everything that really matters. Yet they do not include many of the things which so often fill our prayers. There is no absolute promise that God will heal all the Christian sick or free all the Christian prisoners or give all his preachers 'liberty' or give all born-again students good marks in exams; or that the Second Coming will take place in our life-time; or even that all our children will be converted.

If these things are not absolutely promised, is it therefore wrong to pray for them? Not at all! The Bible clearly tells us to take our requests to God and to cast our cares upon him. We have every right to go to him and say, 'This is how I see my need. This is what I want. This is what I think your promises mean in my situation.' But at these points we have no right to pray 'in faith', if by that we mean praying with total certainty that our requests will be granted. Such confidence would not be faith but presumption, because faith implies a promise: and there is no such promise. In such circumstances every prayer must be marked by deference to the sovereignty of God: 'Lord, if thou wilt!'

There are in fact excellent reasons why God should not always give us what we ask.

First, our prayers are often substitutes for obedience. This is particularly true in connection with sanctification. It is easier to pray for it than to work at it. Yet God commands the latter. The backslider has to fight his problem not merely pray about it.

Secondly, we are poor judges of what is good for ourselves. It may very well be that the problem from which we want deliverance has an important part to play in our spiritual lives. This is the way it was with Paul's thorn in the flesh. To himself it was only an irritant: an embarrassing disability. Without it, he thought, he could serve God so much more effectively. But the truth was different. It was that thorn that kept him from being 'exalted above measure'. It made him weak, and in that weakness God's strength was made perfect. How often is it true that the burdens and pains and handicaps of which we long to be quit are the very things that keep us depending on the grace of God? Would Paul really have been a better preacher if he could have faced men without 'weakness, fear and much trembling'?

Thirdly, we are even poorer judges of what is good for other people. Doesn't the very success which parents crave for their children often prove their spiritual undoing? How can we pray imperiously that the life of an aged saint be prolonged if we really believe that for him to be with Christ would be far better? A fond mother may be praying fervently that God would remove every impediment to her son's becoming a minister when the man is utterly unsuited to it and would probably be destroyed by it. Another equally fond mother may be praying the very opposite, knowing the harassment and heartache the ministry

involves and pleading with all her might that her son may be spared it; and yet, God has set his mark on him.

Fourthly, what we want is not always good for the church. We are only labourers, our view limited to the time and place we ourselves occupy. We are part of the plan, not planners. The Master Builder has a very different vision. It would be folly for him to bind himself to heed all the suggestions of his labourers. If he had, the foundation would never have been laid (Mk. 8:32).

#### **The crux of the matter**

This is the crux of the matter. The theory we are considering would tie God's hands. He could never refuse his children anything they wanted. What is worse, he could never give them anything they didn't want. This would make all discipline and all chastisement impossible. God would have had to grant Moses' impassioned request to enter the Promised Land. He would have had to yield to David's plea for Bathsheba's child. There could have been no divine judgment on those in Corinth who were profaning the Lord's Supper. Whenever anything hurt, Christians would simply pray and all discipline would end. Indeed, our age would lose its entire character. We could no longer speak of 'the sufferings of the present time'. Persecution, pain and death would be prevented by 'the prayer of faith'. How can we fit such a scenario into the pages of the New Testament?

There is, of course, a possible response to this: Christians will pray 'in the Spirit' and what they ask will therefore coincide exactly with the will of God. But this rests on a confusion, or, more precisely, on a quite impossible disjunction between the Spirit and Scripture. To pray in the Spirit is to pray according to the will of God. That can only mean his revealed will; and it is revealed only in Scripture. Our boldness in prayer can never outreach Scripture. Which brings us right back where we started: we can pray with the certainty of being heard only for those things which God has promised; and our only ground for such certainty is the teaching of Scripture.

#### **Worldly praying**

Complaints are often heard of prayers being too theological and too unspecific. There is some truth in this. Too much of our praying is given over to telling the Almighty about himself. It is not sufficiently earthed in the real needs of real people. But this must not become the pretext for allowing our prayers to degenerate into mere shopping-lists. The emphasis of our petitions must fall on those things which God has unconditionally promised. These seldom refer to temporal needs. Almost all the great promises are concerned with spiritual blessings and that sets our priorities. Our praying should be kingdom-praying, reflecting the conviction that few earthly things matter and that no earthly thing matters very much. The imprisoned Paul could claim that for him life was Christ (Phil. 1:21). Precisely for that reason it doesn't seem even to occur to him to ask for escape or deliverance. Hand-cuffed to the soldier who guarded him, and never left alone, day or night, he pleads only for the spiritual growth of his correspondents (Phil. 1:3-11) and for the exaltation of Christ, whether he himself live or die.

Maybe there is nothing that so shows where our hearts are as the things we pray for. A wordly heart means wordly prayers.

*We apologise for the omission of this bibliography appertaining to The Contribution of Donald Mackay, by Paul Helm, from the last issue of Evangel.*

## **The Contribution of Donald Mackay Bibliography**

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