

# The Meaning of Prayer

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With Introduction by  
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## THE MEANING OF PRAYER

To  
FLORENCE WHITNEY FOSDICK

## INTRODUCTION

These meditations and studies on prayer are most timely. Never have there been such extensive and such convincing evidences of the poverty and inadequacy of human means and agencies for furthering the welfare of humanity; never has there been such a widespread sense of the need of super-human help; never have there been such challenges to Christians to undertake deeds requiring Divine cooperation; never has there been such a manifest desire to discover the secret of the hiding and of the releasing of God's power. Interest in prayer is world-wide. This is shown in the prominence of this subject in addresses and sermons in all lands, as well as by the growing volume of books and pamphlet literature in different languages. The multiplication of Calls to Prayer and of Prayer Cycles, and the formation of Prayer Bands and of Leagues of Intercession, constitute similar testimony. Among Christians everywhere, and even among many who would not call themselves believing Christians, there is being manifested an earnest desire to understand what prayer is and to engage more fully in its exercise.

Among many recent writings on prayer possibly none does more to show its reasonableness than the following chapters. They will answer the unanswered questions of many an honest doubter. The daily arrangement of the material will serve to make the following of this course of studies a valuable school of prayer. This suggests one of the principal merits of Professor Fosdick's treatment of the subject. It shows clear recognition of the simple and central fact—a fact apparently unrecognized by so many—that prayer is something the reality and power of which can be verified only by praying. An alarming weakness among Christians is that we are producing Christian activities faster than we are producing Christian experience and Christian faith; that the discipline of our souls and the deepening of our acquaintance with God are not proving sufficiently thorough to enable us to meet the

unprecedented expansion of opportunity and responsibility of our generation. These studies and spiritual exercises in helping men and women to form that most transforming, most energizing, and most highly productive habit—the habit of Christlike prayer—will do much to overcome this danger.

JOHN R. MOTT.

## PREFACE

This little book has been written in the hope that it may help to clarify a subject which is puzzling many minds. **Prayer is the soul of religion, and failure there is not a superficial lack for the supply of which the spiritual life leisurely can wait.** Failure in prayer is the loss of religion itself in its inward and dynamic aspect of fellowship with the Eternal. Only a theoretical deity is left to any man who has ceased to commune with God, and a theoretical deity saves no man from sin and disheartenment and fills no life with a sense of divine commission. Such vital consequences require a living God who actually deals with men.

In endeavoring to clear away the difficulties that hamper fellowship with this living God, the book has used the Scripture as the basis of its thought. But the passages of Scripture quoted are not employed as proof texts to establish an opinion; they are uniformly used as descriptions of an experience which men have actually had with God. In a study such as this, the Bible is the invaluable laboratory manual which records all phases of man's life with God and God's dealing with man.

A debt of gratitude is due to many books and many friends consulted by the author. In particular, Professor George Albert Coe, Ph.D., of the Union Theological Seminary, New York City, and Mr. Frederick M. Harris, of Association Press, have given generously of their time and counsel.

Each chapter is divided into three sections: Daily Readings, Comment for the Week, and Suggestions for Thought and Discussion. This arrangement for daily devotional reading—"The Morning Watch," for intensive study, and for study group discussion, has met such wide acceptance in my previous book that it has been continued here.

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## CHAPTER I

# The Naturalness of Prayer

### DAILY READINGS

#### First Day, First Week

Samuel Johnson once was asked what the strongest argument for prayer was, and he replied, "Sir, there is no argument for prayer." One need only read Johnson's own petitions, such as the one below, to see that he did not mean by this to declare prayer irrational; he meant to stress the fact that praying is first of all a native tendency. It is a practice like breathing or eating in this respect, that men engage in it because they are human, and *afterward* argue about it as best they can. As Carlyle stated it in a letter to a friend: "Prayer is and remains the native and deepest impulse of the soul of man." Consider this universal tendency to pray as revealed in "Solomon's prayer" at the dedication of the temple:

Moreover concerning the foreigner, that is not of thy people Israel, when he shall come from a far country for thy great name's sake, and thy mighty hand, and thine outstretched arm; when they shall come and pray toward this house; then hear thou from heaven, even from thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calleth to thee for; that all the peoples of the earth may know thy name, and fear thee, as doth thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by thy name.—II Chron. 6:32, 33.

Note how this prayer takes for granted that any stranger coming from anywhere on earth is likely to be a praying man. Let us say to ourselves on this first day of our study,

that in dealing with prayer we are dealing, as this Scripture suggests, with a natural function of human life.

“All souls that struggle and aspire,  
All hearts of prayer, by thee are lit;  
And, dim or clear, thy tongues of fire  
On dusky tribes and twilight centuries sit.”

*O Lord, in whose hands are life and death, by whose power I am sustained, and by whose mercy I am spared, look down upon me with pity. Forgive me that I have until now so much neglected the duty which Thou hast assigned to me, and suffered the days and hours of which I must give account to pass away without any endeavor to accomplish Thy will. Make me to remember, O God, that every day is Thy gift, and ought to be used according to Thy command. Grant me, therefore, so to repent of my negligence, that I may obtain mercy from Thee, and pass the time which Thou shalt yet allow me in diligent performance of Thy commands, through Jesus Christ. Amen.*—Samuel Johnson (1709-1784).

## Second Day, First Week

Epictetus was a non-Christian philosopher and yet listen to him: “When thou hast shut thy door and darkened thy room, say not to thyself that thou art alone. God is in thy room.” Read now Paul’s appreciation of this hunger for God and this sense of his presence which are to be found among all peoples.

Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To an Unknown God.” What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you. The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men’s hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply, they might feel after him and find him, though he is not

far from each one of us; for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.—Acts 17:22-28.

Consider the meaning of the fact that prayer and worship are thus universal; that all peoples do “seek God, if haply, they might feel after him and find him.” It is said that an ignorant African woman, after hearing her first Christian sermon, remarked to her neighbor, “There! I always told you that there ought to be a God like that.” Somewhere in every man there is the capacity for worship and prayer, for the apprehension of God and the love of him. Is not this the distinctive quality of man and the noblest faculty which he possesses? How then are we treating this best of our endowments?

*O Lord our God, grant us grace to desire Thee with our whole heart; that so desiring we may seek and find Thee; and so finding Thee may love Thee; and loving Thee, may hate those sins from which Thou hast redeemed us. Amen.—Anselm (1033-1109).*

### Third Day, First Week

Prayer has been greatly discredited in the minds of many by its use during war. Men have felt the absurdity of praying on opposite sides of a battle, of making God a tribal leader in heaven, to give victory, as Zeus and Apollo used to do, to their favorites. Let us grant all the narrow, bitter, irrational elements that thus appear in prayer during a war, but let us not be blind to the meaning of this momentous fact: *whenever in national life a time of great stress comes, men, however sceptical, feel the impulse to pray.* How natural is Hezekiah’s cry in the siege of Jerusalem!

O Jehovah, the God of Israel, that sittest above the cherubim, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline thine ear, O Jehovah, and hear; open thine eyes, O Jehovah, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, wherewith he hath sent him to defy the living God. Of a truth, Jehovah, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods but the work of men’s

hands, wood and stone; therefore they have destroyed them. Now therefore, O Jehovah our God, save thou us, I beseech thee, out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou Jehovah art God alone. —II Kings 19:15-19.

Consider now the same tendency to pray in a crisis, which appears in the European war. Here is a passage from a Scotchman's letter, describing the infidel in his town, who never went to church, but who now sits in the kirk, and is moved to tears when he hears the minister pray for the king's forces, and for the bereaved at home: "It was then that my friend stifled a sob. There was Something after all, Something greater than cosmic forces, greater than law—with an eye to pity and an arm to save. There was God. My friend's son was with the famous regiment that was swaying to and fro, grappling with destiny. He was helpless—and there was only God to appeal to. There comes an hour in life when the heart realizes that instinct is mightier far than logic. With us in the parish churches of Scotland the great thing is the sermon. But today it is different; the great thing now is prayer." So always a crisis shakes loose the tendency to pray.

*O Lord God of Hosts, grant to those who have gone forth to fight our battles by land or sea, protection in danger, patience in suffering, and moderation in victory. Look with compassion on the sick, the wounded, and the captives; sanctify to them their trials, and turn their hearts unto Thee. For Thy dear Son's sake, O Lord, pardon and receive the dying; have mercy upon the widow and fatherless, and comfort all who mourn. O gracious Father, who makest wars to cease in all the world, restore to us, Thy people, speedily the blessing of peace, and grant that our present troubles may be overruled to Thy glory, in the extension of the Redeemer's Kingdom, and the union of all nations in Thy faith, fear, and love. Hear, O Lord, and answer us; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.—E. Hawkins (1789-1882).*

## Fourth Day, First Week

H. Clay Trumbull tells us that a soldier in the Civil War, wounded in a terrific battle at Fort Wagner, was asked by

an army chaplain, "Do you ever pray?" "Sometimes," was the answer; "I prayed last Saturday night, when we were in that fight at Wagner. I guess everybody prayed *there*." Consider how inevitably the impulse to pray asserts itself whenever critical danger comes suddenly upon any life. In view of this, read the Psalmist's description of a storm at sea:

They that go down to the sea in ships,  
That do business in great waters;  
These see the works of Jehovah,  
And his wonders in the deep.  
For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind,  
Which lifteth up the waves thereof.  
They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to  
the depths:  
Their soul melteth away because of trouble.  
They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man,  
And are at their wits' end.  
Then they cry unto Jehovah in their trouble.  
—Psalm 107:23-28.

Remember those times in your experience or observation when either you or some one else has been thrown back by an emergency upon this natural tendency to pray in a crisis. Consider what it means that this impulse to pray is not simply age-long and universal; that it also is exhibited in every one of us—at least occasionally. How natural as well as how noble is this prayer of Bishop Ridley during the imprisonment that preceded his burning at the stake!

*O Heavenly Father, the Father of all wisdom, understanding, and true strength, I beseech Thee, for Thy only Son our Savior Christ's sake, look mercifully upon me, wretched creature, and send Thine Holy Spirit into my breast; that not only I may understand according to Thy wisdom, how this temptation is to be borne off, and with what answer it is to be beaten back; but also, when I must join to fight in the field for the glory of Thy name, that then I, being strengthened with the defence of Thy right hand, may manfully stand in the confession of Thy faith, and of Thy truth, and may continue in the same unto the end of my life, through the same our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*—Bishop Ridley (1500-1555).

## Fifth Day, First Week

The instinctive turning of the heart to a "Power not ourselves" is often felt, not alone in crises of peril, but in the presence of great *responsibility*, for which a man unaided feels inadequate. Despite Solomon's shallowness of life, there were times when something finer and deeper was revealed in him than his deeds would have suggested. When he first realized that the new responsibility of kingship was upon him, how elevated the spirit of his impulsive prayer!

And now, O Jehovah my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give thy servant therefore an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to judge this thy great people?—I Kings 3:7-9.

As a companionpiece with this cry of Solomon, see Lincoln's revealing words: "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go; my own wisdom and that of all around me seemed insufficient for the day." Whenever a man faces tasks for which he feels inadequate and upon whose accomplishment much depends, he naturally turns to prayer. Let us imagine ourselves in Luther's place, burdened with new and crushing responsibilities, and facing powerful enemies, when he cried:

*O Thou, my God! Do Thou, my God, stand by me, against all the world's wisdom and reason. Oh, do it! Thou must do it! Yea, Thou alone must do it! Not mine, but Thine, is the cause. For my own self, I have nothing to do with these great and earthly lords. I would prefer to have peaceful days, and to be out of this turmoil. But Thine, O Lord, is this cause; it is righteous and eternal. Stand by me, Thou true Eternal God! In no man do I trust. All that is of the flesh and savours of the flesh is here of no account. God, O God! dost Thou not hear me, O my God? Art Thou dead? No. Thou canst not die; Thou art only hiding Thyself. Hast Thou chosen me for this work? I ask Thee how I may be*

*sure of this, if it be Thy will; for I would never have thought, in all my life, of undertaking aught against such great lords. Stand by me, O God, in the Name of Thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, who shall be my Defence and Shelter, yea, my Mighty Fortress, through the might and strength of Thy Holy Spirit. God help me. Amen.*—Martin Luther (1483-1546).

## Sixth Day, First Week

And when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his chamber toward Jerusalem); and he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.—Daniel 6: 10.

We are evidently dealing here with a new element in prayer, not apparent in our previous discussion. *Prayer, to Daniel, was not simply an impulsive cry of need, wrung from him by sudden crises or by overwhelming responsibilities.* Daniel had done with the impulse to pray what all wise people do with the impulse to eat. They do not neglect it until imperious hunger demands it to save their lives or until special work absolutely forces them to it. They rather recognize eating as a normal need of human beings, to be met regularly. So Daniel not only prayed in emergencies of peril and responsibility; he prayed three times a day. How many of us leave the instinct of prayer dormant until a crisis calls it into activity! "Jehovah, in trouble have they visited thee; they poured out a prayer *when thy chastening was upon them*" (Isaiah 26: 16). Consider how inadequate such a use of prayer is.

*I am forced, good Father, to seek Thee daily, and Thou offerest Thyself daily to be found: whensoever I seek, I find Thee, in my house, in the fields, in the temple, and in the highway. Whatsoever I do, Thou art with me; whether I eat or drink, whether I write or work, go to ride, read, meditate, or pray, Thou art ever with me; wheresoever I am, or whatsoever I do, I feel some measure of Thy mercies and love. If I be oppressed, Thou defendest me: if I be envied, Thou guardest me; if I hunger, Thou feedest me; whatsoever I want Thou givest me. O continue this Thy loving-*



*kindness towards me for ever, that all the world may see Thy power, Thy mercy, and Thy love, wherein Thou hast not failed me, and even my enemies shall see that Thy mercies endure forever.*—J. Norden (1548-1625).

## Seventh Day, First Week

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God.—Eph. 3: 14-19.

Compare praying like this with the spasmodic cry of occasional need and see how great the difference is. Here prayer has risen into an elevated demand on life, unselfish and constant. It gathers up the powers of the soul in a constraining desire for God's blessing on the one who prays and on all men. What starts in the pagan as an unregulated and fitful impulse has become in Paul an intelligent, persevering, and well-directed habit. "As power of thought confused and weak in an Australian aboriginal, becomes in a Newton capable of grasping laws that hold the stars together, so prayer may begin in the race or in the individual as an erratic and ineffective impulse, but may grow to be a dependable and saving power." Consider how much you understand this latent force in your own life and how effectively you are using it.

*O God, Thou art Life, Wisdom, Truth, Bounty, and Blessedness, the Eternal, the only true Good! My God and my Lord, Thou art my hope and my heart's joy. I confess, with thanksgiving, that Thou hast made me in Thine image, that I may direct all my thoughts to Thee, and love Thee. Lord, make me to know Thee aright, that I may more and more love, and enjoy, and possess Thee. And since, in the life here below, I cannot fully attain this blessedness, let it at least*