

Our Need of Prayer

by J. K. POPHAM

"Pray without ceasing." 1 Thess. 5:17

Dependence is written in our nature. The most unseemly thing on the earth is the man who supposes himself to be independent; and surely the Holy Ghost will save all His people from that unseemly thing, that abomination in the sight of God. There is but one independent Being, and He is no creature, He alone is the true God. The text meets dependent people, and it brings them in the Spirit's power to be depending people. How many of us are in that state of mind God knows; but if we are taught of the Spirit, we are taught our dependence on sovereign grace, on the Lord Jesus, on the Holy Ghost.

"Pray without ceasing." This divine injunction lays an abiding obligation on the saints. Also in the Scriptures we find this promise: "I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplications;" (Zech. 12:10). "They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them," (Jer. 31:9). And further, this merciful, this mighty work of prayer is described as the Spirit's immediate operation: "Praying," Jude says, "In the Holy Ghost;" and Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit Itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered," (Rom. 8:26). Everything within the saints, and all things without them from time to time, cry in their hearts, "You cannot get on without the Lord; you cannot get through trouble, you cannot manage sin, you cannot overcome temptation, without the Lord." And the direction of the Lord is, "Pray;" "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation;" "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it;" "Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me;" "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret;" "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done," so pray. We have plenty to pray about, if we have but prayer. You who fear God know this. Go, dear friends, as directed, go into your closets, shut your doors, and pray to God in secret. One of the best things you can have is a religion that can bear solitude, a religion with a secret root. To be sure, there will be open fruitfulness, but look to the root. If you get near God, if you are blessed with intimacy with Him, if you gain His ear, if you pour out your hearts before Him, there is no sin, no temptation, no tempter, no trouble, no affliction that shall overcome you.

It is a great thing to pray. "Not in this mountain nor at Jerusalem," said Christ, "must men worship now." "God is a Spirit," incomprehensible, inconceivable glorious, "and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth;" that is, their hearts must be engaged. The attitude, not of the body, but of the heart, is the thing. Your orientation Godward will prove your state. If your heart is set to God, toward Christ, all is well. The child of God who for a time backslides in respect of prayer, will find himself with broken bones, a sore conscience, a lean soul, and many shameful defeats. But he who is taught to pray, and kept at praying, whose business it is to do business with God, to traffic with heaven, to bring his food from a far country, he shall find food. The diligent soul is made fat. It is written, "Keep thy heart with all

diligence, for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). God could, if it had pleased Him, if He had seen it most for His glory, have taken His people to heaven without tribulation, and without the need of prayer; but in His wisdom He ordered it otherwise, He has said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33); He has said in effect, "In the world you shall have want, you shall be necessitous people, you shall be weak and ignorant, unable to fight your own battles; for My kingdom is not of this world. But there is this one thing I set before you, pray. Call on My Name. I will ever be at hand to help you. I will never forsake you. You shall not pray in vain. Pray. Ask Me, ask in My Name, go to My fullness, look to My power, depend on My Word, hang on My faithfulness. Pray. Pray without ceasing."

First of all, I would notice the ground and reasons of prayer. Secondly, the exercise of prayer.

First, the ground of prayer. It lies in two places. It lies in the Three-One-God. He Himself has commanded it. He will have His creatures come to Him, and has opened a way of access for sinners. If we believe in God, we believe what I just said, that an independent creature is impossible. Dependence is indelibly stamped upon our nature. Eternity will not erase that. We shall not lose creature-ship in eternity, therefore we shall not lose dependence. The ground of prayer, then, is of Himself; the dependent creature must come to God. And especially it is so in respect of the spiritual well-being of His people. The ground of all their supplications is in Himself, it is in His purpose: "Blessed is the man whom Thou chooseth, and causeth to approach unto Thee" (Ps. 65:4). It is in His Son Jesus Christ. In His great work of redemption for sinners He has made a new and living way to God for sinners. There is the ground on which to stand, a great matter that can be used as a plea, namely, the atonement. "Mention My Name," says He, "ask in My Name, and I will do whatever you ask. If ye shall ask anything in My Name, I will do it." Never forget, O guilty, troubled soul, the immovable ground for prayer that is in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Further, in the Holy Spirit there is ground to pray. He is promised as, "the Spirit of grace and of supplications." Moreover, and this is marvellously encouraging when perceived, it is the Holy Spirit who searches the deep things of God, and knows before a sinner knows, and more perfectly than a sinner can know in this life, what is the mind of God. What blessings He has to give, what favours are in His heart to bestow, He knows. Therefore the coming of the Spirit into a sinner's heart, and His gracious work, will always be a ground for that sinner to pray.

The ground of prayer, in the next place, is in the sinner. Not only in his natural dependence on God his Creator, but also he must have mercy or he must die. There is a great reason in us for praying. We are lost, we are undone, we are at a distance from God, we are unlike Him, we are opposed to Him by nature; and He has opened a new and living Way, and therefore says, "Now come, O dependents; come, O sinners; come to the Throne of grace,

'Let not conscience make you linger.'

Come as you are in your unworthiness, your unfitness, your weakness, your ignorance, your ruin, your bondage; come with all these obstacles, and in the face of all these difficulties, come to the Throne of God's heavenly grace." This is a great reason, and it lies in ourselves. God has put dependence in our nature, and sin has made us absolutely dependent on the goodwill of God in Jesus Christ.

One chief reason why a sinner should pray is this, that it is God's will he should. This is God's will. It is expressed in the Scriptures repeatedly: "Call upon Me, I will that you should do this." It is a great and merciful thing that God should will that a sinner should come to Him. It was congruous that a creature without sin should pray to a holy God. But there seems naturally, and there is, an incongruity in a sinner's calling upon God. Therefore is the first reason for prayer the exercise of His sovereign will alone; for under the law He can but will eternal separation between Him and rebels. Mark it, sinner. God, as a holy God, in the law can but determine your separation from His divine Majesty for ever and ever; but in sovereign grace, what a change there is! Here this great God determines that some men shall come to Him, come as sinners, come notwithstanding their sinfulness, come confessing it, come seeking the forgiveness of it, come for salvation. And this is a wondrous reason, the will of God. If you by faith at any moment lay hold of it, O tried sinner, you will plead it, "Thou callest burdened souls to Thee, Thou callest sinners to Thy footstool, to Thy Throne of grace. I am burdened, I am a sinner, I venture nigh."

The second reason I put before you is, the infinite merit of Jesus Christ. The merit of Jesus has no limit; it is infinite in its value. God, "made Him to be sin," and He put away sin. He gave Himself a Sacrifice; His vicarious offering satisfied divine justice for ever and ever for the church. And this, so needed by a guilty conscience, this sweetly manifested by the Spirit to a guilty conscience, will be a reason why that sinner should pray, a reason to him. It is always a reason in God, but now it becomes a reason in the sinner. It becomes a great reason, an argument against despair, a reason why he should come. If his religion seems wrong, if his profession is full of faults, if his present state of mind is darkness itself, if his fears are heavy, if his suspicions of God are cruel, if his infidelity threatens to swamp him and destroy him for ever and ever; notwithstanding, all that, the blood of Christ affords you an infinite reason why you should pray. May the Lord make it out to you. O sinner, whatever your temptations to despair, whatever your fears, pray with faith in the Name of Christ, present yourself before the Lord with all your deformity, all your guilt, all your ignorance, and you will find a welcome. Welcome to the Throne of grace you are.

Yet a third reason you will find in the gracious promise concerning the Holy Ghost: "I will put upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and of supplications, and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced" (Zech. 12:10). That divine Spirit is full, full of mercy, full of goodness. How tender He is! How condescending His is! He comes to the worst of men, speaks to the vilest of men, touches the hardest hearts, and leads sensibly corrupt sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Fountain of all goodness, the Fountain opened for sin and uncleanness.

Now I must name another reason to you, for I would encourage praying people, people who feel they cannot pray because they are so wicked. It is this, the gracious invitations of the holy gospel. They are to characters. "Open thy mouth wide;" "Call upon Me in the day of trouble;" "Roll thy burden on the Lord." Think of this too, "All that the Father," says Jesus Christ, "giveth Me shall come to Me, and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out." You may live to be thankful that the Lord Jesus Christ did not in that scripture say, "All that are broken-hearted, all that are humble, all that are meek, all that are lowly, all that are docile in their spirits; may come, and I will not cast them out." You may live to be thankful that He just simply said, "Him that

cometh to Me, be he what he may, if he but comes; the guiltier the more welcome, the deeper his feeling of guilt, the more welcome; if he be more lost than ordinary, the more welcome; whatever he is, he may come; and when he comes, I, full of truth, full of goodness, full of mercy, full of pardons, full of righteousness, I will in no wise cast him out, for no reason that he can produce out of his own heart, his own nature, his own life, his own thoughts. I will in no wise cast him out." Will that do for you? Can you ask more? Pray, then, on this ground; put the Lord in remembrance of what He has said. Put Him in remembrance of Himself, of His holy promise. Tell Him how suitable you find Him to be as you read of Him in the Scripture, and as you get some inklings of Him in your souls. Tell Him all these things.

Now, says the apostle, "Pray without ceasing." We are to look in the next place, at the exercise of prayer. It is a very solemn thing to pray. He who thinks it is a light and an easy matter knows nothing about it. He knows nothing about God, and knows nothing about sin, who thinks it light and easy to pray. Some realization of the awfullness of God, such as all new-born souls have, will make it a great matter; not an impossible thing, but a great thing to pray. "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth," (John 4:24). You may feel a hypocrite. Where is the heart that is clear of hypocrisy? God is holy, and you feel you are a sinner, and have hypocrisy in your nature, and so cannot boast of sincerity; how may you call on Him? No doctrinal knowledge you may have of the things just hinted at as grounds and reasons for prayer will help; the thing that will stand before you is what you feel in yourself. But still you may find one day, when you look back in the light of the Spirit, that you were praying all the time, notwithstanding your felt obstacles and difficulties. My dear friends, prayer is the soul's attitude and motion toward God, however few words, perhaps none at all; sometimes only groanings which cannot be uttered will be your prayer; the sigh of your heart, the trembling desire that you feel within, "O that God would save me and bless me! That He would do me good!" It is the exercise of faith really. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him," (Heb. 11:6). If you have no faith, I can say this, you do not pray; you are dead in trespasses and sins. The stronger your faith, the more fervent and constant your prayer.

It is the exercise of faith in God as He shows Himself in Christ. What a sound was that which reached the ear and the heart of Moses, when the Lord answered his petition. "I beseech Thee, show me Thy glory;" and said, "I will make all My goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the Name of the Lord before thee....The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin," (Ex. 33:19; 34:6,7). This is that after which a living soul reaches. Faith will sometimes get such a sight, in the light of the Spirit, of the infinite merit of Christ, of the vicarious offering of Christ unto God, as will touch the soul, influence it, move it, bend it, guide it to God.

"I can no denial take
When I plead for Jesus' sake."

Did your faith ever get hold of that? It is a clean point in religion, to believe in the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and plead it before God, and feel that you cannot take a denial. In a true and proper sense sin is lost sight of, and yet all the while it is seen; I will put it thus: if you see a

mountain, what is the mole-hill at the foot of it to you? If you see Jesus Christ, if you see His infinite merit, I do not depreciate sin when I say, what will be the mole-hill of your sin to that? Pray for the forgiveness of sin. You will feel sin to be very great, and taste it to be very bitter, and you will mourn that ever you were a sinner, and that ever you committed sin; but this will overtop and drown all, take all from your view and feelings for the time. Of this wondrous merit Watts sings sweetly, sings of it as an ocean:

"It rises high and drowns the hills,
Has neither shore nor bound;
Now if we search to find our sins,
Our sins can ne'er be found."

This atonement will take you to heaven, my friends; it will carry you through all difficulties, it will land you into the midst of that mighty multitude of saved ones that no man can number, in the midst of whom is the Lamb.

Pray also respecting all your difficulties. There are many difficulties in the way of pilgrims. They are not at home, they are travelling home, and there are many difficulties. The wilderness has its dangers, its necessities. Difficulties are within: an unbelieving heart, which makes us depart from the living God; necessities, which we ourselves cannot supply, which no creature can supply, but only God; difficulties arising from a wicked nature, a nature that never submits to God; difficulties arising from temptations. Into these you who are exercised about them and with them, can enter. Now our good teacher, Hart, says,

"The remedy's before thee, pray."

This is God's remedy, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble," whatever it is.

Take one eminent example afforded us in the Scriptures of the blessedness of this. When David and his men came to burnt Ziklag, he and all of them wept till they had no more power to weep, for they had suffered a grievous loss, not only of their cattle, but of their wives and children. And the men were so angry and discouraged by this grievous loss that they looked upon David as the cause of all; and they spake of stoning him. Here was a pass for the man of God. What did he do? Did he turn to them and say, "Now I have brought you through many difficulties; I have defended you, I have helped you. Why do you turn on me thus?" No, that was not his strength, his captaincy over them was not his strength; it was his relation to his God. His God was before and with him, and so we read: "But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God," (1 Sam. 30:6). He had no other encouragement at that moment, but he encouraged himself in the Lord his God. You may be similarly bereft of all help, in different circumstances. You may feel, "There is no friend I can turn to, there is no creature I can lean on. I would be glad of advice, but to whom shall I turn for it? I would be glad of a troop, but where is it? God has taken it all away." What for? Faith says, "For a gracious purpose." What purpose can this strait answer? Why, your good. "Call upon Me, come to Me, make known this case to Me." God will never disappoint those to whom He gives grace to follow that course. Who ever trusted in the Lord, and was put to confusion? Who ever opened his mouth in prayer by the power of the Holy Spirit, and was repelled? Does God repel people when they call upon Him? That would be against His Word,

against His nature. He says, "Open thy mouth wide;" and David opened his mouth wide at that time: "Shall I pursue this troop? Shall I overtake?" "Yes," says the Lord, "thou shalt overtake, and without fail recover all."

Go, poor sinner, as this text says, and pray about your difficulties. They will come right; they are in the hand of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. That book of providence, that very and immediate providence that now troubles you, is in the hand of the Lamb, who had power to take the book out of the hands of the Ancient of Days, and loose the seals, and open it. The wilderness had its necessities for Israel; there was no bread, there was no water. And we are pilgrims, as some of us believe, and in an unfriendly wilderness, a world in which we find tribulation; and it has no bread for us. The Bread we want is in heaven: "I am the Bread of life," (John 6:48). You may sometimes go without this Bread for a season. Rutherford says, and it is a very strong and true word, "The Lord's wise love feeds His people with hunger, and makes them fat with desertsions." And if one might venture to try to explain that seeming contradiction, one would say, this is how the wise love of God feeds a person with hunger; namely, He brings that hungry person to the Throne of grace. If you can ply there, trade there, live there, you will feed, and be made fat. "The soul of the diligent shall be made fat," (Prov. 13:4); and this is diligence, when you can repeatedly pray for manifestations of Jesus Christ, for views of His Person, of His merit, for applications to you of His goodness, for supplies out of His fullness. The whole will come, the Bread of life will come. Yes, and you may be obliged, and perhaps often, to say, "I get a little, a very little, hardly enough to keep me alive." But consider this, I put it before you for your consideration, that every crumb of bread is whole bread, all bread as to parts; and every touch of mercy, every gracious word you get from the Lord, is Jesus Christ, all Christ, so to speak, though not all of Him. A little from Him, what a mercy this is! Pray on for this Christ. He will never, never let you perish, and die of hunger. You want the water of life, the smitten Rock must yield it; this world yields it not. "Would to God," said poor Israel, "that we had remained in Egypt! We are only brought out to die of hunger and thirst." They did not know much of God then; and we sometimes prove our ignorance of Him by thinking we shall die, because such and such lacks are about and upon us. But there is a smitten Rock, whose living streams come and make glad the city of God, make glad individual persons; they refresh, they strengthen, they nourish. Temptations come, fiery serpents, wild beasts, evils in our own hearts, evils innumerable, evils powerful, these come; and subtle things, subtle temptations, hardly known at times to be temptations, perhaps; and says the apostle, "There is only one way for you, God has ordained it, call upon Him, pray to Him, pray without ceasing," "Whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved." They shall get what they want, and more than they ask; for.

"To praying souls He always grants
More than they can express."

One more word. We do not know what we are going into, or what this nation yet has to suffer, or what shall come on the church of the living God. What then? Shall we despair? No, rather may we call upon God for protection and for mercy. "Pray that ye enter not into temptation." Pray that God will sustain and comfort and help us, and bring us honourably through; and all will turn out well. May the Lord give us power, then, thus to regard this exhortation: Pray, and pray always. Pray concerning affliction, that it may be sanctified; concerning temptation, that you may not fall

under it; concerning indwelling sin, that you may not be overcome by it. "Pray without ceasing."
Amen