

*and his incomparably great power for us  
who believe.*

Ephesians 1:15–19

## TWO

### The Greatness of Prayer

*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,*

### The Supremacy of Prayer

A quick comparison of this prayer from Ephesians 1 with those in Philippians 1, Colossians 1, and later in Ephesians 3 reveals that this is how Paul customarily prayed for those he loved. At the grammatical heart of Paul's long sentence is a striking insight into the greatness and importance of prayer. In verse 17 he writes: "I keep asking that . . . you may know him better."

It is remarkable that in all of his writings Paul's prayers for his friends contain no appeals for changes in their circumstances. It is certain that they lived in the midst of many dangers and hardships. They faced persecution, death from disease, oppression by powerful forces, and separation from loved ones. Their

## P R A Y E R

existence was far less secure than ours is today. Yet in these prayers you see not one petition for a better emperor, for protection from marauding armies, or even for bread for the next meal. Paul does not pray for the goods we would usually have near the top of our lists of requests.

Does that mean it would have been wrong to pray for such things? Not at all. As Paul knew, Jesus himself invites us to ask for our “daily bread” and that God would “deliver us from evil.” In 1 Timothy 2, Paul directs his readers to pray for peace, for good government, and for the needs of the world. In his own prayers, then, Paul is not giving us a universal model for prayer in the same way Jesus did. Rather, in them he reveals what he asked most frequently for his friends—what he believed was the most important thing God could give them.

What is that? It is—to *know him better*. Paul explains this with color and detail. It means having the “eyes of their hearts . . . enlightened” (Ephesians 1:18). Biblically, the heart is the control center of the entire self. It is the repository of one’s core commitments,

deepest loves, and most foundational hopes that control our feeling, thinking, and behavior. To have the “eyes of the heart enlightened” with a particular truth means to have it penetrate and grip us so deeply that it changes the whole person. In other words, we may know that God is holy, but when our hearts’ eyes are enlightened to that truth, then we not only understand it cognitively, but emotionally we find God’s holiness wondrous and beautiful, and volitionally we avoid attitudes and behavior that would displease or dishonor him. In Ephesians 3:18, Paul says he wants the Spirit to give them “power . . . to grasp” all the past, present, and future benefits they received when they believed in Christ. Of course, all Christians know about these benefits in their minds, but the prayer is for something beyond that—it is to have a more vivid sense of the reality of God’s presence and of shared life with him.

Paul sees this fuller knowledge of God as a more critical thing to receive than a change of circumstances. Without this powerful sense of God’s reality, good circumstances can lead to overconfidence

## P R A Y E R

and spiritual indifference. Who needs God, our hearts would conclude, when matters seem to be so in hand? Then again, without this enlightened heart, bad circumstances can lead to discouragement and despair, because the love of God would be an abstraction rather than the infinitely consoling presence it should be. Therefore, knowing God better is what we must have above all if we are to face life in any circumstances.

Paul's main concern, then, *is for their public and private prayer life*. He believes that the highest good is communion or fellowship with God. A rich, vibrant, consoling, hard-won prayer life is the one good that makes it possible to receive all other kinds of goods rightly and beneficially. He does not see prayer as merely a way to get things from God but as a way to get more of God himself. Prayer is a striving to "take hold of God" (Is 64:7) the way in ancient times people took hold of the cloak of a great man as they appealed to him, or the way in modern times we embrace someone to show love.

By praying in this way, Paul was assuming the

priority of the inner life with God.<sup>30</sup> Most contemporary people base their inner life on their outward circumstances. Their inner peace is based on other people's valuation of them, and on their social status, prosperity, and performance. Christians do this as much as anyone. Paul is teaching that, for believers, it should be the other way around. Otherwise we will be whiplashed by how things are going in the world. If Christians do not base their lives on God's steadfast love, then they will have "to accept as success what others warrant to be so, and to take their happiness, even their own selves, at the quotation of the day. They tremble, with reason, before their fate."<sup>31</sup>

## The Integrity of Prayer

If we give priority to the outer life, our inner life will be dark and scary. We will not know what to do with solitude. We will be deeply uncomfortable with self-examination, and we will have an increasingly short attention span for any kind of reflection. Even more

## P R A Y E R

seriously, our lives will lack integrity. Outwardly, we will need to project confidence, spiritual and emotional health and wholeness, while inwardly we may be filled with self-doubts, anxieties, self-pity, and old grudges. Yet we won't know how to go into the inner rooms of the heart, see clearly what is there, and deal with it. In short, unless we put a priority on the inner life, we turn ourselves into hypocrites. The seventeenth-century English theologian John Owen wrote a warning to popular and successful ministers:

A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, *that he is and no more.*<sup>32</sup>

To discover the real you, look at what you spend time thinking about when no one is looking, when nothing is forcing you to think about anything in particular. At such moments, do your thoughts go toward God? You may want to be seen as a humble,

unassuming person, but do you take the initiative to confess your sins before God? You wish to be perceived as a positive, cheerful person, but do you habitually thank God for everything you have and praise him for who he is? You may speak a great deal about what a “blessing” your faith is and how you “just really love the Lord,” but if you are prayerless—is that really true? If you aren't joyful, humble, and faithful in private before God, then what you want to appear to be on the outside won't match what you truly are.

Just prior to giving his disciples the Lord's Prayer, Jesus offered some preliminary ideas, including this one: “When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. . . . But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen . . . in secret” (Matt 6:5–6). The infallible test of spiritual integrity, Jesus says, is your private prayer life. Many people will pray when they are required by cultural or social expectations, or perhaps by the anxiety caused by troubling circumstances. Those with a genuinely lived

relationship with God as Father, however, will inwardly *want* to pray and therefore will pray even though nothing on the outside is pressing them to do so. They pursue it even during times of spiritual dryness, when there is no social or experiential payoff.

Giving priority to the inner life doesn't mean an individualistic life. Knowing the God of the Bible better can't be achieved all by yourself. It entails the community of the church, participation in corporate worship as well as private devotion, and instruction in the Bible as well as silent meditation. At the heart of all the various ways of knowing God is both public and private prayer.

A pastor and friend of mine, Jack Miller, once said he could tell a great deal about a person's relationship with God by listening to him or her pray. "You can tell if a man or woman is really on speaking terms with God," he said. My first response was to make a mental note never to pray aloud near Jack again. I've had years to test out Jack's thesis. It is quite possible to become florid, theologically sound, and earnest in your public prayers without cultivating a rich, private

prayer life. You can't manufacture the unmistakable note of reality that only comes from speaking not toward God but with him. The depths of private prayer and public prayer grow together.

## The Hardness of Prayer

I can think of nothing great that is also easy. Prayer must be, then, one of the hardest things in the world. To admit that prayer is very hard, however, can be encouraging. If you struggle greatly in this, you are not alone.

*The Still Hour*, a classic book on prayer by nineteenth-century American theologian Austin Phelps, starts with the chapter "Absence of God, in Prayer" and the verse from Job 23:3—"Oh that I knew where I might find him!" Phelps's book begins with the premise that "a consciousness of the *absence of God* is one of the standing incidents of religious life. Even when the forms of devotion are observed conscientiously, the sense of the presence of God, as

## P R A Y E R

an invisible Friend, whose society is a joy, is by no means unintermittent.”<sup>33</sup>

Phelps goes on to explain the numerous reasons why there is such dryness in prayer and how to endure through that sense of God’s unreality. The first thing we learn in attempting to pray is our spiritual emptiness—and this lesson is crucial. We are so used to being empty that we do not recognize the emptiness as such until we start to try to pray. We don’t feel it until we begin to read what the Bible and others have said about the greatness and promise of prayer. Then we finally begin to feel lonely and hungry. It’s an important first step to fellowship with God, but it is a disorienting one.

When your prayer life finally begins to flourish, the effects can be remarkable. You may be filled with self-pity, and be justifying resentment and anger. Then you sit down to pray and the reorientation that comes before God’s face reveals the pettiness of your feelings in an instant. All your self-justifying excuses fall to the ground in pieces. Or you may be filled with anxiety, and during prayer you come to wonder what you were

so worried about. You laugh at yourself and thank God for who he is and what he’s done. It can be that dramatic. It is the bracing clarity of a new perspective. Eventually, this can be the normal experience, but that is never how the prayer life starts. In the beginning the feeling of poverty and absence usually dominates, but the best guides for this phase urge us not to turn back but rather to endure and pray in a disciplined way, until, as Packer and Nystrom say, we get through duty to delight.

We must beware of misunderstanding such phrases, however. Seasons of dryness can return for a variety of causes. We don’t spend a discrete amount of time in dryness until we break through permanently into joy and feeling. Instead, the vivid reorientation of mind, and the overall sense of God on the heart, comes more frequently and sometimes in startling ways—interspersed with times of struggle and even absence. Nevertheless, the pursuit of God in prayer eventually bears fruit, because God seeks for us to worship him (John 4:23) and because prayer is so infinitely rich and wondrous.

## The Centrality of Prayer

The Bible is all about God, and that is why the practice of prayer is so pervasive throughout its pages. The greatness of prayer is nothing but an extension of the greatness and glory of God in our lives. The Scripture is one long testimony to this truth.

In Genesis we see every one of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—praying with familiarity and directness. Abraham’s doggedly insistent prayer for God’s mercy on the pagan cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is remarkable (Gen 18:23ff). In Exodus, prayer was the way Moses secured the liberation of Israel from Egypt. The gift of prayer makes Israel great: “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?” (Deut 4:7).<sup>34</sup>

To fail to pray, then, is not to merely break some religious rule—it is a failure to treat God as God. It is a sin against his glory. “Far be it from me,” said the prophet Samuel to his people, “that I should sin

against the *Lord* by failing to pray for *you*” (1 Sam 12:23 [*italics mine*]).<sup>35</sup> King David composed much of the Psalter, God’s inspired prayer book, filled with appeals to “you who answer prayer” (Ps 65:2). His son Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem and then dedicated it with a magnificent prayer.<sup>36</sup> Solomon’s main petition for the temple was that from it God would hear his people’s prayers—indeed, Solomon’s highest prayer was for the gift of prayer itself.<sup>37</sup> Beyond that, he hoped those from other nations would “hear of your great name . . . and pray toward this temple” (1 Kings 8:42). Again we see prayer is simply a recognition of the greatness of God.

The Old Testament book of Job is largely the record of Job’s suffering and pain—worked through with prayer. In the end, God is angry with Job’s callous friends and tells them he will refrain from their punishment only if Job prays for them (Job 42:8). Prayer permeated the ministry of all the Old Testament prophets.<sup>38</sup> It may have been the ordinary means by which the Word of God itself came to them.<sup>39</sup> The Jews’ preservation and return from exile in

## P R A Y E R

Babylon was essentially carried out through prayer. Their exile began with a call to pray for the pagan city and their neighbors (Jer 29:7). Daniel, nearly executed by the Babylonian authorities over his insistence on prayer three times a day, prays a prayer of repentance for his people, asks for their return, and is heard.<sup>40</sup> Later, Nehemiah rebuilds the wall around Jerusalem with a series of great prayers interspersed with wise leadership.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus Christ taught his disciples to pray, healed people with prayers, denounced the corruption of the temple worship (which, he said, should be a “house of prayer”), and insisted that some demons could be cast out only through prayer. He prayed often and regularly with fervent cries and tears (Heb 5:7), and sometimes all night. The Holy Spirit came upon him and anointed him as he was praying (Luke 3:21–22), and he was transfigured with the divine glory as he prayed (Luke 9:29). When he faced his greatest crisis, he did so with prayer. We hear him praying for his disciples and the church on the night before he died (John 17:1–26) and then petitioning God in agony in the Garden of

Gethsemane. Finally, he died praying.<sup>42</sup>

Immediately after their Lord’s death, the disciples prepare for the future by being “constantly in prayer” together (Acts 1:14). All church gatherings are “devoted . . . to prayer” (Acts 2:42; 11:5; 12:5, 12). The power of the Spirit descends on the early Christians in response to powerful prayer, and leaders are selected and appointed only with prayer. All Christians are expected to have a regular, faithful, devoted, fervent prayer life. In the book of Acts, prayer is one of the main signs that the Spirit has come into the heart through faith in Christ. The Spirit gives us the confidence and desire to pray to God and enables us to pray even when we don’t know what to say. Christians are taught that prayer should pervade their whole day and whole life—they should “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17).<sup>43</sup>

Prayer is so great that wherever you look in the Bible, it is there. Why? Everywhere God is, prayer is. Since God is everywhere and infinitely great, prayer must be all-pervasive in our lives.

## The Richness of Prayer

One of the greatest descriptions of prayer outside of the Bible was written by the poet George Herbert (1593–1633) in his “Prayer (I).” The poem is remarkable for tackling the immense subject of prayer in just one hundred words and without a single verb or prose construction. Instead, Herbert gives us some two dozen word pictures.

In the next chapters, we will work at defining prayer, but there is a danger in doing that. A definition seeks to reduce things to the essence. George Herbert wants instead to move us in the opposite direction. He wants to explore the richness of prayer with all its infinities and immensities. He does so by overwhelming both our analytical and our imaginative faculties.

PRAYER the Churches banquet, Angels  
age,  
Gods breath in man returning to his  
birth,

The soul in paraphrase, heart in  
pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n  
and earth;

Engine against th’ Almighty, sinner’s  
towre,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing  
spear,  
The six daies world-transposing in an  
houre,  
A kinde of tune, which all things heare  
and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love,  
and blisse,  
Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,  
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,  
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

## P R A Y E R

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the  
souls bloud,  
The land of spices, something  
understood.

Prayer is “Gods breath in man returning to his birth.” Many who are otherwise skeptical or nonreligious are shocked to find themselves praying despite not even formally believing in God. Herbert gives us his explanation for that phenomenon. The Hebrew word for “Spirit” and “breath” is the same, and so, Herbert says, there is something in us from God that knows we are not alone in the universe, and that we were not meant to go it alone. Prayer is a natural human instinct.

Prayer can be “softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse”—the deep rest of soul that we need. It is “the souls bloud,” *the* source of strength and vitality. Through prayer in Jesus’ name and trust in his salvation we come as a “man well drest,” spiritually fit for the presence of the king. That is why we can sit

down with him at “the Churches banquet.” Feasts were never mere feedings but a sign and means of acceptance and fellowship with the Host. Prayer is a nourishing friendship.

Prayer also is “a kinde of tune.” Prayer tunes your heart to God. Singing engages the whole being—the heart through the music as well as the mind through the words. Prayer is also a tune others can hear besides you. When your heart has been tuned to God, your joy has an effect on those around you. You are not proud, cold, anxious, or bored—you are self-forgetful, warm, profoundly at peace, and filled with interest. Others will notice. All “heare and fear.” Prayer changes those around us.

Prayer can be a “land of spices,” a place of sensory overload, of exotic scents and tastes—and a “milkie way,” a place of marvels and wonders. When that happens, prayer is truly of “Angels age,” an experience of timeless eternity. Yet no one in history has found that “land of spices” quickly or easily. Prayer is also the “heart in pilgrimage,” and in Herbert’s time a pilgrim was someone who was engaged on a long, difficult, and

## P R A Y E R

exhausting trek. To be *in* pilgrimage is to have not yet arrived. There is a longing in prayer that is never fulfilled in this life, and sometimes the deep satisfactions we are looking for in prayer feel few and far between. Prayer is a journey.

Even in spiritually lean times, prayer can serve as a kind of heavenly Manna” and quiet “gladnesse” that keeps us going, just as the manna in the wilderness kept Israel moving toward its hope. Manna was simple food, especially savory, but hardly a banquet. Yet it sustained them wonderfully, a kind of travelers’ waybread that brought an inner endurance. Prayer helps us endure.

One reason for the arduousness is because true prayer is “the soul in paraphrase.” God does not merely require our petitions but our *selves*, and no one who begins the hard, lifelong trek of prayer knows yet who they are. Nothing but prayer will ever reveal you to yourself, because only before God can you see and become your true self. To paraphrase something is to get the gist of it and make it accessible. Prayer is learning who you are before God and giving him your

essence. Prayer means knowing yourself as well as God.

Prayer is not all quiet, peace, and fellowship. It is also an “engine against th’ Almightye,” a startling phrase that clearly refers to the siege engines filled with archers that were used in Herbert’s day to storm a city. The Bible contains laments and petitions and pleadings, for prayer is rebellion against the evil status quo of the world—and they are not in vain, for they are as “church-bells beyond the stars heard” and indeed are “reversed thunder.” Thunder is an expression of the awesome power of God, but prayer somehow harnesses that power so that our petitions are not heard in heaven as whispers but as crack, boom, and roar. Prayer changes things.

Yet Herbert also states that prayer is a “sinner’s towre.” An arrogant spirit cannot rightly use the power of prayer’s siege engines. “Sinner’s towre” means that prayerful dependence on the grace of Jesus is our only refuge from our own sin. We cannot go into God’s presence unless we are dependent on Christ’s forgiveness and his righteousness before God, not on

## P R A Y E R

our own. Indeed, prayer is the “Christ-side-piercing spear.” When we pray for forgiveness on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, grace and mercy come flowing down even as the spear in his side brought water and blood gushing out. Prayer is a refuge.

Though prayer is a kind of artillery that changes the circumstances of the world, it is as much or even more about changing our own understanding and attitude toward those circumstances. Prayer is “a kinde of tune” that transposes even “the six daies world.” The six days is not the Sabbath day of formal worship but the workweek of ordinary life. Yet the one “houre” of prayer completely transposes it all, as the transposition of a piece of music changes its key, tone, and timbre. Through prayer, which brings heaven into the ordinary, we see the world differently, even in the most menial and trivial daily tasks. Prayer changes us.

As plumb lines measured the depths of waters beneath boats, prayer is a “plummet sounding heav’n and earth.” That means it can plunge us by the power of the Spirit into the “deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10).

This includes the indescribable journey that prayer can take us through the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ’s saving love for us (Eph 3:18). Prayer unites us with God himself.

How does Herbert end this dazzling succession of word pictures? He concludes, surprisingly, that prayer is “something understood.” Many scholars have debated the apparent anticlimax of this great poem. It seems to be an “abandonment of metaphor . . . [yet] its final crowning.”<sup>44</sup> After all the lofty images, Herbert comes down to earth. Through prayer “something”—not everything—is understood, and prayer’s conquests are indeed often modest. Paul says believers in this world see things only “in part,” just as the reflections in ancient mirrors were filled with distortions (1 Cor 13:12). Prayer, however, gradually clears our vision. When the psalmist was spiraling down into deadly despair, he went in prayer to “the sanctuary of God; then I understood” (Ps 73:17).

Prayer is awe, intimacy, struggle—yet the way to reality. There is nothing more important, or harder, or richer, or more life-altering. There is absolutely

nothing so great as prayer.

## **PART TWO**



### Understanding Prayer