

In Spirit and in Truth: Rooted and Established

Freedom Church of Denton

Prayer

Volume 1, Lesson 9

- **In Devotion** (feel free to highlight, underline, and scribble notes. Take your time, working through the following material over the course of the next week...it would be better for you to get through one sentence with understanding than the whole lesson with no understanding!)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers
Acts 2:42

We have come to the third and final practice that Luke mentions in this verse, that was the indispensable means of securing the grace that God was so benevolently pouring out on the early church. Continuing the analogy of infancy, like the pants and cries of the newborn, prayer is that which summons, receives, and effectuates the spiritual life. It is how we, moment by moment, appropriate the grace that we need to live the life that God is entreating us to live. Prayer is the discipline that demands the destruction of our pride and self-dependency. It meets the deepest needs of our soul as we live in perpetual dependence on heaven's life sap, in the same way a tender shoot depends on the branch from which it is derived. And although you could cut the shoot off and it would continue to look like a shoot for some time, it would inwardly begin to atrophy the moment the flow was interrupted. It is for this reason that life flourishes only as one abides in heaven's vine.

Prayer is where life begins and where new life is found. It is also where rejuvenation occurs. Here, in the Book of Acts, was a revival of true religion. Revival in the individual. Revival in the home. Revival in the multitude. Where there has been revival as witnessed in this account, there has always been prayer. It would be impossible to have revival without it. This is true for the man, it is true for the church, and it is a true for the nation. Revival is predicated almost exclusively on prayer, especially prayer that emanates from a whole and holy heart. Prayer that is undivided and unstained by the world. Prayer that is individual and prayer that is corporate.

And such was the case here. Here was a church that was united in continual and fervent prayer. Prayer that found its power in the Spirit that had just raised the God-Man from the dead and that had been poured out on all flesh from heaven's laver! Red-hot prayer whose flames were being fueled from the depths of the repentance that was taking place, the magnanimity of the living sacrifices that were being offered, and from the oxygen of the persecution that the saints were enduring. This was risky prayer, the kind that man cannot create nor control. The kind that incites hell and fills heaven's chambers with holy and coveted scents. It was the kind of prayer that came at a great cost and yet secured the

highest reward. It was a type of prayer that received what it petitioned, demonstrated what it purported, and divided what it discerned. It came from a hunger that was insatiable, while paradoxically delivering unparalleled satisfaction. It was birthed of the Spirit and not of a man, caught and not taught, coming from God and returning to God.

Prayer is simply communication with God and God is simply transcendent. It (prayer) is on His terms, not ours. Any child may enter in, but stalwarts must pay the price with the currency of heaven's character, the currency of self-abasement and humiliation of the soul, and the currency of the relational nuances that must attend the most sublime of all romances. Again, it is easy enough that any child can begin, but transcendent enough that we will be perfecting it the rest of our lives.

It has been said that effective prayer is the hallmark of the true believer and one of the clearest proofs of one's salvation. Prayer that transcends the theoretical, manifesting in the practical. Prayer that brings heaven to the earth, ushering God into space and time - our space, and our time. In James 5, James describes what he calls the effective and fervent prayer of a righteous man, a.k.a., the prayer of faith. What is its main test? Like Elijah's prayer, that it receives what it is that it asks for. What is its main encouragement? That Elijah was nothing more than a man, with a sinful nature just like ours. You and I may be tempted to dismiss as unachievable the power that was clearly confirmed in the life and ministry of Elijah, but James, and God, are going to great lengths to convince us that Elijah was nothing more than a common man. He faced the same enemies from within and from without. He was born of a woman, bought by the same blood. The only difference being the scope and quality of his faith!

The ability to pray effectively may be reduced to three simple dynamics: 1) the *ability to hear* the Word of God clearly, 2) the *quality of the faith* that is appropriating the Word that has been heard as seed into the heart, and 3) the *quality of the soil* of the heart that is receiving that seed. Go to work on one of these three you will do well. Master all of them, you will be unstoppable. Jesus Himself said that we should pray in no other posture than that of high expectation - expecting to receive what it is that we ask for, to be clear. And while the man of faith takes Jesus at His Word, without exaggeration, he understands that Jesus said many other things about prayer as well. There are occasions when we have every reason to expect to receive what it is we pray for, but there are as many times when we should not expect to receive from God. Negotiating these truths in the light of our ability to hear, with an undivided faith, coming from a pure heart, is the main challenge facing the new believer. This is the school in which he must matriculate if he desires that none of his words fall to the ground in vanity.

In short, the effectiveness of prayer becomes an issue of the heart. God's Word will never return void. As many promises as there are in the Word of God, in Jesus, they are always yes and amen. Nothing happens in this world of any spiritual profit apart from the Word of the Lord. Spiritual things happen because God said so. But because God's Word is likened unto a seed, the Word will not profit the individual lest the seed is implanted in soil that supplies the right nutrients and conditions that initiate germination and growth. The mature person recognizes this. He doesn't shift blame to God or the devil or the world for

his failures in prayer, but instead sets out to cultivate the soil of his heart to receive and grow the Word of God.

The mature person believes in the power of God's promise and lives in the certain expectation of answered prayer. He also believes in the full counsel of God on the subject. He trusts that timing is God's prerogative, not his. He also knows that answers are sometimes delayed and hindered for causes from within and causes from without. He is acutely aware that his battle is a spiritual one, being meted out in no small part in the unseen realm. He understands the importance of the motivations of the heart and his inherent blind spots. He is convicted that his own moral and relational weaknesses are sometimes causes of delay or even denial. And he understands that all of this speaks to the incredible humility that must attend the child if he expects to receive anything from God.

Humility may be the most indispensable characteristic in prayer. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Ironically, the one that is the most convinced of his unworthiness, most aware of his need, most contrite in spirit, is the one that is most positioned to be a powerhouse in prayer.

This explains how a mere mortal like Hezekiah could succeed in changing the mind of God and move Him to renege on the Word He had sent Hezekiah through the prophet Isaiah regarding Hezekiah's imminent death. Somehow by faith, Hezekiah had the importunity, upon the pronouncement of the death warrant, to turn his face to the wall, and through the travail of this spiritually unacceptable situation, to lay hold of the horns of the altar, and not let go, until he had secured repentance (a change of mind) from God on this subject.

Wow! Did you get that? God changed His mind because of Hezekiah's prayer! What was the key of Hezekiah's success? Of course, ultimately, the mercy of God. But it's mercy that delights in finding a heart of a certain scope and quality of faith. The answer is found in 2 Kings 20:3 where Hezekiah reminds the Lord of his faithfulness (no doubt to God's inviolable covenant) and his *whole* heart. And I believe he told the truth. His heart was whole. Not perfect, but perfectly honest. It was loyal and undivided. He held God's Word and promise in the highest of esteem and expectation, in absolute faith, and in genuine brokenness and contrition; and would not allow any circumstance, even one that seemed ordained of the Lord, to come between what He knew of the mercy, promise, and covenant that a holy, infinite, and loving God had previously made with his people. God, give us that kind of faith! God, give us that kind of prayer life! God, give us that kind of heart! God, give us a whole heart! In Jesus name.

- **In Meditation**

As you consider the following references, first pray and invite the Holy Spirit to come and teach you as only the Teacher and Comforter can. Admit to him your complete inability to understand anything spiritual apart from his grace and illumination. Then consider each of these verses, taking notes on anything that the Spirit brings to your attention; perhaps a Sin to confess, a Promise to claim, an Example to follow, a Command to obey, or a Seed of righteousness to sow. If successful, you are learning to read the Word of God with your **S.P.E.C.S.** on!

John 15:7 _____

What is the confidence this scripture gives us? _____

What are the conditions? _____

We often think of prayer in terms of God’s willingness to hear our prayer, but there is frequent mention in the Word of God regarding times that we should not expect to be heard, much less answered by God. Meditate on the following verses and note your observations:

James 4:2 _____

James 4:3 _____

James 1:5-7 _____

Matthew 6:7 _____

Matthew 6:15 _____

Proverbs 28:13 _____

1 Peter 3:7 _____

Proverbs 28:9 _____

Mark 11:25 _____

Psalm 66:18 _____

James conclude his indicting, yet practical “gospel” with a wonderful word of encouragement regarding prayer. He speaks of the “prayer of faith” using Elijah as his case study. Note the following items that you observe in James 5:13-18:

All the promises: _____

All the conditions: _____

In Application

Our effectiveness in prayer is contingent on our ability to hear the Word of God, the quality of our faith that receives the Word into our heart, and the quality of the soil of our heart that receives the implanted Word. Growth in effectiveness depends on growth in each of these areas. Either alone or in small groups consider the following:

1) Hearing the Word of God:

1. What are ways that we can improve our ability to hear, *with understanding*, the Word of God more clearly? _____

2. What are practical ways that we can begin to grow in the areas of silence, simplicity, and solitude? _____

2) Improving the quality of our faith:

1. List the various ways that we can begin to grow in our faith toward God and His Word _____

2. What are the practical steps we can take to ingest more of the Word of God? _____

3) Improving the quality of the soil of our heart:

1. What are steps that we can take toward wholeness in our heart toward God? How do improve our:
 - a. Integrity _____
 - b. Purity _____
 - c. Motivations _____
2. What are the practical, theological, and speculative barriers that are currently hindering us from the type of prevailing prayer that we see in Hezekiah?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.

In Prayer

Father, we are convicted by our apparent weakness in prayer in view of the exhortations, promises, and examples we see in Your beautiful Word. We are also thoroughly encouraged that it is Your will and desire to teach us how to pray effectively as You did Your servants Elijah, Hezekiah, Samuel, and even Jesus. We are encouraged that in the former three we find nothing more than men, born into the same human condition in which we currently find ourselves. We are also convinced that we are the ones that are impeding the flow of the river of Your life. God, move us out of the way. Increase our faith. Purify our hearts. Renew a right spirit within. Make us whole! Amen.