

WHY DOES
GOD
ALLOW
WAR?

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Man in the Presence of God

1 TIMOTHY 2:8

“I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

OF ALL THE ACTIVITIES in which the Christian engages, and which are part of the Christian life, there is surely none which causes so much perplexity, and raises so many problems, as the activity which we call prayer. This is true at all times. But it is especially true during a time of difficulty and crisis—whether this crisis concerns the devastation of a nation in war, or the devastation of a personal tragedy. Such suffering causes many to ask why it is that God does not hearken unto our prayers and intervene in the midst of tragedy. It is one of the first questions, therefore, that should engage our attention.

In a time of stress and difficulty men and women turn instinctively to prayer. They are conscious of the fact that their

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fate, and the fate of those who are dear to them, is in the hands of powers greater than themselves. They feel that they cannot control events and circumstances as they believe they can in normal times, so they turn to God. Most people think of God and remember the possibilities of prayer when they are in desperate need, however little and however infrequently their mind may be turned in that direction at other times. They need something, and they need it urgently, so they turn to God and plead with Him to grant their request. They expect, and they wait. They are more actively engaged in a religious sense than they have ever been before. They may or may not have been formally religious, and they may have expected little from religion. But now they pin their faith to it and expect great things. And all in terms of prayer. Thus it comes to pass that there is always much talk and writing concerning this matter during a time of crisis. That alone should make us consider this question. But there are two further practical considerations that compel us to do so.

There is no aspect of the Christian life, I sometimes think, concerning which there is so much loose thinking and writing and speaking. That is largely due to the fact that those who approach it do so in the way we have indicated. They rush into prayer impelled by their need, without any real thought or study concerning the nature of prayer. And often they are encouraged to do so by teaching which seems to suggest that all they have to do is to pray, and all will be well. Thus high hopes are raised and great expectations are encouraged, and all ideas as to any conditions which have to be observed are entirely ignored. All this of necessity leads to trouble. The

prayer is not answered in the way that the suppliant desired; indeed, events may take an entirely contrary course. And, at once, the persons concerned are not only cast into a state of doubt and perplexity, but often into a condition of active criticism of God, leading finally to a loss of faith. This has happened to large numbers of people during times of war. They had prayed for the safety of their sons or for some other particular matter. The request was not granted, as they thought, and the result was that they lost their faith, and, nursing this grievance against God, they have ceased to be interested at all in religion. It is probably the experience of most pastors that they have had to deal with questions concerning the nature of prayer, and the problems that arise as the result of disappointment in connection with the matter, more frequently than with any other single question. There are other general questions which are raised by calamities such as war or personal tragedy, with which we hope to deal subsequently. But the problem of prayer must come first, because it is so frequently the practical question that gives rise to so many of the other questionings. The time for us to think and to prepare is before we are in the midst of tragedy or suffering. When feelings are hurt and susceptibilities wounded, it is difficult to do anything.

Before we come to the actual exposition of our text, it is well that we should consider certain of the commoner errors with respect to this whole question of prayer.

One of the commonest causes of difficulty, and of disappointment, is that far too frequently we approach this matter solely in terms of answers to prayer. Prayer is regarded as a

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mechanism which is designed to produce certain results. We need something, and we believe that all we have to do is to ask for it and that God will grant us it. We do not stop to think of how we are to approach God, and whether we have any right to do so. The idea of worshipping God and of adoring Him does not arise at all. We do not consider our respective positions or remind ourselves that He is “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity” and that we are altogether sinful—our very goodness and righteousness being but “filthy rags” in His presence. The thought of listening to God and of waiting in His presence does not occur to us at all. God is but some agency to whom we can turn just when we desire to do so, and whose main function is to grant our requests. When we compare our prayers with those which we find recorded in the Bible from the lips of Moses, Daniel, Isaiah and the Apostles, and especially when we observe the order and place given to actual petitions in the model prayer taught to the disciples by our Lord, is it not clear that we tend to leave out what is most important, and primary, and concentrate only on petitions and the gratification of our personal, selfish desires? This is why, of course, the prayer life of so many is fitful and spasmodic in normal times, and becomes urgent and regular only in a time of desperate need.

Closely allied to this is another tendency, namely, to think overmuch in terms of what God ought to do. We have seen already that we fail to stop to consider the nature of God in the matter of our access to Him. And in the same way we fail to consider His nature and His infinite wisdom before we make up our minds as to what God ought to do. We do not

hesitate to assume that what we think is right must of necessity be right, and that therefore God ought to grant us our requests in the precise form in which we present them. Alas! how infrequently do we pause to consider what God's will may chance to be with respect to any matter. How often do we try to contemplate the various possibilities, and to envisage what may be God's will in any given situation? How often do we seek by prayer to discover and to know the will of God? Instead of asking Him to do His will, instead of turning to Him and saying:

*“Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
However dark it be,”*

we simply ask Him to do our will and to carry out our desires. Instead of humbling ourselves before Him, and asking Him to reveal His will to us, we often come near to commanding God, and to dictating to Him what He should do. It is because we have already settled in our minds what must come to pass that we are so filled with chagrin, and so ready to doubt the goodness of God, when it fails to take place. This is true not only of our personal prayers, but also of our prayers with respect to our country, and perhaps our prayers with respect to the condition of the world at large.

Another very common source of trouble is to be found in the way in which we tend to draw general and sweeping conclusions from reports of answered prayers of which we read in the Bible, or elsewhere in the literature of the Church. The trouble is, that we concentrate all our attention on one aspect

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of the matter only, and entirely ignore the other which emphasizes the conditions that must be observed in all such cases. We read of a man like George Müller or of some other Christian saint. We observe that all he had to do, apparently, was to make his request known unto God. He prayed, he made certain requests, and they were answered. There seemed to be no limit whatsoever to God's readiness to give and to respond. The prayer was offered, the answer came. We jump to the conclusion, therefore, that we have nothing to do but to pray and to make our request known to God. And when we do not receive the precise answer desired we are vexed, and hurt, and begin to doubt God. The whole trouble, of course, is entirely due to the fact that we have failed to observe the conditions. We have not noted the difference between the life lived by Müller and our lives. We have entirely missed the fact that he felt that he was called of God to exercise this particular ministry of prayer and faith, and that he knew it to be his main mission in life to tell for the glory and the grace of God in that particular way. We have not noticed that the actual answers, and the receiving of the precise replies, were secondary matters to Müller, and that his primary concern was always, ever, the glory of God. Indeed, we may not have troubled even to notice the struggles through which he passed, and the rigid discipline which he imposed upon himself. And what is true of Müller is true of all others who have received such striking answers to their prayers. We desire to receive all the blessings which saints have received; but we forget that they were saints. We ask, why does God not answer my prayer as He answered that man's prayer? We *should* ask, why is it that I have not lived

the type of life which that man has lived? But in addition, as I have hinted, there is such a thing as a special calling to a ministry of intercession. Among “the diversities of gifts” which are dispensed by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul mentions “the gift of faith”—surely this special faith which manifests itself through the medium of prayer? Were we but to realize these things, I fear we should often discover that in many of our requests we have been guilty of presumption.

One other matter to which we must refer, is the failure to discriminate between true answers to prayer and circumstances which may simulate answers to prayer. This is a very difficult subject and one concerning which we need to speak with caution. And yet it must be faced, were it merely for the reason that those who are often most guilty at this point are amongst the most spiritual of religious people, and are most concerned to tell forth the wonders of God’s grace to others. This is most natural. They desire to offer to others living and actual proofs of God’s direct intervention in human affairs; they long to display unmistakable tokens of His love. They are ever always on the look-out for instances and examples of this. How easy, therefore, to fail to discriminate as they ought! And yet the New Testament in its teaching exhorts and urges us to do so. It tells us to “prove all things” and only to “hold fast” to “that which is good.” It tells us that there are evil forces and powers at work in this world which are so clever, and so powerful, and so subtle in their attempts to imitate the works of God that they succeed almost in deceiving “the very elect” (Matthew 24:24). Signs and wonders must be examined, and must be sifted, lest in our zeal we may at times attribute to God

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what is in reality the work of the devil. But, to deal with this matter on a more practical plane, is there not a danger at times of our confusing between mere coincidence and answers to prayer? Then there are the strange phenomena of telepathy and mind-transference and that whole realm which we are only just beginning to explore. It may be argued that God guides the thought of one person to another. Whether He does so or not, that is not what the Bible means by answered prayer. Neither is it what has always been accepted as the true view of this matter, which teaches that God takes action, and not merely that He directs our activities. Then there is the whole question of psychic phenomena and the problem of spiritism or "spiritualism." It is idle to deny certain well-attested phenomena, but it is vital that we should realize the nature of the agencies that produce the phenomena, and that we should be able to discriminate between the manifestations of evil spirits and the gracious working of the Holy Spirit. I have not even mentioned the power of suggestion, and the importance of an accurate medical diagnosis in reported instances of cures as an answer to prayer.

The whole subject is involved and difficult, and, to many, it may savor of unbelief that such questions should be raised at all. And yet, in the light of New Testament teaching, they are vital. Jewish exorcists and the purveyors of the art of black magic could do extraordinary things. Jannes and Jambres could enter into competition with Moses up to a point. Nothing tends to bring the gospel more into disrepute than extravagant claims, or claims which can be dismissed on natural or other grounds. I would not hesitate to say that we

should be careful to attribute to the direct intervention of God only that which we have entirely failed to account for by any other hypothesis. Failure to do this will inevitably lead, eventually, to muddled thinking, which in its turn will lead to disappointment and sorrow.

These, then, are the common sources of error and of trouble. We have considered them at such length, on the principle that the exposure of the nature of a trouble is more than fifty percent of its cure. Positive instructions alone are not sufficient. But, having considered the causes of the trouble, we see clearly that one great principle emerges. And that is, that nothing is of such vital importance in connection with this whole matter of prayer as the question of the right approach. It is because we are wrong here that we are wrong everywhere. We blame God, and ask our questions. The real trouble is that we have not faced ourselves. If only we did so, half of our questions would never be asked at all; or at any rate we would be able to answer them ourselves.

Now our text deals with this very question of the approach. That is why it is so important, at such a time as this, that we should study it carefully and observe its teaching. Once we discover how to pray, how to approach the whole matter of prayer, the question of what to pray for will more or less look after itself, and the vexed problem of answers to prayer will be already solved. What I say to God in prayer is entirely subordinate to the way in which I approach God. What I am and what I have done before I begin to speak to God, are of much greater importance than my actual words. I am to concentrate, not on my prayers or the answers which I desire, first and

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foremost, but on myself, and on my right to pray at all. How are we to pray? What right have we to pray? St. Paul's answer is, "I will therefore that men pray everywhere lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting (or disputing)." There we have the conditions which govern the activity called prayer which we must look at briefly.

I. The first condition is that we are to lift up "*holy hands.*" We are not now concerned about the question of posture in prayer, nor to indicate that the Jews generally stood and held up their hands to God when they prayed. We shall not tarry with the fact that it was a Jewish custom to wash their hands before they took part in an act of worship. That was merely the external symbol used to emphasize the principle that the apostle is anxious to stress. The clean hands, the "holy hands," are indicative of, and represent, a holy character. That must ever be the first question in any approach to God. "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." "God is of purer eyes than to behold evil," and cannot "look on iniquity." There is nothing which is so utterly contrary to the whole teaching of the Bible as the assumption that anyone, and at any time, without any conditions whatsoever, may approach God in prayer. Indeed, the first effect of sin, and the main result of the Fall, was to break the communion that obtained between God and man. Man, by sin, has forfeited his right to approach God, and, indeed, were he left to himself he never would approach God. But God in His wondrous grace has made a way for man to approach Him. That is the explanation of all the teaching concerning offerings and sacrifices in the Old Testament, as it is also the explanation of the cere-

monial of the tabernacle and the temple and the Aaronic priesthood. Without these things men could not approach God. We can commune with him only in this way and according to His dictates. There is no access otherwise. But, above and beyond all that we find in the Old Testament, the whole meaning of the coming, and of the life and death, resurrection and ascension, of our Blessed Lord is that they provide us with “a new and living way” into the very presence of God. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” Obviously, therefore, the first matter we have to consider when we approach God in prayer is our own sin. The first question must be, how can I approach God? What right have I to do so? To the Christian, the answer comes at once that “the blood of Jesus Christ” is an atonement for our sin, and cleanses us from it, and enables us to approach God. But that does not mean, that because we have believed in Christ, we can therefore live as we please and still find the way open to God. Because we still sin, and are sinful, we need to repent and ask for forgiveness anew. And repentance is not merely sorrow for sin, it is not mere remorse. It is a godly sorrow which includes the element of hatred of sin, and a determination to forsake sin and to live a holy life. In other words, this realization of the need of cleansing, and this determination to keep “our hands” holy, are essential to our approach to God, and obviously therefore take priority over any question relative to answers to our prayer.

This is frequently emphasized in the Bible. You remember how the Psalmist puts it? “If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18). He means, that if he

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harbors sin in his heart, and refuses to be done with that sin, he really has no right to expect God to listen to his prayer. If his own heart condemns him, He who searches the heart and tries the spirit is certain to do so. But take another illustration. Do you remember that significant word spoken by God in Jeremiah 15:1? Jeremiah was praying for his people, and this is what God said to him, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be toward this people: cast them out of my sight, and let them go forth.” Why Moses and Samuel? Because they were holy men. It is as if God said to Jeremiah, “Even though the best men who have ever stood before Me pleaded for this people, I could not grant their request.” There is a similar word in Ezekiel 14:14, where we read “Though these three men, Noah, Daniel and Job were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.” Again the explanation is the same. There is a beautiful illustration of the same point in the account of the healing of the blind man in the ninth chapter of John’s Gospel. The healed man was being examined and questioned by the Pharisees, and they were trying to get him to say that Jesus could not have healed him because He was “a sinner.” The man replies, “Now we know that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth His will, him He heareth.” Still the same emphasis, still the same stress on the vital importance of “holy hands” if we expect our prayers to be answered. And, then, we remember the well-known word of James, “the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Fervency of spirit, and a deep desire, are not enough. It is “the righteous man” who has

a right to expect the results he desires. The promises of God are never without conditions. God has not promised to grant us all our requests unconditionally; and the first condition is ever this one of the “holy hands.” It is only as we seek to conform our lives to His pattern, and determine to live according to His holy will, that we are really entitled to pray to God at all, and to bring our petitions to His throne. Are you still tempted to ask questions about God, and as to why He has not answered your prayer?

II. The second condition is “*without wrath.*” It is most important that we should realize the exact meaning of this word “wrath.” It does not mean what is usually suggested to us by the common usage of that word. It does not mean so much anger, or the expression or manifestation of anger, as an unloving disposition—not a violent outburst of temper, but rather a “settled condition of ill-will and resentment.” Here, the emphasis is not upon the way in which a man regards God, and approaches Him, but on the way in which he approaches and regards his fellow-men, his neighbors. Added to this, perhaps, is the whole question of a man’s spirit—not only his actions, but also his outlook and his attitude towards others, and towards life. How vitally important this is! And how tragically we all tend to fail at this point. Often there is a feeling of resentment in our hearts even against God while we are actually praying to him. We feel that we have a real grudge and a genuine complaint. We feel that we have been wronged. And yet we feel that we are dependent upon God, so we ask Him for favors. We feel that he is against us, that He is not fair to us, and yet, in that state and condition we ask

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Him to bless us, and we expect Him to do so. God says of the children of Israel, “this people honoureth me with their lips but their heart is far from me.”

This same spirit also shows itself in our attitude towards our fellows. It may be a feeling of bitterness, or envy, or malice, in our heart, or a refusal to forgive them for some wrong, real or imaginary, that they have done us. And yet, though that is our attitude towards them, we expect God to forgive us and to grant us the desired answers to our petitions. Here, again, we are utterly and entirely condemned by the teaching of the New Testament. You remember the words of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount? “Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee: leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.” Again, in the Lord’s Prayer we are taught to ask that God may forgive us our trespasses “as we forgive them that trespass against us.” And then there is that parable recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (28:23-35), where our Lord, describing the wicked servant who, having received forgiveness himself, refused to forgive the servant who owed him a debt, sums up His teaching by saying, “so likewise shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.” It is a terrifying thought, but it does seem to be perfectly clear and evident that those who take up an aggrieved attitude towards God and the whole world, when things go wrong with them and against them, and their prayers do not seem to be answered, were never really in a position to pray to God at all. They even

refuse to forgive God (terrible, blasphemous thought!); and yet they are the first to complain about unanswered prayer. “Without wrath.” The spirit that alone entitles us to expect God to hearken to our prayers and petitions, is that which is described so perfectly and in such detail in the thirteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. If we are slaves, we must not have a feeling of wrath towards kings and all who sit in authority; and if we have enemies, we must not hate them, but love them. The rule is “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” “Without wrath.”

III. The third condition is described as “*without doubting,*” or, if you prefer it, “without disputing.” The reference is not to disputing with others, but to disputing with oneself. It denotes a state of wavering and uncertainty, or, perhaps, even a state of actual intellectual rebellion. The doubt may express itself in many different ways. It may be doubt with respect to the very being of God; doubt, to use the words of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, as to whether “God is.” It is remarkable to note how many people pray without ever settling this first and fundamental prerequisite to prayer and its possibilities. Others, while being quite clear on this matter, are in a state of doubt with regard to the goodness of God, and of God’s readiness and willingness to hearken to our prayers. This is a matter with which we hope to deal at greater length in subsequent considerations of this general question of God’s ways towards men. But, here, we must indicate that it is surely obvious, if we but take the trouble to think for a moment, that

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such a state and condition on our part renders our prayers useless. And then there is often doubt with respect to what we may call the power or the possibility of prayer, as to whether anything can happen or ever does happen, in a word, whether there is any point in our praying at all.

As a result of these doubts, whether only one of them, or all of them together, it often comes to pass that prayer is nothing but some desperate adventure or doubtful experiment in which we engage. We find ourselves in a difficult position, or face to face with some dire need. We know not what to do, or where to turn. Then we remember that we have heard about someone who prayed to God, and had a marvelous answer. So we decide to pray, to try the experiment, in order to see whether it will succeed with us also. We have not thought the matter out thoroughly, we have not stopped to consider all the conditions to which we have referred; we more or less “cry out in the dark,” on the possible chance that it may succeed, and we may be delivered. In that state of doubt and skepticism, and, indeed, at times, of actual disbelief, men often pray to God; and when their prayers are not answered, and their desires are not satisfied, they grumble and complain, pronounce religion to be useless, and take umbrage against God. Unless we observe this third condition, prayer is useless. We must approach God believing “that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” Prayer is not meant to be the doubtful experiment that may lead to faith and belief; it is rather the expression, and the outcome, of a faith that not only believes in God, but is also prepared to trust its all to Him and to his holy will. To pray to God in order to

discover whether prayer works or not is an insult to God. And there can be but one outcome to such an experiment. The men whose prayers have been answered have always been those who knew God, those who have trusted Him most thoroughly, those who have been most ready to say at all times and in all circumstances "Thy will be done," assured as they were of His holy and loving purpose. There must be no doubt, no disputing, no desperate experiments, but rather a calm and unhurried resting upon, and in, God and His perfect will.

These, then, are the conditions. Do you not agree, as you consider them, that the surprising thing is not that God at times does not answer our prayers as we desire Him to do, but rather that He should ever hearken unto us at all, and grant us any of our requests? Let us, then, resolve to put these principles into practice while there is still time. The acute crisis may come at any moment, and we may feel the need of prayer. Let us cleanse our hands, purify our spirits, and be established in our faith. And then, in the hour of our greatest crisis, we shall not be making a doubtful experiment, but rather turning to One of Whom we can say with St. Paul, "I know Whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." The answer may not always be what we had desired, but we shall be enabled to see that ultimately it was that which was best for our souls. And, in any case, we shall have learned to be more concerned about the glory of God than the gratification of our own desires.