

Prayer—Telling the Lord of All Our Needs

- 1 What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!
- 2 Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness,
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
- 3 Are we weak and heavy-laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,
Thou wilt find a solace there. (*Hymns*, #789)

God has an eternal intention. His purpose, according to Ephesians 1:10, is to head up all things in Christ. The entire universe has been subjected to corruption because of the rebellion of Satan and the subsequent rebellion of humanity under satanic instigation. In order to bring all things back into a proper harmony between God and creation, God sent His Son Jesus Christ into

however, very few believers have a proper realization of God's purpose.

The completion of God's purpose depends on the cooperation of His people in their living and walk. At the center of their coordination with the divine intention is the prayer life of the believers. To a born-again Christian who embraces a very personal God, prayer is the communication between man and God—a warm, personal, and intimate contact with the Lord. However, the prayer of many Christians is utterly deficient in consciousness of the ultimate goal of the Divine Trinity. Hymns that reflect on the efficacy and intimacy of prayer often seek to open the hearts of the believers to the vast resources that are available through fellowship with God, but many of them perpetuate a childish view of direction and purpose in prayer. To be child-like in faith is wonderful, but to be childish in vision is tragic. In this issue we consider two hymns that deal with prayer as a Christian exercise and the difference in vision that each one reflects.

The first hymn, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, is well-known and loved by many Christians throughout the past century. Written in 1857 by Joseph Scriven, the hymn is not deep in its content, nor is it rich in its poetry. Reportedly, Mr. Scriven wrote it when he received word of the illness of his mother who lived in Scotland, a great distance from his home in Ontario, Canada; he included this hymn in a letter of comfort that he sent to her at that time. Apparently he never intended these verses for publication. The words of the hymn are the simple expression of hope for those who may be suffering under a variety of difficult experiences that are typical to human living. It has one central theme: *take everything to the Lord in prayer*.

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There is a basic and wonderful truth in this simple fact. We can and should pray. The Lord is ready to meet our every

the world to head up all things. Through His redeeming and regenerating work, God in Christ through the Spirit has begotten many sons, and through these many sons, God will head up all things in the universe. Now there is an expectant yearning in all creation, awaiting the revelation of the sons of God (cf. Rom. 8:19-23). Today,

need. However, this hymn addresses prayer in an immature and elementary way. Prayer in this context tends to be centered on one's self, like a child who seeks the solace and comfort of a loving parent when hurt. The Lord is seen as a Savior-Friend who will bear all our burdens, shield us in His arms, and share our sorrows. Its view

reveals a major lack of maturity in faith and of growth in life; there is no thought or care for the things concerning the purpose of God which should characterize the prayer of a mature believer.

First let us look at the positive aspects of this hymn and then consider its shortages. Both the text and the music are simple and easy to enter into, which makes it helpful not only to one experiencing some particularly disturbing event but also to new believers and young people who do not yet have much realization or appreciation of a deeper, more intimate cooperation with the Lord dwelling within them.

The hymn begins with an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving to our wonderful Lord Jesus: "What a Friend we have in Jesus, / All our sins and griefs to bear!" This appears to be a reference to the prophecy of Isaiah:

Surely He has borne our sicknesses / And carried our sorrows; / Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, / Smitten of God and afflicted. / But He was wounded because of our transgressions; / He was crushed because of our iniquities. (53:4-5)

The heart of the saints is always comforted by the remembrance of the precious fact that our dear Lord carried our sins and iniquities to the cross. He bore not only our sins but also our griefs, our sicknesses, and our weaknesses. We praise Him for His intervention without which we would be left in a hopeless and helpless state. We recall that He has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west (Psa. 103:12). So the psalmist cries out:

Bless Jehovah, O my soul; / And do not forget all His benefits: / He pardons all your iniquities; / He heals all your diseases; / He redeems your life from the pit; / He crowns you with lovingkindness and compassions; / He satisfies the prime of your life with good, / So that your youth is renewed like the eagle. / Jehovah executes righteous acts, / And judgments for all who are oppressed. (vv. 2-6)

This is the wonderful salvation that we enjoy through faith in Him, and prayer is the most direct and effective means by which we appropriate and enjoy the redeeming work of the Lord in all of our circumstances and situations: "What a privilege to carry / Everything to God in prayer!" We have the inestimable honor and immeasurable benefit of prayer; we have been invited and encouraged to bring all our requests to God (Phil. 4:6-7; Mark 11:24; 1 Thes. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1, 8). The Lord promised His believers that whatever they ask in prayer they will receive through faith (Mark 11:24; Luke 18:1; John 14:13-14; 15:7; 16:23-24). Through

prayer we contact God and receive Him into our lives as the very source and supply of eternal life. Through prayer, we receive His counsel, His comfort, His guidance, His correction, His warnings, and His grace. It is truly an awesome privilege to bring everything to the Lord in prayer.

Perplexingly, our practice of prayer is often infrequent, inconsistent, or nonexistent. Prayer is actually a great mystery. Every believer knows he can pray and is convinced that he ought to pray; nonetheless, there are many times when he does not pray. The Lord Jesus predicted that there would be a problem with faith on the earth when He returns. He spoke a parable to His disciples emphasizing that men should always pray and never be discouraged, giving them the assurance that God will always hear the prayer of His own and will avenge them of their adversary in negative situations. Then He asks, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). In fact, prayer is an illusive practice for many, perhaps most of us. Even when we pray frequently, our prayer may be superficial, lacking the reality of genuine contact with the Lord. Prayer often deteriorates into a kind of memorized or repetitive monologue. Eventually, the particular requests may be forgotten or dropped altogether. New petitions are subsequently uttered only to be allowed to fade away. Hence, we need to be reminded and to encourage ourselves with the fact of what a privilege it is to make known our requests to God (Phil. 4:6). The absence of peace in our personal living alerts us to our lack of prayer: "O what peace we often forfeit, / O what needless pain we bear, / All because we do not carry / Everything to God in prayer."

The second stanza continues to urge that we bring everything to the Lord in prayer, citing other troubles that may confront us as an incentive to pray: "Have we trials and temptations? / Is there trouble anywhere?" Never be discouraged, we are told; rather, continue to bring all these things to the Lord in prayer. Then the writer brings in the thought of our faithful Friend who will share all of our sorrows. Finally, he reassuringly tells us that "Jesus knows our every weakness"; we should just

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bear everything to the Lord in prayer. Perhaps, the author's thought here is linked to the following encouragement from Hebrews 4:15-16:

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our weaknesses, but One who has been

tempted in all respects like us, yet without sin. Let us therefore come forward with boldness to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help.

The final stanza suggests still other things which may disturb our peace and our sense of well-being: "Are we weak and heavy-laden, / Cumbered with a load of care?" And again: "Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?" Eventually, the writer of this hymn comforts us with the fact that we

another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and psalming with your heart to the Lord." Hymns should play a crucial role in our strengthening and growth in the Christian life. This hymn, however, provides very little truth with which to feed and instruct one another. As we have seen, the hymn contains one single and basic admonition: bring everything to the Lord in prayer. Personal prayer is crucial for our growth in life and for our guidance in the Christian walk, but the content of this hymn does not give us any information on how to pray, what to pray, when to pray, or what our attitude should be in prayer. And it does not contribute to the cooperation of believers with the Lord for the carrying out of His interests on the earth. For this kind of instruction we have to look elsewhere.

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can be secure in the knowledge that whatever our circumstances or situations may be, our precious Savior is still our refuge. He will take us up and shield us in His tender embrace. We will find all our solace in Him. So the hymn ends with the repeated refrain: "Take it to the Lord in prayer."

The feeling of this hymn is warm and tender. It may elicit a sense of comfort and security within us as we sing it and consider its message. However, it is very limited in its application and scope, doing very little to lead us on to maturity in our relationship with the Lord. In fact, if we do not progress beyond this kind of prayer, we may suffer a profound damage in our Christian life. Watchman Nee warns of this possibility:

Some prayers originate from our needs. Sometimes God answers these prayers, but He does not gain anything through these prayers. Psalm 106:15 says, "And He gave them their request, / But He sent leanness into their soul." What does this mean? This means that in the wilderness the Israelites prayed to God for the satisfaction of their lust, and God answered their prayer. He gave them what they wanted, yet they became weak before His eyes. Brothers and sisters, sometimes God answers our prayers to satisfy our needs. Yet these prayers do not satisfy God's desire. These prayers are of little worth. (453)

In the early churches hymns occupied a central position in the teaching and encouragement of the saints, a fact that is clearly reflected in the writings of the apostle Paul. In Colossians 3:16 he instructs his readers, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to God." The apostle repeats his admonition in a slightly different format in Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to one

Prayer—Intimate Fellowship with the Lord

- 1 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
In the spirit seek His face;
Ask and listen in His presence,
Waiting in the secret place.

Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
In the spirit seek His face;
Ask and listen in His presence,
Waiting in the secret place.
- 2 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
Fully opened from within,
With thy face unveiled, beholding,
Single, pure, and genuine.
- 3 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
Seeking Him in confidence;
Learn to touch Him as the Spirit,
Looking up in reverence.
- 4 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
Speaking nothing in pretense;
Ask according to the spirit,
Praying by the inner sense.
- 5 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
List'ning earnestly to Him;
Be impressed with His intentions,
Yielding to Him from within.
- 6 Pray to fellowship with Jesus,
Bathing in His countenance;
Saturated with His beauty,
Radiate His excellence. (*Hymns*, #784)

In contrast to the first hymn, this hymn by Witness Lee is full of rich experiences directed toward the development and continuation of prayer as a personal, warm, and intimate fellowship with the Lord. Here the focus of the hymn expresses the reflections of a mature believer, not looking to his own interests but to those of his Lord. Watchman Nee writes of this kind of prayer:

There is another kind of prayer—one that originates from God’s needs. It comes from God and is initiated by God. This kind of prayer is valuable. Those who have this kind of prayer must be in God’s presence continually, and their desires and thoughts must be mingled with God’s desires and thoughts. Because these ones live in God’s presence continually, He shows them and touches them with His desires and thoughts. These desires and thoughts become the praying ones’ desires, which in turn become their prayer. (453)

The central theme of this hymn is: “Pray to fellowship with Jesus.” The term *fellowship* is misunderstood by many believers. It is generally identified with a kind of social interaction. For example, many facilities have a social hall which is often called the “fellowship hall.” The biblical definition of the word indicates something far more profound and crucial to our walk in faith. John, in his first Epistle, testifies that the apostles of the Lord Jesus enjoyed fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, and he invites the believers in general to join them in this same fellowship (1:3). The Greek word translated “fellowship” is *koinonia*. Fritz Rienecker in his work *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* affirms that “the word indicates the setting aside of private interest and desires and the joining in w. another or others for common purposes” (785). Our fellowship with the Father and the Son indicates that we are participants in the divine interests to such a degree that those interests have become our interests.

Witness Lee’s own words in his *Life-study of First John* may help us to appreciate the significance of the hymn’s focus concerning prayer as a means to fellowship with Jesus:

If we see what fellowship really is, we shall realize that fellowship is a great matter. However, for years we have understood fellowship to be merely a kind of enjoyment in the divine life. We have not seen that fellowship also involves a common interest. God does not supply us with enjoyment without a purpose. God is purposeful, and He has a purpose in giving us the enjoyment in the fellowship of His life. God’s purpose is to feed us so that we may

grow in the divine life and that with the divine birth as the basis we may live a life of the divine righteousness and divine love to overcome the evil one, the world, sin, and all idols. (49-50)

With this understanding of the meaning of fellowship, let us now consider in some detail the message of this hymn. The first stanza and the chorus are identical: “Pray to fellowship with Jesus, / In the spirit seek His face; / Ask and listen in His presence, / Waiting

Whenever we pray, we need to use our spirit. We must learn to pray in this way. We should open our entire being to the Lord, calming our heart and thoughts and using our spirit to pray from the deepest, most genuine part of our being.

in the secret place.” The wording of this hymn, like that of the first, is simple and straightforward, but the thought is profound. A critical factor concerning how we should pray to fellowship with Jesus is found in the phrase: *In the spirit seek His face*. The expression was used by Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians: “Praying at every time in spirit” (6:18). The spirit here is our human spirit joined to and mingled with the divine Spirit through the process of regeneration. Whenever we pray, we need to use our spirit. We must learn to pray in this way. We should open our entire being to the Lord, calming our heart and thoughts and using our spirit to pray from the deepest, most genuine part of our being. We have to realize that our spirit is different from our mind. Our spirit is mingled with the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:17). Hence, the sense in our spirit reflects the feeling of the Spirit of the Lord. By utilizing our mind to understand and express the feeling in our spirit, we are able to bring our mind into harmony with our spirit in our prayer. We should remain in the presence of the Lord, not rushing through an itemized list of needs or expressing a litany of prescribed utterances, but taking time to consider with the Lord the issues before us in our daily life with a view to God’s goal. Praying in spirit is to wait on the Lord, allowing Him to impress us with issues for which we should pray. We do not need to compose our thoughts into poetic or literary sentences but speak frankly, openly, and genuinely with much thoughtfulness according to our inner sense.

As we exercise our spirit, our heart should be seeking the face of the Lord Jesus: “In the spirit seek His face.” Paul tells us that the illumination of the knowledge of the glory of God is in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). When we behold Him, we see the glory of God. Further, as we are beholding Him, we are being changed into the same image from glory to glory (3:18). Praying to seek the face of Jesus indicates that we are pursuing intimate contact with our Lord—cultivating a warm and personal

relationship with Him. Paul testified that he gave up everything of value to him for “the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). The supreme goal of the apostle was to gain Christ and be found in Him; that is, he wanted to have such a compelling and thorough fellowship with the Lord that he would possess the indwelling Christ as his person so that whenever he was encountered by others, they would find him in the very person of the Savior. He could in this way fulfill his earlier boast: “To me, to live is Christ” (1:21). This ought to be the aim in the prayer of every seeking Christian.

Furthermore, we need to nurture our fellowship with Jesus by *asking and listening* in His presence. Many times our prayer may be a mere presentation of a “grocery list” of requests and desires with little or no endeavor to listen to the Lord. Listening during our times of prayer is the secret to being joined to the Lord and to His goals and intentions. We need to learn to linger in His presence, allowing Him to speak to us in our innermost being, waiting in the secret place. The Lord Jesus told His disciples to pray to the Father in secret, not in pretentious display. A valid prayer life is a very private life. During His life on the earth, the Lord often went out to a quiet place to pray (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 6:12). In this way He accomplished the Father’s will; not in independent service, but by intimate and personal prayer He kept Himself fully one with His Father for His purpose. We must now follow His pattern.

We must learn to turn to our spirit, learn to know our spirit, and learn to take care of our spirit in order to fellowship with Him in prayer. It is crucial for our growth in life that we know our spirit so that we can touch Him as the Spirit.

The second stanza tells us that to fellowship with the Lord, we need to be fully opened from within. By opening our entire mind, emotion, and will to the Lord, we give Him ground in us to shine His light into us, adjust us, and impart the desires of His heart into our hearts. In prayer we need to ask the Lord to shine into us and expose all of our hidden sin, worldly lusts, and unspoken intentions. Then the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from every sin and from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:6-9), and we will be enlightened to behold Him with a face that is unveiled, as presented in 2 Corinthians 3:14-18. In these verses Paul points out that the unbelieving Jews had a veil over their face in reading the Scriptures, unable to understand the meaning of the Word of God. The veil was their hardened thoughts which constituted a covering over their hearts. However, this veil is done away with in Christ—whenever their hearts turned to the Lord, the veil would be removed. The act of turning constitutes the removal of the veil. We, who turn our

heart, opening fully from within, will experience liberation and will be able to behold the Lord—looking into His face and reflecting Him as a mirror. In the process of turning and beholding, we are being transformed into the same image of the One we are beholding.

Stanza 3 reminds us that our prayer needs to be full of faith: “Seeking Him in confidence; / Learn to touch Him as the Spirit, / Looking up in reverence.” Faith is the absolute essential of effective prayer. We are told in Hebrews 11:6, “But without faith it is impossible to be well pleasing to Him, for he who comes forward to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” James also counsels us to ask in faith, doubting nothing (1:6). Faith, however, is not an inherent attribute in us; it has been allotted to us by the Father and is strengthened and perpetuated in us through the precious and exceedingly great promises that have been given to us (2 Pet. 1:1-4). Christ’s accomplished work on the cross is the object of our faith. Through the blood of Jesus we have boldness to come forward to the Holy of Holies in full assurance of faith (Heb. 10:19-23).

As we come forward in faith, it is essential that we learn to *touch Him as the Spirit*. Today the Lord is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). This divine fact means that the Lord is not only the ascended Lord in the heavens, but He is also the life-giving Spirit indwelling our human spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 8:9-11; 2 Tim. 4:22). Because He is the Spirit, we are able to touch Him and enjoy intimate fellowship with Him. To say that Christ in resurrection became the life-giving Spirit is not to suggest, imply, or declare that the

Son as the second of the Triune God has ceased to exist. Rather, He is forever the only Begotten of the Father, the second of the Triune God. But in our experience in the economic move of God, He is realized as the Spirit—we can touch Him, receive Him, enjoy Him, and cooperate with Him, even become one spirit with Him because He is the Spirit now indwelling our spirit. Hence, we must learn to turn to our spirit, learn to know our spirit, and learn to take care of our spirit in order to fellowship with Him in prayer. It is crucial for our growth in life that we know our spirit so that we can touch Him as the Spirit. If He is not the Spirit, He can only be eternally removed and eternally separate from us. However, when we touch Him as the Spirit, we are transferred into Christ as our realm of existence, and we receive Christ into us to be our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, making us a new creation in Him (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17). We are able in reality to *look up in reverence*; that is, we expectantly wait on Him in profound

yet intimate respect. He becomes in practicality our eternal portion, our intrinsic source, and our constitutional supply in the divine life for our living: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ" (Gal. 2:20).

The fourth stanza enlightens us further concerning the way in which we can pray effectively: "Speaking nothing in pretense; / Ask according to the spirit, / Praying by the inner sense." We must not attempt to "dupe" the Lord into granting us our requests, as if petitioning Him in a particularly fine and excellent way will impress Him. We must learn to speak directly and honestly, even earnestly in our conversations with the Lord. Additionally, we are again reminded of our spirit: "Ask according to the spirit."

In order to ask according to spirit, we need "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph. 1:17). We are entering into things which are invisible to the eyes of the unbelievers and even of many believers. God's move on the earth is hidden from the eyes of the natural man: "But a soulish man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he is not able to know them because they are discerned spiritually" (1 Cor. 2:14). But when we open to the Lord, He will open His heart to us, and we will be able to pray according to God by the operation of the indwelling Spirit witnessing with our spirit (Rom. 8:26-27, 16).

In the fifth stanza another key aspect of prayer is emphasized—the aspect of listening: "List'ning earnestly to Him; / Be impressed with His intentions, / Yielding to Him from within." We can never pray in harmony with God if we do not learn to listen—to quiet our mind, open our spirit, and seek to hear what He is speaking to us. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," the speaking Savior challenged all the believers in the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). As we listen, we need to *be impressed with His intentions* so that we may pray His prayer. Our prayers thus become an echo of the prayers of the interceding High Priest in the heavens. In all things we need to yield to Him in our spirit. This will increase the efficiency of our petitions and the sweetness of our times with Him.

Finally, we are brought to the ultimate attractiveness of all intimate prayer: "Bathing in His countenance; / Saturated with His beauty, / Radiate His excellence." Our oneness with Him, our prayer and listening, and our exercise to take care of our spirit and touch Him as the indwelling Spirit will bring us into the indescribable joy,

peace, and rest of bathing in His countenance—sensing His very presence—"Whom having not seen, you love; into whom though not seeing Him at present, yet believing, you exult with joy that is unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). And as we bathe in His countenance, we will be saturated with His beauty and we will radiate His excellence. This is the desire of everyone who loves the Lord, and this should become the aspiration in the prayer of every believer.

by Gary Kaiser

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