

# Getting Ready to PRAY

WHEN one of Jesus' disciples approached Him about the matter of prayer, he asked a very simple question but one which came from a heart that felt the matter was most complex and perhaps even beyond reach. The fond request was, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

## I. A CUSTOM CONSIDERED

It was the regular custom for a Jewish rabbi to teach his disciples a rather unadorned but useful prayer which they might employ habitually. John the Baptist, apparently, so taught those whom he had instructed concerning the coming kingdom. Now the disciples of Jesus approached Him with the request that He do a similar thing.

Notice that the disciples approached Jesus requesting that He instruct them. The disciples did not say, "Teach us what to ask for"; nor yet, "Teach us when or under what circumstances to pray"; but rather, "Teach us *how* to pray." That "how" indicates the mechanics. The disciples were crudely familiar with them, but perhaps when they compared their own lives with the unblemished and majestic Christ, they concluded that *they knew nothing about* the "how-to" of talking with the Almighty!

Paul, a specialist in heavenly petition, said concerning prayer, "For we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26). The NEB puts it, "We do not know how we ought to pray." The MLB renders it, "For we do not know what or how we ought to pray." If, in his inner-

most being, the great apostle did not know either *what* or *how* to pray, how much more should these humble, unlearned fishermen and daily laborers come up with a request that was more a confession than a query!

Perhaps it is even astounding that being so acquainted with His miraculous powers the disciples, in their staggering path to fellowship, did not simply ask Jesus to give them the power to pray or to lay His hands upon them, instilling within them the mechanics of a devoted life of prayer! However, their not making these requests says far more for Jesus than for the disciples; it tells us that His emphasis on the growing, enlarging spiritual life was having its impact upon them.

If anyone could teach other men how to pray, if such can be instilled by the process of communication, surely it was the humble but divine Galilean who could do it. He who spent all night in prayer, He who went apart to pray (sometimes onto a mountain, at other times into a garden), He who in His final episode of agony so petitioned that His perspiration became as great drops of blood falling to the ground would be the greatest teacher of prayer.

## II. A CONCEPT ANNOUNCED

Jesus began His model prayer with the concept that prayer is a child approaching a Father. His initial emphasis was upon the One whom they were to address. The very first word reminds us that in prayer we are coming, not to one

from whom gifts have to be unwillingly extracted, says Barclay, but to a Father *who delights* in supplying His children's needs.

In Hebrew the name meant much more than merely the title by which a person was addressed. The name meant the entire character of the person as it is revealed and known to us. David said, "They that know *Thy name* will put their trust in Thee" (Psalm 9:10; italics mine).

In saying His name, far more is involved than simply knowing that His name is Jehovah. Reference is deliberately made to the entire character, mind, and heart of God.

To the newborn child in the kingdom, Jesus says God is *Father*. He said, "Begin by saying, 'Father.'" The Syriac was "Abba," signifying intimate recognition and relationship (Galatians 6:4).

Then, in the prayer, Jesus proceeds to cover all of life: the present needs, the pressing circumstances, and the daily demands. But observe that before anything is asked for ourselves, God, His glory, and the reverence rightfully due Him come *first*. One is not fully ready to make petition until he recognizes who God is.

J. B. Phillips in *Your God Is Too Small* has emphasized by his title that, to many, God is too little. Some want "God in a box." They want to be able to control God. This view deifies man and humanizes God. God is very much God, and we are feeble, oft arrogant, and quite erring human flesh. Jesus, God's Son, urges us to approach the Ancient of Days, praying thus, "Our Father, who art in heaven. . . ."

Jesus said, with near distinguishable jubilation to His humble but expectant disciples,

And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full! These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs: but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I will shew you plainly of the Father. At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you: For the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God. I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father (John 16:22-28).

Their reply, as if they must have understood at last, was this: "Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb" (John 16:29).

## CONCLUSION

One is never ready to pray until he entertains the proper concept of God in his own heart. But it was this great accomplishment Jesus came to obtain in our behalf. Let us, therefore, draw nigh (James 4:7, 8; Hebrews 4:16) and know that even as He said to His disciples, because we have been made accepted "through the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6), "the Father himself loveth" us!

—Stanley E. Sayers

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