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A Passion *for* Prayer

“PRAY WITHOUT CEASING.”

—1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

As a busy minister, Charles Haddon Spurgeon cherished the rare opportunities that allowed him time to visit with close friends. On one such occasion, when Dr. Theodore Cuyler of Brooklyn came to England, Spurgeon invited him for a walk through the woods—another pastime Spurgeon loved yet seldom had time for. During the walk, Spurgeon surprised his guest with a rather unexpected comment. Their conversation must have been lighthearted and even mirthful, for suddenly Spurgeon stopped and said, “Come, Theodore, let us thank God for laughter.” Later, when Dr. Cuyler spoke of this particular visit, he said, “That was how he lived. From a jest to a prayer meant with him the breadth of a straw.”¹

That incident is but one of many that demonstrate Spurgeon's spontaneity when it came to prayer. What stood out above all in Spurgeon's life as a minister—even more than his extraordinary giftedness for preaching—was his diligence in prayer. Not only was he faithful in the practice of prayer, he also bathed all of life in prayer. In the introduction to *C. H. Spurgeon's Prayers*, Dinsdale T. Young observes that “prayer was the instinct of his soul, and the atmosphere of his life.”²

Spurgeon himself once told a friend, “I always feel it well just to put a few words of prayer between everything I do.”³ He lived out the biblical admonishment to pray unceasingly, which had a profound impact on his ministry.

A few months after Spurgeon's death, the famous American preacher and evangelist D. L. Moody spoke to Spurgeon's congregation at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and shared with them about his first visit to the building twenty-five years earlier. He had come to London to hear Spurgeon preach, and what impressed him most was not the beautiful congregational singing or the powerful sermon, but Spurgeon's heart-stirring prayer. Dr. John Cairns, another noted minister, said he exulted in hearing Spurgeon's sermons, yet he exulted even more in hearing his prayers.

—UNCEASING COMMUNION WITH GOD—

What made Spurgeon's prayers so luminous, so memorable? Those who observed his life up close commented on his perpetual private communion with God, and it was the intimate spiritual richness of these times alone with the Lord that overflowed into Spurgeon's public prayers and led people to feel as if he were taking them into the very portals of heaven through his petitions. Spurgeon's ongoing inclination toward prayer is evident in these words:



I cannot help praying. If I were not allowed to utter a word all day long, that would not affect my praying. If I could not have five minutes that I might spend in prayer by myself, I should pray all the same. Minute by minute, moment by moment, somehow or other, my heart must commune with God. Prayer has become as essential to me as the heaving of my lungs and the beating of my pulse.⁴



We've all heard Scripture's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But what exactly does that mean? Spurgeon explained it this way:



Our Lord meant by saying men ought always to pray, that they ought to be always in the spirit of prayer, always ready to pray. Like the old knights, always in warfare, not always on their steeds dashing forward with their lances in rest to unhorse an adversary, but always wearing their weapons where they could readily reach them, and always ready to encounter wounds or death for the sake of the cause which they championed. Those grim warriors often slept in their armour; so even when we sleep, we are still to be in the spirit of prayer, so that if perchance we wake in the night, we may still be with God. Our soul, having received the divine centripetal influence which makes it seek its heavenly centre, should be evermore naturally rising towards God Himself. Our heart is to be like those beacons and watchtowers which were prepared along the coast of England when the invasion of the Armada was hourly expected, not always blazing, but with the wood always dry, and the match always there, the whole pile being ready to blaze up at the appointed moment.⁵



What would our lives be like if we were to find prayer as natural as breathing, as Spurgeon did? Or if we were to have the “match” of prayer always ready? What effect would this have on our ministry endeavors? Were we to draw near to the Lord with such persistence, we would come to know Him and His ways such that we would become more and more of one heart and one mind with Him and thus reflect Him more clearly to those whom we lead.

—GIVING CREDIT WHERE IT’S DUE—

Many reasons have been given for the tremendous influence of Spurgeon’s ministry, with the credit usually being attributed to the abilities or cleverness of the man himself. But Spurgeon made it clear that any success he knew was the direct result of a complete dependence upon God through prayer, especially the intercessory prayers of his church:



The fact is, the secret of all ministerial success lies in prevalence at the mercy-seat.⁶

I stand here to confess frankly that from my inmost heart I attribute the large prosperity which God has given to this church vastly more to the prayers of the people than to anything that God may have given to me.⁷



Spurgeon saw prayer very much as a lifeline to God, a lifeline for which there was no substitute, and which, if neglected, would impair the effectiveness of a minister and church. Indeed, in everything, we are utterly dependent upon God and His free-flowing grace, and what better way is there to be at the receiving end of His provision than by kneeling at His feet in free-flowing prayer?

—THE GREATEST WEAPON—

To Spurgeon (and this should be true for any spiritual leader), there was nothing ordinary about prayer. He had a lofty view of prayer, and rightly so. In his sermons, he endeavored to instill in his congregation both a reverential awe and an unshakeable confidence in the power of prayer. These are among his exhortations:



My own soul's conviction is that prayer is the grandest power in the entire universe, that it has a more omnipotent force than electricity, attraction, gravitation, or any other of those secret forces which men have called by name, but which they do not understand.⁸

If any of you should ask me for an epitome of the Christian religion, I should say it is in that one word—prayer.⁹

*Prayer is the master-weapon. We should be greatly wise if we used it more, and did so with a more specific purpose.*¹⁰



—PRAYER’S PLACE IN THE LEADER’S LIFE—

Spurgeon’s recognition of the priority of prayer came early in his ministry. Biographer W. Y. Fullerton observed that even at the age of sixteen, when Spurgeon began to preach in small rural English churches, he would arise early in the morning to pray and read the Bible.¹¹ Spurgeon had this to say about the absolute necessity of prayer in a minister’s life:



*Never account prayer second to preaching. No doubt prayer in the Christian church is as precious as the utterance of the gospel. To speak to God for men is a part of the Christian priesthood that should never be despised.*¹²

*The minister who does not earnestly pray over his work must surely be a vain and conceited man. He acts as if he thought himself sufficient of himself, and therefore needed not to appeal to God.*¹³



Spurgeon often chastised ministers who were more concerned about their outward appearances to men and thus put greater emphasis on the external aspects of their ministry, such as preaching. Many of the ministers in Spurgeon's era expended great effort in producing eloquent sermons that offered scant spiritual nourishment to the hearers, and they spent little time in their private prayer closets. As a result, their ministries lacked life and power, and tragically, the attendance in their churches declined.

—PRAYER: AN INTIMATE ENCOUNTER—

What is it about prayer that makes it so special, so essential? Spurgeon recognized prayer as more than mere thoughts or words lifted heavenward, but as an intimate encounter with the all-caring Father and all-powerful God of the universe:



Prayer links us with the Eternal, the Omnipotent, the Infinite, and hence it is our chief resort. Resolve to serve the Lord, and to be faithful to His cause, for then you may boldly appeal to Him for succor. Be sure that you are with God, and then you may be sure that God is with you.¹⁴

We do not bow the knee merely because it is a duty, and a commendable spiritual exercise, but because we believe that, into the ear of the eternal God, we

Speak our wants, and that His ear is linked with a heart feeling for us, and a hand working on our behalf. To us, true prayer is true power.¹⁵

Because God is the living God, He can hear; because He is a loving God, He will hear; because He is our covenant God, He has bound Himself to hear.¹⁶



God is always a ready listener, eager to hear our footsteps approach His throne. But are we equally eager to bring ourselves into His presence? If we as spiritual leaders fail to possess an enthusiasm for spending time with God in prayer, we cannot expect those who follow us to catch that enthusiasm.

—ENTERING GOD’S TREASURE-HOUSE—

Spurgeon painted a beautiful picture of the multifaceted benefits of prayer when he said,



The very act of prayer is a blessing. To pray is as it were to bathe oneself in a purling cool stream, and so to escape from the heat of earth’s summer sun. To pray is to mount on eagle’s wings above the clouds and get into the clear heaven where God dwells. To pray is to enter the treasure-house of God and to enrich oneself out of an inexhaustible storehouse.

To pray is to grasp heaven in one's arms, to embrace the Deity within one's soul, and to feel one's body made a temple of the Holy Ghost. Apart from the answer, prayer is in itself a benediction. To pray is to cast off your burdens, it is to tear away your rags, it is to shake off your diseases, it is to be filled with spiritual vigour, it is to reach the highest point of Christian health. God give us to be much in the holy art of arguing with God in prayer.¹⁷



The kind of prayer life we have will be outwardly evident to those around us, for prayer brings very real changes in us, as stated above. As Spurgeon said, “To pray . . . is to reach the highest point of Christian health.” Are we at the highest point of our vitality? Only then can we expect the highest results when we carry out the responsibilities we bear as spiritual leaders.

—A WELL-WORN PRAYER CLOSET—

As noted earlier, Spurgeon's public prayers stirred the hearts of his listeners as much or even more so than his preaching. But these prayers were only the tip of the iceberg, buoyed upward by the unseen depth and breadth of his private times alone with God. Consider his words about private prayer—words that anyone in a position of spiritual leadership would do well to take to heart:



It may scarcely be needful to commend to you the sweet uses of private devotion, and yet I cannot forbear. To you, as the ambassadors of God, the mercy-seat has a virtue beyond all estimate; the more familiar you are with the court of heaven the better shall you discharge your heavenly trust. Among all the formative influences which go to make up a man honored of God in the ministry, I know of none more mighty than his own familiarity with the mercy-seat. All that a college course can do for a student is coarse and external compared with the spiritual and delicate refinement obtained by communion with God. While the unformed minister is revolving upon the wheel of preparation, prayer is the tool of the great potter by which He molds the vessel. All our libraries and studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets. We grow, we wax mighty, we prevail in private-prayer.¹⁸

You cannot pray too long in private. The more you are on your knees alone the better.¹⁹

How much of blessing we may have missed through remissness in supplication we can scarcely guess, and none of us can know how poor we are in

*comparison with what we might have been if we had lived habitually nearer to God in prayer. We not only ought to pray more, but we must.*²⁰

*Neglect of private prayer is the locust which devours the strength of the church.*²¹



One Sunday Spurgeon revealed to his congregation, “I have not preached this morning half as much as I have prayed. For every word that I have spoken, I have prayed two words silently to God.”²²

Because private prayer is a hidden part of our life, it’s all too easy to neglect it. After all, who will know whether we have taken the time to be alone with God? But we can be certain that any weakness in our personal prayer life will eventually manifest itself in a corresponding weakness in our public ministry life. By contrast, a strong prayer life will result in a stronger ministry.

—PRAYING WITH THE RIGHT HEART—

It’s also vital to recognize that the mere act of praying is not enough to unlock the door to heaven’s storehouses of blessings. When we pray, we need to consider the attitude of our hearts. Thus Spurgeon urged his fellow ministers:



When you are engaged in prayer, plead your strength, and you will get nothing; then plead your weakness, and you will prevail. There is no better plea with Divine love than weakness and pain; nothing can so prevail with the great heart of God as for your heart to faint and swoon. The man who rises in prayer to tears and agony, and feels all the while as if he could not pray, and yet must pray—he is the man who will see the desire of his soul. Do not mothers always care most for the tiniest child, or for that one which is most sick? Do we not spend the greatest care upon that one of our children which has the least use of its limbs; and is it not true that our weakness holds God's strength, and leads Him to bow His omnipotence to our rescue?²³

Our addresses to the throne of grace must be solemn and humble, not flippant and loud, or formal and careless. The colloquial form of speech is out of place before the Lord; we must bow reverently and with deepest awe. We may speak boldly with God, but still He is in heaven and we are upon earth, and we are to avoid presumption. In supplication we are peculiarly before the throne of the Infinite, and as the courtier in the king's palace puts on another mien

*and another manner than that which he exhibits to his fellow courtiers, so should it be with us.*²⁴

*Only that prayer which comes from our heart can get to God's heart.*²⁵



—CHALLENGES FACED IN PRAYER—

When it comes to the art of prayer, many of us feel inadequate. We often find ourselves struggling in prayer, wishing we could master it better. We may find solace in knowing that even Spurgeon, with his vast experience in the practice of prayer, included himself among those who feel inadequate in this spiritual discipline. At one point he said, “I usually feel more dissatisfied with my prayers than anything else I do.”²⁶

Another common frustration we may face is the challenge of making time for prayer in the midst of a busy schedule. The demands of everyday life clamor for our attention, and all too often prayer falls two, three, or even several notches down our list of priorities. Spurgeon commented:



Sometimes we think we are too busy to pray. That is a great mistake, for praying is a saving of time. You remember Luther's remark, "I have so much to do today that I shall never get through it with less

than three hours' prayer." . . . If we have no time we must make time, for if God has given us time for secondary duties, He must have given us time for primary ones, and to draw near to Him is a primary duty, and we must let nothing set it on one side. Your other engagements will run smoothly if you do not forget your engagement with God.²⁷



That's not to say our private prayers need to be as lengthy as Martin Luther's. The point is that serious demands upon our life call for serious prayers. No matter how many priorities crowd our to-do list, prayer is always the ultimate priority. After our time alone with God—however short or long it is—we can continue through the day as Spurgeon did, communing with God moment by moment, hour by hour throughout the day, living in a ready spirit of prayer. And taking the time to pray first is indeed a “saving of time,” for there's something about prayer that helps us to get God's perspective on our day, prioritize our obligations, and get a clearer sense of what we need to do and how it should be done.

But what about those times when we just don't feel like praying? When we feel as if the spiritual well has run dry, when discouragement tells us it's just not worth the effort, when anger has set a strong foothold upon our hearts? What if our emotions or circumstances lead us to say, “I just don't feel like talking to God right now”? Spurgeon offers this solution:



I believe that when we cannot pray, it is time that we prayed more than ever. And if you answer, "But how can that be?" I would say, pray to pray. Pray for prayer. Pray for the spirit of supplication. Do not be content to say, "I would pray if I could." No, but if you cannot pray, pray till you can.²⁸

If your heart be cold in prayer, do not restrain prayer until your heart warms, but pray your soul unto heat by the help of the ever-blessed Spirit, who helpeth our infirmities. If the iron be hot then hammer it, and if it be cold, hammer it till you heat it. Never cease in prayer for any reason.²⁹



In the book of Psalms, we see a recurring pattern: Many of the prayers or psalms begin as laments of discouragement, then gradually turn into songs of praise. There's something about bringing our cares to God that comforts and reassures us. As Spurgeon said, "One night alone in prayer might make us new men, changed from poverty of soul to spiritual wealth, from trembling to triumphing."³⁰

There may be times, of course, when we find it difficult to articulate our thoughts to God. At such times, the Holy Spirit can intercede for us, or even simple tears can.



A groan cometh not from the lips, but from the heart. A groan then is a part of prayer which we owe to the Holy Ghost, and the same is true of all the prayer which wells up from the deep fountains of our inner life. . . . This deep groundswell of desire, this tidal motion of the lifefloods is caused by the Holy Spirit. His work is never superficial, but always deep and inward.³¹

You can draw near to God even though you cannot say a word. A prayer may be crystallised in a tear. A tear is enough water to float a desire to God.³²



—AWAITING THE ANSWERS—

Perhaps the most mysterious aspect of prayer is God's response. How will He answer our prayers? Sometimes the response isn't what we expect. Or when the answer doesn't come, we wonder why. Or perhaps we're oblivious to the answer because we're unaware of how God wants to work in our life. As we wait upon God, we cannot help but wonder about *when* and *how* He will respond, or *why* He responded in a certain way. That's when we need to remember that God's wisdom and love are perfect, and, when we pray, we are to let go of our concerns and yield them into His hands, which are

infinitely more capable than our own. Spurgeon shared this about God's timing in relation to answering our prayers:



Frequently the richest answers are not the speediest. . . . A prayer may be all the longer on its voyage because it is bringing us a heavier freight of blessing. Delayed answers are not only trials of faith, but they give us an opportunity of honouring God by our steadfast confidence in Him under apparent repulses.³³

God's answers have never come too soon nor yet too late.³⁴



When we find ourselves feeling uncertain about the future, rather than look ahead in fear, we can look back to the past and recall God's unceasing faithfulness in caring for us:



The Christian may do well sometimes to look backward . . . the retrospect will help him to be humble, it will urge him to be faithful. He may look back with satisfaction to the glorious hour when first he saw the Lord, when spiritual life for the first time quickened his dead soul. Then he may look back through all the changes of his life, to his troubles

and his joys. I bid you stand upon the hill-top of your present experience and look back upon the past . . . that you may . . . [declare] in the language of the Psalmist, "I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplication."³⁵

Your prayers were innumerable; you asked for countless mercies, and they have all been given. Only look at yourself; are not you adorned and bejeweled with mercies as thick as the stars?³⁶



And in one of his own prayers following a sermon, Spurgeon acknowledged,



O Lord, in looking back we are obliged to remember with the greatest gratitude the many occasions in which Thou hast heard our cry. We have been brought into deep distress, and our heart has sunk within us, and then have we cried to Thee and Thou hast never refused to hear us. The prayers of our lusts Thou hast rejected, but the prayers of our necessities Thou hast granted. Not one good thing hath failed of all that Thou hast promised.³⁷



Indeed, God never fails. Though we don't understand our trials or circumstances, we can take confidence in knowing He can see them—and even beyond them—with perfect clarity. It is this confidence that gives us the strength to persevere, and the trait of perseverance will prove a valuable asset for those times when the difficulties inherent in our responsibilities as ministry leaders weigh heavily upon us.

—THE POWERHOUSE OF A CHURCH—

Spurgeon's convictions about the necessity of private prayer were exceedingly strong, and his convictions about the necessity of a prayerful church were equally strong. When he toured friends and guests through the Metropolitan Tabernacle, he would take them to the prayer room in the basement, where people could be found on their knees, offering up intercessory petitions to God. Spurgeon would tell his visitors, "Here is the powerhouse of this church." And in his sermons, Spurgeon pleaded often for his congregation to uphold him and the church in prayer. We, too, would gain much by urging our fellow church members to pray as a community. Consider Spurgeon's urgent words:



A prayerful church is a powerful church. I think there will be less fault to find with the ministry when there shall be less fault to find with believers in their closets.³⁸

If we were stronger in faith, mightier in prayer, more fervent in heart, more holy in life, who can tell how much we might effect for our age.³⁹

The condition of the church may be very accurately gauged by its prayer meetings. So is the prayer meeting a grace-ometer, and from it we may judge of the amount of divine working among a people. If God be near a church, it must pray. And if He be not there, one of the first tokens of His absence will be slothfulness in prayer.⁴⁰

Truly I wish that all pastors could always, without doubt, assume that they enjoyed the perpetual prayers of those under their charge.⁴¹

How often have I said, "All our strength lies in prayer!"⁴²



—A FINAL WORD ON PRAYER—

The ministry of Charles Spurgeon and the congregation at the Metropolitan Tabernacle reached far beyond the walls of the massive structure to countries all over the globe. Never before had a church drawn such large crowds, never before had a minister been more widely published and in so many languages. Travelers who came to London from around the

world considered a stop at Metropolitan Tabernacle to be equally obligatory as stops at Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral. The kingdom of God was extended mightily through this ministry, with countless multitudes coming to receive Christ as their Savior—and Spurgeon said all of it was the direct result of prayer . . . his own private prayers, and the ongoing intercessory prayers of the congregation. He saw the spiritual health of a church—and an individual—as being inextricably linked to prayer: “I know of no better thermometer to your spiritual temperature than this, the measure of the intensity of your prayer.”⁴³