

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Stool (A Praying Stool) - the servant's need for communion

Good morning and welcome to this last talk on the room made ready for Elisha, the servant of the Lord, by a rich lady of Shunem. The account is found in the 2 Kings 4:9-10. On previous weeks we have considered the table provided and the servant's need for food and clothing. Then we considered the bed provided and thought about the servant's need for rest. Last week our thoughts were centred on the candlestick in the room and the servant's need for light and guidance. This week we shall be looking at the stool provided, a prayer stool, and how Elisha communed with his Master and God. His daily walk with the Lord must have included times when he sought the presence of God, and so I repeat, again, that the servant's need and desire for communion is our subject today, because what was true for Elisha must also be true for us. If we believe in, and seek to serve, Elisha's God, who is, we believe, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not only do we need guidance, rest and light, but, also, our desire and delight should be our communion with Him.

One of the incidents in Elisha's life concerns the son of the lady who made the room available to the prophet. From 2 Kings 4:18-20 we learn how her only son died: "And when the child was grown, it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers. And he said unto his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad, Carry him to his mother. And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died."

Obviously, in such circumstances, the mother was greatly distressed and sent for Elisha. We continue the narrative in verse 33: "[Elisha] went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the LORD."

Notice from this latter verse how Elisha closed the door to the mother, leaving himself alone in the room with the body of the child and then prostrated himself in prayer.

My first point is that sometimes communion with God requires us to close the door on the busy world and its cares, so that we can be alone with God. I emphasise the word 'sometimes' for we shall see from Elisha's actions in a later chapter that he did not always need to be alone before he spoke with his God. On this occasion, however, he was and we can learn something from his good example.

Years later the Lord Jesus also recommended that we should be alone when we prayed, though this was primarily to avoid hypocrisy. I read His words from Matthew 6:5-6: "But when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

There are many other Scriptures that could be quoted to reinforce my point that often it is a good thing to be alone with God. The experience of many Christians over the years would support the necessity of making time, preferably every day, to be in prayer before the Lord. I shall return to that point again in a few minutes.

What I want us to notice is that Elisha had a specific problem that only God could deal with and his first action, once he had arrived at the house where the dead child was, was to be alone with God. Two incidents from the Old Testament would confirm the example of Elisha as one to follow. If we read Genesis 28 we see how Jacob left Beersheba, when he was fleeing from his brother, and fell asleep as he rested on his journey. There then followed a most amazing dream in which he was convinced that God communed with him. So sure was he that he called the place "Bethel", meaning "house of God". It was a lonely spot, but in Jacob's subsequent history it was always a sacred place. Unlike Elisha, Jacob was not seeking God's presence and that is a lesson to us. God is sovereign and will make Himself known to His servants when He desires.

Later in Jacob's life there was another episode where he received a revelation of God. This time I shall read from Genesis 32:24, then 27 to 30: "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day ... And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said; Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he

blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

From this rather long quotation I want us to notice that this life changing incident occurred when Jacob was alone.

Many of us lead busy, hectic lives with almost every minute of our waking hours filled with some activity or other. Believing Christians who wish to be disciples and servants of the Lord Jesus must have time to commune with Him. A "Wayside Pulpit" poster from a few years back had a message that is still relevant. "If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy."

As we need to cultivate such a habit of making time for God, another example from the Old Testament will be used. This time it is Moses, the great leader of the Israelites. When he answered the call to lead the nation he was serving as a shepherd in the desert. We learn this from Exodus 3:1-4: "Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I."

Notice again from this quotation that Moses was alone. This is not to say that when we spend time alone that God will appear to us in such a dramatic fashion. We must remember that we have the final and complete revelation of God in the Person of the Lord Jesus. The Spirit of God, who will take of the things of Christ and reveal them to us, dwells in every believer. This does not, however, do away with the need to spend time quietly in the Lord's presence.

One last illustration, though in this instance from the New Testament, that recommends we make time for fellowship and communion with the Lord.

This passage is from Luke 10 where the context is a visit to a house in Bethany where two sisters lived with their brother Lazarus. We shall read verses 39 to 42: "And [Martha] had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered, and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

When I was younger I used to think that Martha had cause to complain. Now I realise that the Lord was inviting Martha to participate in what was considered in those days to be a privilege for men only. She was being taught that worship, communion and fellowship are for all believers. The point remains, however, that if our service takes up all of our time we are too busy. Time spent in prayer and communion with the Lord is not wasted time.

We move back now to Elisha to examine the second occasion on which he prays. We find this in the 2 Kings 6:15-17: "And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha."

On this occasion Elisha is anything but alone and in quietness. Instead he is faced with an invasion by an army of the King of Syria. So, surrounded by the invaders with a distressed and worried servant by his side, he prays that his young servant might see the resources of God that are available to them.

My second point, therefore, is that we do not always require a quiet room or desert place in which to pray. Many of the Lord's servants have learned that in the midst of a busy working day we can offer a prayer of supplication, or thanks, confident in the assurance that He hears. The Apostle Paul, on his way to Rome, endured a terrible storm that eventually wrecked the ship in which he was sailing. In Acts 27:21-25, we read: "But after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me."

From this long quotation we learn that God was communing with Paul, giving him confidence and assurance, in the midst of a very dark trial. When the storm, that lasted many days, was at its worst, Paul was obviously able to spend time in prayer with his Lord. So this should be a lesson to us. As Elisha shut himself in the prepared room to be alone

with God on one occasion, so he could pray and seek God at a different location, when under severe pressure. We, like him, should not feel there is only one pattern for prayer and communion with God.

I wish, in the few minutes remaining this morning, to glance into the Book of Psalms, to glean a few helpful thoughts from the psalmist's desire for fellowship and communion with the LORD. Many of the psalms, being the experiences of real people in everyday life, are special because they contain the longings and aspirations of the soul for the living God.

Psalms 1 brings to our attention some of the factors of the man in tune with the infinite greatness of God. Verses one and two state: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night."

There are positives and negatives in that quotation which we must take note of. We cannot commune with God in the pathway of sin and unbelief, because sin and unbelief are abhorrent to God.

There is also an indication of the necessity for the Scriptures to be part of the equipment necessary to commune with God. The psalmist desires to meditate "in his law both day and night." It is possible in our scientific age to fall into the trap that the Bible has nothing to offer the soul that is seeking the presence of God. Forty years ago, transcendental meditation was a method that was advocated to bring one in touch with the infinite. Christians then did not move away from Scripture and neither should we today. Time and again the psalmist would refer us to the Word of God as a way into the presence of God.

Psalms 119 is another example for us, this morning, of the importance of the Scriptures, as we seek to absorb the lessons of the richness and wonder of communing with God. It opens with the point that we have already made, that we cannot seek the presence of God while we walk in the pathway of known sin. Verse 2 goes on to state: "Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with their whole heart."

Notice the inclination towards God. It would seem as if the psalmist has a bias towards God that causes him to seek the Lord. This is not a natural bias, rather is it the grace of God that inclines our attention heavenwards. It is also a whole-hearted effort. So many of us are part-time in our affections. If we are not serious in seeking the Lord, our experience of Him will be less than that described by the psalmists and the New Testament writers. The Apostle Paul's desire was to know Him and the power of His resurrection. Is ours any less?

We have just sufficient time to glance at the longings for the presence of God, expressed in a couple of other psalms. Psalm 42 begins with evocative thoughts from a pastoral scene: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?"

These verses contain the intense longing for God's presence, a longing that CS Lewis calls an "appetite for God". Notice also how the psalmist's longings increase in intensity. First it is for God, then the 'living God'. No thought of dead idols here, yet we in the church are sometimes persuaded to regularly exchange the prospect of spending time in prayer with the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to watch television or to attend a sporting event. The psalmist had such longings for God that no other experience could replace.

There is also, in verses 8, 9 and 10 a word of warning: "Yet the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the day-time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life. I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?"

It is possible, as these verses have just told us, to lose the sense of the Lord's presence with us. Here, the oppression of the psalmist's enemy caused him "to go mourning". Never doubt that the enemy of souls, the devil, will seek to destroy your prayerful communion with the Lord Jesus. Also expressed in verse ten, is the thought of those in our generation who will mock and cause us to doubt. Many of our contemporaries say to us, "Where is your God?" There are many who do not believe in our day and generation. In such circumstances, let us remember the past actions of God, in that He gave his only begotten Son so that we might have everlasting life. Let us encourage one another to press on, and not to doubt.

The work of redemption, accomplished by the Lord Jesus in His death and resurrection, can never be undone. The Apostle John wrote that in Him was life. It was true in his day and it is still true in ours. The Lord also said that people in His day would not come to Him that they might have life. I trust that all who are listening to this broadcast this morning are amongst the many that have come to Him and received that abundant life.

As time has almost gone, we must return to our theme of prayer and communion. Wherever we look in Scripture we find injunctions to pray, and examples of godly men and women who prayed and sought the presence of God. All of Paul's letters contain references to prayer and, on occasions, even the very prayers that he prayed for the Christians he was writing to. This brings me to a simple, yet practical, question to ask each one of us this morning. How much time will I spend in prayer this day?

We seem to have travelled far from the event with which we began this talk, of how Elisha met with God, in the room that the woman of Shunem prepared for him, so I wish to close with his example before us. Some of the psalms with their experience of God were being written while Elisha lived. They could be describing his thoughts and aspirations. We read how his first action, when presented with the pleas of the dead child's mother, was to close the door upon the world and immerse himself in prayer. I believe it was a habit of life for him to pour out his cries for Israel's blessing and for the sons of the prophets with whom he worked. It is in the act of true, sincere prayer that many battles are won.

Regarding this I want to quote a Christian writer, whom I respect, concerning the praying men and women in the church today: "I am sure that someone who prays has come your way, and today your life is richer for his coming; and you have sometimes wondered how it is that his life is so fresh and fragrant, how it is that his influence is so constantly beneficent. It is this: while we have been busy preaching sermons on prayer and singing beautiful hymns on prayer he has been praying. He is a man of prayer."

I wonder if a fellow believer in your church, or fellowship, could think that about you or me? I pray that something of the example of Elisha, and the words of the psalmists, become vital portions of our experience with God, as we seek to walk the pathway that is pleasing to Him.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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