

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

A Place to Stay: A Place for Prayer

The whole world had just turned upside down, twice! Now it was wobbling again. Less than six weeks ago, Jesus' disciples had been shocked and scattered by His execution. The man they had abandoned their homes and professions for and had come to believe was the promised Messiah, sent from God to save Israel, had been nailed to a cross and put in a grave. While their minds were still reeling, as they considered what this meant for them personally and their understanding of whom Jesus was, the world inverted again! Jesus was risen from the dead! It took some time for the eleven disciples to grasp that this really had happened. Then, filled with joy, they began to listen to their Lord's explanations of what all this meant and what they themselves were now being commissioned to do. This time of instruction had lasted for forty wonderful days, but now Jesus had departed again. He had returned to heaven. They were now alone and had the overwhelming task ahead of them of being Christ's witnesses "to the end of the earth". They had not yet received the indwelling Spirit who would provide the power needed for this great task, so what were they to do now? We read in Acts 1:12-14, "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey. And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers."

We can see from these verses that there was no need for discussion about the best thing to do. The obvious thing to do was pray, so they went to a suitable place for prayer and did just that; they prayed!

This morning we will look at our subject of 'A place for prayer' under five main headings:

1. The Primacy of Prayer
2. Persevering in Prayer
3. Public Prayer
4. A Place for Prayer
5. The Privilege of Prayer

1. The Primacy of Prayer

We have just seen that the job at the top of the disciples' 'to do' list was prayer. How often we have different priorities! I am reminded of the story of a man who had a few problems in his life. Some of those problems were significant but many of them were rather trivial, and some were imaginary. However his problems consumed all his attention to the point of self pity. His friends did many things to help, and tried to encourage him to get his problems in perspective. One day, after they had done all that they could and had become rather exasperated with him, they said, "Now all we can do is pray about things and leave it to God." "Oh dear!", the man replied, "I didn't realise things were as bad as that!" For this man, prayer was a last resort for the desperate; something you only do when you have exhausted all other possibilities. Is my attitude closer to that of the disciples or to the man in this story? By the word primacy I mean that prayer is a matter of first importance. I am not trying to set up a hierarchy where prayer is more important than bible study or holy living. What I am saying is that prayer is so integral to the whole of the Christian life that it must be treated as a matter of first importance. It is simply not possible to neglect prayer and still continue to live an otherwise healthy Christian life. Prayer is our vital connection to the God we love and serve and, without it, everything else will quickly wither and become lifeless. I do not mean that we cannot carry on formally doing Christian things without prayer.

I could carry on studying the Bible for years without ever praying (indeed I suspect some theologians do exactly that!) but I would not draw closer to God by doing so. Without prayer, Bible study may increase my knowledge of the text, but it will never bring me into lively communion with the God who is the author of that text, or transform my life in conformity with what He commands. I could try and live a moral life without prayer, but if I lose the regular connection with the God who provides the power to live in ways that please Him, I will soon become a hypocrite or fail to live righteously. I could teach other people about Jesus and what the Bible says, but if I am not praying to Him, what I teach will be empty words that are losing their effect on me, and so will have little effect on those I am teaching. I

could carry on, but I think I have made the point. Prayer is central to the whole Christian life and must have a prime place in my schedule and my list of priorities.

2. Persevering in Prayer

We read from Acts 1. “[They] all **continued** with one accord in prayer and supplication.” They **continued**. It was not something they did once and then gave up. Nor was it something they returned to sporadically, once a month or so, when they were not too busy with other things. Prayer needs to be a determined, ongoing commitment. I chose the phrase ‘persevering in prayer’ for this section, not just because it begins with the letter ‘P’, but because it suggests that prayer can be hard work and we need to keep plugging away at it. That sounds rather unspiritual when you phrase it that way. Perhaps we think that a spiritual person ought to find prayer a constant, effortless joy. Surely prayer is not meant to be hard work or need perseverance? Jesus Himself told a parable in Luke 18 with the purpose that “Men always ought to pray and not lose heart.” This parable is about a woman who persevered in her requests to an unjust judge and finally got her request granted. It is not meant to teach us that God is reluctant to give us what we want and needs to be constantly pestered. Rather, it teaches that if even an unjust judge can be persuaded to do what is right, our loving Father in heaven will certainly do great things for His own children. Nevertheless, those children may sometimes need to persevere and should not lose heart when they do.

We must also remember that to pray is to enter into spiritual warfare. It is no coincidence that the description of the Christian’s armour in Ephesians 6 ends with the believer, “praying always with all prayer”. It is perhaps a little trite to say that prayer is a source of amazing power, but it is still true, and we are not the only ones who realise it! Just before his description of the armour, Paul talks about how we “wrestle against... principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” These beings realise that prayer is a great power against them and their plans, and they oppose it however possible. Do not be surprised if you always feel tired when it is time to pray, or something urgent comes up, or you just don’t feel like praying. Don’t be surprised either when your own natural selfishness makes it difficult to pray regularly and feelingly for other people, and their spiritual and material needs. Satan’s workers and your own weaknesses will combine to make prayer hard work at times. You must be like the disciples and persevere.

3. Public Prayer

No doubt the disciples prayed privately in their own homes, but the verses we read in Acts describe them meeting together with women, including Jesus’ mother Mary, and Jesus’ brothers also present. In other words this was public prayer. The New Testament has many exhortations to, and examples of, public prayer. It is clearly an important part of church life. Let’s look quickly at some things that are more important when we are praying out loud in front of others than when we are praying alone.

- a) Clarity - Public prayers should be clear. You are praying on behalf of other people and they must be able to make out what you are saying if they are to add their ‘amen’ at the end. This means speaking clearly rather than mumbling. The first few times you pray in public your nerves may make you talk too quickly and too quietly and to lose track of what you are saying. Everybody will show patience to a nervous beginner, but make it your aim to speak slowly enough to be clear and loudly enough to be heard. Clarity also means being clear in the way you express yourself. A prayer meeting may not be a public speaking competition, but people should not be left wondering what we are talking about, or lost in complicated sentences that the speaker seems unsure how to end! Keep your sentences short and clear. Stick to the point and be brief. If you think through what you are going to say before you get to your feet you are much more likely to be clear and concise.
- b) Unity - When you are praying in public you are praying on behalf of all those present. It is a good idea to say “Father, **we** pray for your wisdom”, rather than “**I** pray for your wisdom”. This follows the example of some prayers recorded in the Bible and reminds you, and others, that you are all praying together. You should normally be praying for things that are the concern of the whole company you are with, not just your own private concerns.
- c) Remember who it is you are addressing - I have stressed the need for others to hear and understand your prayers but it is essential to remember that you are still speaking to God. You are not addressing the congregation. Your prayers should not be an excuse to tick off the other people in the room while pretending to talk to God. “Lord, please forgive John for insulting me this morning” is not a suitable public prayer! While sometimes your prayers might refer to doctrines from the Bible, and you will want to try and be accurate in what you say, public prayer is not an opportunity to deliver a sermon in disguise! God will not be fooled; nor are the other people in the room likely to be either. Finally, avoid praying to achieve the largest number of loud ‘Amens’. You are supposed to be speaking to God with others overhearing - not the other way round.

4. A Place for Prayer

Let's consider the topic of private prayer for a few minutes. We will never learn to pray effectively in public if we do not have a place in our lives for regular private prayer. Of course, Christians do not need a special, holy place to pray. We do not need to visit a temple, or even a church. We do not need to face towards Jerusalem or even have a prayer mat. Anywhere, any time is appropriate. But this does not mean that we should not set aside regular times, when we deliberately go somewhere quiet for prayer. You need to be away from whatever the distractions in your life are. A ringing phone, demanding children, jobs around the home; you need to take a step away from them all and consciously come into the presence of God. Another reason to be alone somewhere quiet is that praying out loud is a very useful way to avoid the big problem of 'mental drift' that we all experience when praying alone. We have all prayed something like this: "Heavenly Father, I am so pleased to be able to speak to you this morning about..." "Now what was I meant to remember to do before work this morning? Hang on, I'm drifting!" "Er, Father I want to thank you..." "That's it, post that application form..." And so our minds seem to keep leading us anywhere except towards God. I have never met anybody who does not experience this problem, and it very often keeps our prayer times short and unproductive. Simply saying the words quietly as we pray them can be very helpful. It helps maintain concentration and makes it very clear, very quickly when we are drifting. It is not a magical shortcut to a better prayer life but it is a handy tool to focus your praying and help you pray for longer without drifting. The very fact that you pray longer and more coherently will improve your prayer life in ways that will make you want to pray more, because it is starting to feel valuable and worthwhile, and this will improve your prayer life further. In this way the strength and breadth of your prayer life grows steadily, as should other elements of your Christian life. Indeed, as we have already noted, your prayer life is so closely integrated with the rest of your Christian life that it will be feeding them and helping them to grow too.

I cannot stress strongly enough the need for regularity and planning in prayer. I am not suggesting that we should not pray unplanned, short prayers as things crop up in our daily lives. That kind of prayer is vital, but it is no replacement for regular, planned times of prayer. Rather if we have regular prayer times and prayer has become a happy, good habit, we are much more likely to find that many incidents in our life are reasons for short prayers. In this busy 21st century, with all its pressures and multiple opportunities to be sidetracked by TV, internet, games etc, I can guarantee that if you have not scheduled time for prayer you will not pray. Prayer is like eating or sleeping; it is vital to health and needs to be done regularly. We have scheduled times to eat and sleep. Sometimes they are moved by circumstances we do not control, and we might occasionally have to go to bed late or even sometimes miss a meal, but we will make sure that we catch up at some other point, or our health will quickly suffer. It is the same with prayer and spiritual health.

5. The Privilege of Prayer

In my second section I stressed the way in which prayer can be hard work and the need to persevere. In this last section I want to balance that by looking at how prayer is an enormous privilege and something that we should regard as a great blessing from God.

If we don't think prayer is a privilege then we have forgotten who God is! If the Queen invited me to a garden party, where I might speak to her for thirty seconds, I would consider myself highly honoured. MPs have been accused of taking large amounts of money to ask questions in parliament on behalf of businesses, because they have access to a powerful place: the UK parliament. When a new president of the United States is sworn in, all the other heads of state around the world want to be the first person he calls, or invites to Washington, because he is such an important, powerful man. Just think for a moment how much greater God is than all these people and organisations! God has authority over all rulers, and puts them in place and removes them at His will. God not only has all information about the present, He has total knowledge of the future as well. In fact He plans and determines the future. This is the God that we know as our Father and the one that we are invited to speak with in prayer - freely, whenever we choose! We are not invited to try and manipulate God, to get Him to give us what we want. In any case, who could manipulate a God of total power and with total knowledge of all our thoughts and plans? We are invited to enter into **His** plans and to simply enjoy the pleasure of His companionship. What would be the greater gain and honour: if I could get President Obama to back my plans to reform the local rubbish collection system in my village, or if he invited me to join him in reforming the economy of the United States? I am not expecting any phone calls from the president, but I do have an open invite from the Almighty God!

The opportunity for honesty with God in prayer is also a great privilege. The writers of the Psalms are often very frank in their exchanges with God. Job was the same. It is one of the advantages of a stable home life that we can go back to our spouse, or parents and be honest about how we feel. We no longer have to be the poised professional or diplomatic listener. We can tell our close family that we are tired, frustrated and fed up, without worrying that it might damage our career or our reputation. We can actually be even **more** open with God. Perhaps you think you need to put on a special, spiritual attitude before you can speak to God and that you need a special prayer vocabulary as well. A few moments reflection will show how silly this is. The one person whom it is impossible to fool with unreal spiritual

pretensions is God. He is the only one who can look straight into my heart and see exactly how I feel and what I am thinking. I might as well be honest and tell Him what He already knows! If I am feeling hurt, or even abandoned by God and shabbily treated, I had better simply say so. In fact this is the only way to move forward to better feelings and thoughts. Perhaps your prayer might be something like this, "Father, you already know I am feeling hurt and bitter and I don't have much desire to pray to You just now. I don't want to feel this way and I know that You can change me from the inside. Please show me Your love and increase my desire to change." You might then need further honesty with God about your feelings and actions but now you will be starting to truly communicate with the God of the Bible and not just saying words you don't mean because you feel that it's your duty.

The kinds of words you use will not add anything extra to your prayers. We should always show great respect for God and that might be reflected in the words we use, but any attempts to use a special kind of language that results in us focusing on the words we are using rather than the Person that we are addressing, will only hinder our honesty and freeness in prayer. God is fluent in Hebrew, Greek, German and Elizabethan and modern English and all other languages. Speak to Him in the one you are most fluent in!

How can prayer be both hard work **and** an enormous privilege, surely they sound like contradictions? The reason for them being in tension is the nature of the universe we live in and our relationship to it and to God. Prayer is an enormous privilege because it puts us in touch with the magnificent, all-loving, all-powerful, all-satisfying God. It is one of the privileges brought to us as part of the new relationship we were brought into when Christ became our Saviour, our sins were judicially removed and we were given a new life. Prayer is hard work because we live in a universe that is still subject to sin and the curse. There are sinful spiritual powers. Most human beings are still unconverted and therefore, at some level, enemies to God and His children. We still have sin present in our own hearts, and will have until we get to heaven. We will always have this tension in our prayer life while we are on this earth. We must make sure that we enjoy the privilege, and commit to the work, more and more as we progress in our walk with God.

It is my prayer that this morning's talk will help encourage and improve your prayer life.

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