



## Why is there no wrestling?

It is a question worth pondering as to whether there is much serious prayer being offered up in our busy age. There is undoubtedly a welter of other things being attempted: files of paper are prepared on a host of topics; memoranda by the score are recorded; statistics are noted; committees are formed and then disbanded; agendas are drawn up and discussed; ideas are floated and debated; proposals are offered and turned this way and then that. But in the face of the massive onslaught of secular and spiritual forces hostile to the gospel of Christ there appears to be little agonising prayer. Perhaps it is time to ask ourselves if this is why nothing seems to get any better.

Behind this lack of real prayer — if the above observations are just — there would appear to lie just one basic explanation: prayer is extraordinarily difficult. At least prayer which involves wrestling is so. There is a common style of praying found in many places today which makes but little demand upon those who offer it up. We do not set ourselves up to be the judges of other men's spirituality. But if our eyes and ears do not deceive us it would seem that a style of prayer is widespread which consists very much of saying thank you to God for a large number of things, yet never goes on to lay hold of the Almighty or to make massive demands upon his promises.

It is time to ask ourselves whether such praying is worthy of being called scriptural or evangelical. The prayers of the Bible concentrate on the great emergency and crisis of the times. Examples of this abound. The prayers of Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel may be taken as notable examples. They grapple with the main issue of the day, which is that God should pardon his people and restore to them the power of his grace. No doubt these holy men were grateful to God for the mercies of life and thanked him no less than we do today. But their chief energies in prayer were spent, not in reference to the common mercies of life, but on those themes and subjects which most concerned Christ's kingdom at that hour. So they contain the element of striving with God. They are hot and passionate. They amount to a spiritual wrestling and to a laying hold of God in downright earnest.

If anyone thinks that we go too far in so speaking of prayer in Bible times, let him recall the marvellous earnestness recorded for us concerning the prayers of our Lord in the garden. How deeply did he experience agony! There was immense conflict in his mind and soul. This was registered in his tears and in his sweat which dripped from his brow like clots of blood. Such intensity of prayer may perhaps be unique to our blessed Redeemer. But there are expressions elsewhere in the Bible to show that prayer is hard and demanding to man.

The Psalmist speaks of an experience which must be exceeding rare in our times. His knees were weak through fasting (Psalm 109:24). Intercessory prayer requires us to '*afflict our souls*' (Leviticus 16), to '*watch*' and not to sleep (Matthew 26:38), to '*labour fervently*' (Colossians 4:12), to persevere (Ephesians 6:18) and to engage in an exercise which is intensely spiritual (Romans 8:26).

When we study the practice of Old Testament saints we find not a little to humble and inspire us. Elijah's prayers stopped heaven and brought a drought on the land. Again, his prayers opened heaven and poured forth rain on the parched earth. What prayers these biblical men and women offered up and with what effect upon the world! They stormed Zion in their fervour to be heard. They petitioned the throne of heaven and laid siege to its walls. They would scarcely take No for an answer. In so praying they stopped the sun in its course; they called down fire from above; they opened prisons; they overturned the schemes of armies; they raised the dead; they toppled thrones; they wrought mighty deeds of victory.

It cannot escape our attention that such wrestlers with God seem to be few today. We are grateful for those who serve Christ in whatever capacity. We value highly all who walk with God and are true to his Word and sound in their faith. But it would be good for our land and for our churches if there were a larger army of wrestlers, all taking God at his Word and pleading relentlessly the promises which he has made to his people in a dark day. In a word, we need an army of men and women who are so devoted to praying for the Spirit to come down that they give God no rest (Isaiah 62:7).

Too many prayers lack steam. Too many prayers are predictable. Too many prayers are marked by sameness and tameness. But prayers which are ordinary are not sufficient to turn the tide of evil in these days. What is called for in such a dark day is for men and women of exceptional dedication to God who will plead for a mighty change in the state of things. Perhaps this is the main reason why there has been a recovery of much truth but little public manifestation of it. We are all guilty in that we have not waited with sufficient seriousness on God to give the church the power of preaching and the unction of spiritual energy.

It is a fault to treat prayer as the Cinderella of our spiritual duties. To read and to preach is essential. But the oil of divine blessing must (needs) be poured on the means of grace if they are to be effectual. Too many of our services to Christ are performed with little water on the mill. It is the way of God that he will have us beg for our blessings. Little prayer usually means little unction. There are exceptions but we must not take advantage of God's kindness. At times we get unusual help in our work with but little intercession beforehand. But it is presumptuous of us to take this as our rule of action.

A common reason why we cease to pray effectually or fervently is because we fall into a rut. When this happens we pray more by habit than in the Spirit. We do indeed go through a routine of words and lists but the fire is just not there in the soul. This is one reason why we must be careful not to be dictated to by our prayer-lists. They may have their place but they must never become our masters. At times — perhaps at frequent times — we must leave our prayer-lists aside and turn from our conventional patterns of prayer. There are times when the mould of our intercession is to be discarded entirely and we are to devote our whole minds and souls to the great task of calling on God for nothing less than revival. Let the soul pour itself out to its Maker in anguished groans. Let the heart within us feel free to roam up and down the land in its search for a way to give vent to our burden and to our grief that Christ's cause is so low.

We shall probably seldom if ever pray in the manner of the saints of the Bible if we are not full of the knowledge of the Scriptures. This is clear from a perusal of the great prayers of the Bible itself. The Bible-characters whom we referred to as great in prayer were themselves men who were full of Scripture. Their prayers are often a tissue of biblical language. They quote not only the ideas of the Bible but also its very text. Of course there is a danger even in this. It is possible to use the Bible as mere padding in our prayers. It is sometimes the case that men who have little to say in prayer fill out their prayers by reciting texts of Scripture which may be only partially what they are trying to say. We have all been guilty, no doubt. This is an abuse. Real prayer shoots upwards, being impelled by the inward fire and animation of the soul. No one needs to be told when we have offered up a real prayer. It is something which all feel who have any spiritual life in them.

However it is to be feared that many cannot pray with fervour because they are simply ignorant of the Word of God. It is not simply a matter of which version we use. The point in hand is that whatever version men use they should know it through and through. We are to be full of the knowledge of God's Word and we are to use it in prayer, not as a way of filling out and decorating our thoughts, but as a way of pleading with God in terms of what he himself has said and thus of arguing before him the unchangeableness of his own holy promises in the light of our present needs.

It appears to be the case that, generally speaking, we are only as good in our public prayers as we are in our private devotions. The measure of the one will be the measure of the other. If anything, private prayer is more difficult. The reason for this is probably that there is more excitement of the

soul where there is a gathering of God's people together. It is less exhilarating to pray on one's own. Moreover there is a special promise from Christ to those who gather in prayer:

*'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'*

(Matthew 18:20)

This is surely one part of the explanation as to why public prayer is easier. For this reason alone it is essential that the Christian, especially the Christian minister, should give attention to secret prayer. Here he will grow in holy boldness. Here he will learn the art of drawing near to God, an art which will make him robust in prayer when he has to stand in the assembly of the people.

But how is a man to *begin* in this work of learning to pray with passion? We are not wrong to think that this is something which we are to learn. For though it is true that all our powers of soul come as a gift from God, yet they are powers which we are to cultivate and to grow in. Some have a special gift in prayer. But all of us are to stir up ourselves to improve in this grace. *'Exercise thyself unto godliness'* (1 Timothy 4:7). As the professional sportsman must train daily so must the man or woman of God train in spiritual gifts, and exercise the soul in holy duties. It is the royal way to excellence. And excellence in prayer is what our churches so much need in this time, surely.

The thing which we must start with if we are to begin to develop the soul in this wrestling type of prayer is time. It is impossible to pray in the way we are suggesting if we do not set apart time for this exercise. Some days we are so busy with legitimate calls on our time that we cannot pray in this specially urgent manner. But from time to time we must set aside the special hour for this sacred work. The believer must in that hour be away from the distractions of the telephone and of the other numerous interruptions which on other occasions we must be prepared for.

When this time is secured we need next to have our hearts brought to a glow of expectation. Emotion is one of the secrets of lively prayer. Whatever will fire the affections with heat and ardour is to be desired. In other words, we shall not pray as we ought at these times of special urgency until we have prepared ourselves. There is a preparation needed for the highest type of prayer. It consists of a rousing of our faith. It becomes a factor of our consciousness. It consists of a yearning desire to move God to bless us with help.

There are undoubtedly times when the Spirit creates a yearning desire for prayer when there has been no conscious preparation on our part. On such occasions we should yield to this impulse. Other duties can wait. When once the heart has become fired with a passion to hold communion with God, other things should be laid aside for the moment and the impulse to pray yielded to. This is so because this urge to pray is in itself so scarce in this world and so precious a gift from God that it should take precedence over other things. The result will normally be that we shall enjoy a time of ecstatic nearness with God. This is a taste of heaven on earth and is probably better for the soul than anything else whatever. There is no spiritual joy comparable to pouring out the heart in burdened intercession. Those who are acquainted with this exercise will know that it is a taste of glory. However, usually we need to prepare ourselves for prayer by meditation, singing or reading.

We need not be in a hurry in our special time of prayer. It is not necessary to rush at the main point to be prayed. Let the soul begin calmly. Let there be no attempt at generating false fire. All our desire at this early point is to have our hearts moistened. What should happen is that as we spend time in the presence of God the world falls away from our mind and we grow into the attitude of looking up in expectation. It is often, not always, a help to pray out loud to God. This is a good way of improving our concentration. We wish him to visit us with a shower of grace. Our yearning is that he should manifest himself to us not as to the world (John 17:6). This early part of prayer is certainly the hardest. Many give up at this early stage and stop their prayer before they have, as it were, begun.

What we wish to do is to bring before God the cause which he loves more than we do. We expostulate with him that he stands so aloof from his own church, that he gives so little evidence of his presence in the services of his house, that he allows his enemies such authority to damage the work of Christ, that he leaves us with such dry eyes and dull hearts in our gatherings. Real intercession is the result of these two things: the promise and the providence of God in seeming

conflict. When the soul feels ground between the upper millstone of God's promise and the nether millstone of his providence, then it prays as it ought. The Psalms bear record to this fact. Take such examples as Psalm 44 or Psalm 74 or Psalm 89. In these instances what we have is the tension begotten in the believer's soul through the apparent inconsistency between what the Lord has promised to do for us and what he is at present doing for us. This tension creates in the longing heart the frequent cry, *'Lord, how long?'*

It much glorifies God when his people call out to him to fulfil his promises in this way. It is for men who will pray like this that he looks. If he finds none, he is displeased And dishonoured. Could more terrible words be found anywhere in the Bible than these:

*'The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment. And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor.'*

(Isaiah 59:15-16)

Or again: *'and I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.'*

(Ezekiel 22:30)

What do such challenging words teach but that the Lord takes special delight in hearing the persistent supplications of those who will hold his own promises before his eyes and who will give him no rest till he makes his work a praise in the earth? (Isaiah 62:7). Such are the effect of God's desertions upon prayerful people. Loud and fervent cries spring out of a soul which is indignant at the blasphemy done to God's Name by sin.

Faith becomes visible in the way it views the glory and honour of God. To small souls only our own personal matters are important. But to the Great-Hearts of this world the supreme issue is the glory and the honour of God himself. It is this motive that marks the intercessions of a Moses or a David or a Samuel. It is this that we see in the prayers of a Paul, or a Luther, or a Calvin. They burn because of the boldness of the enemy. Their emotions are choked at the dishonour done to God when his truth and law, when his gospel and salvation are hidden behind a forest of lies. This is what makes a man or a woman a pleader with God. And let it not be forgotten that some of the noblest of all Bible pleaders with God were women. Let Hannah be called to mind, or Esther, or Anna in the New Testament. This last spent her whole life in pleading for the coming of the kingdom of God. A lifetime of intercession must go by before she sees her heart's desire: the birth of the long-promised Messiah. She specialised in this one thing: wrestling with the Almighty. Nor did she wrestle in vain. Though the promise tarried, yet in due time it came and her heart's desire was granted to her.

O that God would raise up among our nations men and women who would specialise in this gracious work of pleading the promises! O that the Lord would touch the hearts of many and give to them a vision of what might be done in these days if only his power and presence were again granted to us! Truth we have again in a wonderful measure. But the world passes by our doors as though this were some private interest of ours and had no relevance to the eternal destiny of men and nations.

The world will not pass us by in the hour when God rises up and puts the trumpet to his mouth once again. At this hour he sleeps and gives men over to their love of vanity. He suffers men to go on their way heedless of his Word and heedless of the claims of his Son upon their lives. This is not completely so, of course. But it is largely so. Society sees no need of God or of gospel. Sin feels right. Sin tastes delicious. Sin appeals to every faculty. But once let God arise from his long sleep and things will change in a moment, as they have done so often in the past. Our special times of intercession are with this one thing supremely in view: that he would appear again in glory (Psalm 102:16). It is for this we ought to give ourselves as far as we can to special intercession: that the Lord would end his long sleep and shout like a giant refreshed by wine (Psalm 78:65). With this in mind should we in these dark days cry out with peculiar earnestness: that he would lift up the fallen standard and give a banner to the church that may be displayed because of the truth (Psalm 60:4).

In his love to his own people God has given promises in a form wonderfully calculated to raise our faith and to lead us to expect great things from God. Such a promise is that of Isaiah:

*'When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.'*

(Isaiah 59:19)

Are there any who are devoting themselves to such a ministry of prayer as we have here presented? Are there some who will see this as their great and noble life's work? Are there those who will become addicted to the ministering to the saints in this task of special pleading with God?

Never perhaps was the need for excellence in prayer among Christians greater than it is at this hour. We see daily that sin creeps, indeed that it marches, into the citadels of modern life while weak men give in to it on every hand. Sin and pride, defiance and disobedience to God's laws have a stranglehold on our modern world.

We owe it to this generation and to generations unborn to cry out to God against this wave of sin till he is pleased to stand up in his majesty once more and to command: *'Thus far shalt thou come but no farther, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed'*.

Maurice Roberts

© 2014

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)