

Time to Pray

Jonathan Edwards said, “Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” I would like to believe that is true in me but I fear it is often not. I feel more like Martyn Lloyd-Jones when he said, “Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer.” Prayer seems to be one of those subjects that is easiest to talk about, even teach about, yet is hardest to do. I think if we were honest we would admit that our prayer sheet from prayer meeting is merely an ornament for the refrigerator door, and our agreement to pray for something is a good intention with little actual follow-through.

As I grow older I become more convinced than ever that prayer is the most important thing I do although it is still a demanding and difficult spiritual exercise. C.S. Lewis once called prayer the dignity of causality. That is, we can try to do everything ourselves or we can ask God to do it. Which do you think is more effective? But which one do you choose most often? Truly, one of the great blessings of life is that, if we live long enough, we grow out of the ability to do it ourselves and of necessity must ask God instead. I think long life is God’s way of forcing us to our knees.

Jesus instructed the disciples on prayer in the sermon on the mount and began by saying “When you pray” (Matt. 6:5). Not “if” or “perhaps” but “when!” Then He set the example of prayer in His own life, often retreating to a solitary place and sometimes praying all night! The apostle Paul so often instructed us in prayer with words such as, “Always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy” (Phil. 1:4). I believe he meant that word “always” and practiced it and I’m sure his list was not short.

Having my own list, and having children and grandchildren at the top of that list, I was struck and convicted by Job’s prayer and subsequent action, “And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually” (1:5).

I’m thankful that I don’t have to prepare four burnt offerings for my children and eleven more for my grandchildren every morning! But I can do this: “By Him let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16). Being thankful, praising God for His blessing upon them, trying to do the good thing and communicating with them, and then there is that word again, “continually.” Now I find myself with more time and interest to do just that.

James said, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (5:16). Do we really believe that our prayers avail to the point of changing things? First there is that word “righteous.” “For the eyes of the Lord over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers” (1 Pet. 3:12). But can they also “avail much?” Paul was a Roman prisoner when he wrote to Philemon and said, “Prepare me also a lodging, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you” (Phile. 22). Think about the natural way that the apostle makes this request to a little known man such as Philemon. As Edwards said, for Paul it was as natural as breathing. But think also of what confidence he had in Philemon’s prayer! “Your prayer will shake the power of the Roman Empire and cause them to release me!”

After Job’s long ordeal, he hadn’t lost his confidence in prayer. The last chapter records, “And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends” (42:10). These weren’t necessarily his best friends either, but he prayed for them, not for his own sake but for the sake of truth in the world, and then God turned his captivity. I have close friends and distant friends and I must pray for them all. John admonished Gaius, “Greet the friends by name” (vs. 14). There was no one better at this than Paul, as the end of his letters show (see especially Romans 16). We need to hold one another up in prayer for the cause of Christ in the world.

If these things are true, then it is time to pray. Cast your cares upon Him because He cares for you. Spend time with Him outside the camp and commit your soul to Him as a faithful Creator.