

January 10, 2010

Prayer and the Fight of Faith

Prayer is that vital connection that links my heart to heaven. We are strangers and aliens here below – but citizens of heaven, and it is crucial that we hear from our home country often. And our Father, who has given us some time here on this earth as aliens and strangers to prove the glories of His grace before we return to that far country which is our home, has given us the means to stay connected to Him – prayer. Prayer is first and foremost the way to talk with God – to hear from heaven and let heaven hear from us. **It is the means through which we hear and understand the heartbeat of God – it is a door into eternity.** But the fact remains that the prayer life of most Christians is either almost non-existent, or highly sporadic.

I believe it was Leonard Ravenhill that said: *Poverty–stricken as the church is today in many things, she is most stricken here, in the place of PRAYER. We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, few PRAYERS.* People don't pray for a variety of reasons.

They don't believe in prayer.
Prayer is just another positive thinking method.
Prayer doesn't work.
Prayer is for sissies.
God helps those who help themselves. But mainly:

We don't pray because we're lazy.
We don't pray because we're busy.
We don't pray because we're preoccupied.
We don't pray because it is hard work.

But I believe that most of all **we don't pray because we don't sense the immediate need and power of prayer.** We don't have the sense that without prayer – all is lost. We don't have the idea that prayer is anything more than a tool we can use to make the trip more comfortable, or get out of a tight spot, or a last-ditch extreme measure when nothing else has worked. 'We might as well pray, we've tried everything else.' Prayer is really an option in our lives, nothing more. And I would say this attitude characterizes the Christian church to a large degree. There isn't a sense of desperation, of immediate need, of complete dependence that characterizes the man or woman of prayer.

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said that he could get any number of men who were "willing to shed their last drop of blood." The problem, said Lincoln, was that he found it difficult to get anyone willing to shed that first drop!

When you strip it right down – take out the comfort and the luxuries we depend on – remove the illusion of safety and security in the things we've piled up around us – we finally find out where reality lies – and in the foxhole – in the middle of the battle – we find out that it is prayer that is our vital connection to heaven and without it – we're sunk. We find out that life is war. Read the Bible – read the Old Testament – read the New Testament – you see that life is war.

Paul told Timothy '*Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life to which you were called.*' 1 Timothy 6:12

Again he tells him, '*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*' 2 Timothy 4:7

To the Corinthians Paul wrote, '*Though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*' 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

And to the Ephesians he says, '*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies.*' Ephesians 6:12

This all sounds like a fight to me – this is war. This is brutal combat. And unless we realize we are in a war – we probably won't be very concerned about prayer. It will remain an option. But I want you to take away this morning two vitally important thoughts:

Life is War

Prayer is Not an Option

I'd rather be able to pray than be a great preacher; Jesus Christ never taught his disciples how to preach, but only how to pray. D. L. Moody

I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach. Charles Spurgeon

LIFE IS WAR

1 Now these are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. 2 It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. 3 These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath. 4 They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the LORD, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. 5 So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

Judges 3:1 – 5

Here in Judges we get a little picture of how life is war. The book of Joshua details the victories of Israel as they conquered the people of Palestine, but the victory was incomplete because there were enemies left – and the text specifically says that the Lord left them for two purposes:

To teach them to war - *to teach war to those who had not known it before*

While we live, we are to be engaged in the fight. It is a battle against the enemy of our souls, against the world, the flesh and the devil – it is the fight of faith to which we are called.

To test their hearts – *They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the...LORD*

I think He wanted to see if they would obey His word rather than their circumstances. And I think it is helpful to see who the enemy is – because this is not just some story that God put in the Bible to entertain us – but there are practical applications for us today.

AMALEKITES

When Israel left Egypt, the first nation to attack was Amalek – *“Amalek was the first [greatest, most prominent] of the nations, but his end shall be destruction.”* Numbers 24:20 Amalek means **‘tiring effort’** Amalek represents our fallen human nature, the flesh. And in Exodus, the Lord told Moses that the battle against the flesh will be a battle every generation will fight. *“The Lord will be at war with Amalek generation after generation.”* Exodus 17:8-16 In the New Testament, Peter tells us, *“Beloved, I urge you as strangers and aliens to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.”* 1 Peter 2:11 So the first enemy we face is our flesh – **the fallen sinful flesh that hates God, despises prayer and wars against our soul for control.** How often has your flesh won the battle for prayer in your life? Many times in my own. The fight of faith is a fight against the desires of the flesh.

CANAANITES

Canaan means **‘merchant’** and it speaks to the love of money. I think this enemy operates on two tactical levels – the first is to amass enough money so you don't need to ask for anything; and the second is to be so busily engaged in the pursuit of wealth that you have no time for prayer. *“But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.”* 1 Timothy 6:9-10 So the fight of faith is a fight against the love of money

HIVITES

Hivite means **‘villager’** and represents a casual, careless ease, complacency and apathy and even ignorance toward things spiritual. *“Listen you women who lie around in lazy ease. Listen to me and I will tell you your reward. In just a little more than a year, you careless ones will suddenly begin to care. For your fruit crop will fail, and the harvest will never take place. Tremble, you women of ease;...”* Isaiah 32:9-11

Complacency is a blight that saps energy, dulls attitudes, and blinds us to spiritual realities. The first symptom is **satisfaction with things as they are**. The second is **rejection of things as they might be**. “Good enough” becomes today’s mantra and tomorrow’s standard. Complacency makes people fear the unknown, mistrust the untried, and abhor the new. Like water, complacent people follow the easiest course—downhill. Complacent people ‘cope’ – and complacent people don’t pray. So the fight of faith is a fight against complacency and apathy.

HITTITES

Hittite means **‘terror’** and fear. Fear paralyzes us, fear keeps us under the enemy’s thumb, it was fear that kept the Israelites out of God’s promise for them. *‘But the men who had gone up with him said, We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us. So they gave out a bad report to the sons of Israel...Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.’* Numbers 13:31-14:1 They cried all night in their tents – fear paralyzes us and infects those around us – and we think about how big the enemy is rather than how great our God is – and we don’t pray. So the fight of faith is a fight against fear.

AMORITES

Amorite means **‘prominence’**. It is the love of recognition, the pride of being first, unwilling to take the back seat. Leonard Bernstein said once that it is relatively easy to find a first seat violinist but **“It is hard to get anyone to play second fiddle.”** *‘God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.’* 1 Peter 5:5 Pride also keeps us from prayer by causing us to rely on ourselves and not on God. Prayer means dependence – and pride hates being dependent upon any one or anything. *‘There they cry out, but He does not answer because of the pride of evil men.’* Job 35:12 Proudful people may pray – but it is a prayer that is more to be heard by others than by God – and God just doesn’t listen. So the fight of faith is a fight against pride.

PERIZZITES

Perizzite means **‘undefended’** and it represents those who lack moral discipline or ignore legal restraint, having no regard for accepted rules or standards. It is a person without self discipline or self-control. Proverbs tells us **“A person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls.”** Proverbs 25:28 An undisciplined life is a prayerless life. Prayer is a discipline and needs constant practice. So the fight of faith is a fight against an undisciplined life.

JEBUSITES

Jebusite means **‘trampled’** and it speaks to those who have been steamrolled by life. Our circumstances, character, and habits can combine to produce a tyranny of depression, discouragement, a sense of hopelessness and a feeling of being down-trodden. That is what happened to those who returned from the Babylonian captivity to rebuild the Temple in Ezra: *‘Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building.’* Ezra 4:4 Although Martin Luther was one of the fiercest warriors of the faith, he was also prone to bouts of depression. He had been suffering under a dark cloud for some time, and one morning he came down the stairs from his room to see his wife dressed all in black, as if mourning someone’s death. So Luther said, ‘Who died?’ His wife replied, ‘God died.’ ‘How can you say such a thing?’ Luther replied. ‘Well He must be dead, the way you’ve been acting’. Luther realized at that point that he had been allowing his circumstances to dictate the level of his faith. So the fight of faith is the fight against depression and discouragement.

So life is war and these some of the enemies we face – and we don’t have the strength, or the wisdom or the wherewithal to fight the enemy alone – we need God’s help – we need to pray – prayer is not an option. **‘Prayer is a weapon, a mighty weapon in a terrible conflict. Our prayers are to be a continual, conscious, earnest effort of battle, the battle against whatever is not God’s will.’** - P. T. Forsyth

PRAYER IS NOT AN OPTION

Here are just a few things the Bible says about prayer:

‘Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving.’ Colossians 4:2

‘These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer...’ Acts 1:14

‘Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.’ Romans 12:12

‘Be anxious for nothing, but by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.’ Philippians 4:6

‘With all prayer and petition, praying at all times in the Spirit...’ Ephesians 6:18

‘Pray without ceasing.’ 1 Thessalonians 4:17

‘Therefore I want the men in every place to pray...’ 1 Timothy 2:8

‘The end of all things is at hand; therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.’

1 Peter 4:7

If we are to fight effectively – we need to pray. Ephesians 6 tells us that we are in a fight, ‘*for our struggle...*’ And in view of this struggle we are to armor up – with truth, righteousness, the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. And then in verse 18 Paul tells us that all this is done – ‘*With all prayer and petition, praying at all times in the Spirit...*’ In other words, prayer becomes the means through which we appropriate all the power of God for this battle.

Paul uses three words here to describe what prayer is about – first of all he says ‘pray’ – **with all kinds of prayer** – silent prayer, loud prayer, meditative prayer, spontaneous prayer, liturgical prayer – all kinds of prayer. And then he points out in particular a kind of prayer he calls ‘**supplication**’ which relates to **special times of need**. **All too often though, this is our prayer life – just special times of need**. Catastrophe strikes and we get down on our knees. The catastrophe is over – we get up and get on with our lives until the next time. When those planes hit the twin towers in New York – for about 3 months afterward, there was a great outpouring of supplication. But gradually things got back to normal and people got up and got on with life and left their prayer in the closet. But Paul also goes on to say, ‘**praying at all times**’ – and this indicates the **necessity of always being in an attitude of prayer, of having a consistent prayer life**. You can tell those who practice a life of consistent, regular prayer – things don’t shake them much – they don’t go on euphoric highs, and they don’t fall into desperate depressions.

They pray when they’re up – they pray when they’re down.
They pray when they’re victorious – they pray when they’re defeated.
When they’re persecuted – they pray.
When they’re sick – they pray
When they’re worried – they pray
When they’re confident – they pray

Jesus said ‘**My house will be called a house of prayer.**’ That means that prayer characterizes the house. When you look at His house – you see prayer happening. There is an aroma and atmosphere of prayer about the place – when you meet someone from this house – you have a sense that these guys pray – and God answers their prayers; that with them prayer is the first thing, the last thing, and everything in between.

What the Church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer. E. M. Bounds

*Our gracious God and Father,
God of all mercy and grace, move our hearts to pray. Fill us with a passion to pray for Your saving power among the nations and our neighbors. Forgive us, oh Lord, for weak, insipid prayers that do not presume on Your great power and might. Forgive us too for those hasty and even casual moments we indulge in and call it prayer. Teach us to know Your throne of grace as the pleasure ground of our souls and storehouse of mercy and grace; the place where we sharpen the sword of the Spirit – anoint the shield of faith – put on the helmet of salvation and the shoes of the gospel – the place where we are strengthened for each conflict – encouraged for the upward race – and empowered to conquer every foe. May we bow our hearts and bend our knees morning, noon and night, in sacrificial prayer for the purpose of God in the earth. Grant that we would pray God-sized, Scripture-saturated prayers that would call Your sheep from every people on the earth, for the glory of Christ and in His name we pray, Amen.*

‘Though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.’ 2 Corinthians 10:3-5