

"Editorial on Prayer"

E. J. Waggoner

Concerning Prayer

"Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Ps. 50:15). Thus saith the Lord; and what He says in this place is repeated many times in the Scripture. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

A Forcible Illustration

Immediately following the above statement, we find a striking illustration of God's willingness, nay, His anxiety, to answer prayer: "If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?" (Luke 11:11). There can be but one answer; no real father would deal so heartlessly with his child. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" (v. 13).

Are We Better Than God?

The foregoing illustration is something that parents especially can appreciate. Whenever any one who is a parent feels despondent, and thinks that God does not care for him, let him ask himself. "Why should I think myself better than God? I would not think of refusing my children any good thing that lay in my power to bestow; but I am selfish even at the best, and even my best wishes for my children are limited by my lack of resources; God, on the contrary, is infinite love and compassion, and has power to perform whatever His love prompts; therefore **as surely as I live I know that God does hear my prayers!**"

The Great Provider

Think further of the illustration here given. The parent is not only willing to supply the child's needs, but provides for them beforehand. The child never thinks of food until it is hungry. Suppose now that the parents likewise had not thought about providing food, until the child's request brought it to their attention; then the child would be obliged to wait, and would suffer hunger. But such is never the case. Long before the child thought of eating, the parents were at work providing something against the time of need. This is the work of parents, to look ahead, and provide for their children's wants. Even so it is with God. He knows what we need, so that, as the child to the parent, we come to Him, not to let Him know that we are in need, but to take what He has before prepared for us. **Our asking is not to make Him willing to give, but to show our willingness to receive.**

What It Is His Will to Do

God wishes that we should be saved from sin, that we should receive eternal life; and, as the greater includes the less, He also wishes that we should have all things

necessary for this life. "Godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). In His Word God has made known His will. The commandments show that it is God's will that we should live righteously, that we should love Him supremely, and our neighbor as ourselves.

But how can we attain to all this? The question is easily answered. "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14–15). We can not begin or continue our own lives, either in this world or the world to come; but God can, and it is His pleasure to do so; if therefore we are willing to accept God's good gifts, then we may know, without any shadow of doubt, that we have them whenever we ask for them; and if we "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), then we are always in possession of every good gift.

Do We Weary Him?

"Well, isn't it tiresome continually to be asking for what we need?"—That depends on whom we ask. The parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18), was given to teach us that "men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). The judge feared not God, neither regarded man, and so when a widow asked redress for her wrongs, he paid no attention to her for a while. But afterwards he thought that his ease might be disturbed much more by her repeated requests than by complying with them, and so he granted them. If we read no further, we should not be encouraged to pray always and not to faint; for even if we did not become discouraged after a few unheeded petitions, and give up without receiving the thing desired, we would at least say, "I will not ask any oftener than I am absolutely obliged to." But God is "faithful and just" (1 John 1:9), not unjust; He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7), and desires our welfare far more than we do. What then?—"And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily" (Luke 18:7, 8).

The parable is a contrast

If the unjust judge, who had no regard whatever for men, would grant a request simply that he might not be further disturbed, how much more will God grant the request of His chosen ones, with whose failings He is so long-suffering? He will not keep them waiting; nay, "He will avenge them speedily." "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). **In spite of the fact that everything, not only in the Bible, but in God's open book of nature, speaks of God's readiness and parental anxiety to give good gifts, it is a rare thing to find people with faith enough to continue asking and receiving.**

Why Persistent?

“But why continue to ask, if God is so ready to give?” unbelief asks. “What means that statement that God’s elect cry day and night to Him, if He is so willing to give?” How ready and seemingly anxious people are to make God out as unfeeling, and the way of life hard! **God’s people cry day and night to him, for the very reason that He answers them so speedily, not even waiting till they have done speaking.** “I love the Lord, because He has heard My voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, Therefore I will call upon Him as long as I live” (Ps. 116:1–2). Because he inclines His ear to us, bending over toward us, so as not to miss the faintest whisper, and even anticipates our words, because He reads the heart’s desire, and knows what we would ask for far better than we know how to express it, we are encouraged to keep calling on Him continually. **This is why we can always pray and not faint: God does not weary us by keeping us waiting.**

Wrong Ideas of Prayer

But when we go no further in the consideration of prayer than to agree that God answers prayer, although that is a good thing to know, it is far from a true realization of what prayer really is. **We speak now, of course, of sincere prayer.** *We speak about God’s hearing us, when the question really turns on whether or not we hear God.* In our ordinary thought and talk about prayer, we seem to have the idea that we speak first, and that our part is to call God’s attention to us. That is a step in the direction of the heathen idea, that they must awaken their god, so that he may be conscious of their presence. It is this idea, more or less fully developed, which holds many people back from God. They fear to approach him; they fear that they will be intruding on his time and patience, and they have no courage to ask an audience with him, regarding him much as they would an earthly autocrat, only infinitely greater and therefore proportionally unapproachable. If it were indeed the case that we must approach the throne alone, and ask to gain an audience with God on our own account,—if we had to take the initiative—then it would indeed be presumptuous for us to think of it, and we might well shrink from the trial. **But the fact is, God has spoken first; He has called us to Him, and therefore instead of its being presumption for us to approach and speak to Him, it is rudeness in the highest degree if we turn away and say nothing. Common civility demands that we reply to a fellow-man when he speaks to us; how much more should we give heed and reply when God speaks to us.**

Hearing God Speak

God speaks to us, and gives us forgiveness, righteousness, everlasting riches. When we come to Him in prayer, it is only because He has called us to Him; it is only to take what He has already said He freely gives us. **The question is not, therefore, whether God will hear us, but whether we will hear God; and true prayer consists more in listening than in talking.** Therefore it is that Christ tells us not to use vain repetitions, or an overflow of words, as the heathen who think that they shall be heard for their much speaking - “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do.

For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him" (Matt. 6:7, 8). God has called us to Him to receive rich gifts, and He says: "Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live" (Isa. 55:3). But since it is a fact that God has spoken first, that He has made known His will to us, and that true prayer is our response to His gift, with thanksgiving for what He has given, it necessarily follows that a study of God's will as revealed in His Word is necessary to prayer. He who is best acquainted with God's will, can pray best.

Ask for Great Things

But what if we should ask too much? Is there not danger of presuming on God's generosity, overtaking it?—No fear whatsoever. **He is able, and therefore willing, "to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).** And when we hear His voice, that gives us so many good things, and come to Him, and receive them at His hands, what shall we give in return? That is just what the Psalmist asked, after God's readiness to hear had made him determined to call upon the Lord as long as he lived. "What shall I render to the Lord For all His benefits toward me?" (Ps. 116:12). That is a most natural question, and the inspired answer immediately follows: "I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord" (v. 13). How shall I pay the Lord for what He has given me?—By taking more. That is the only way. "But then I will owe him more than before!" Certainly, and so are you under obligation to take more than before; and as you are in duty bound to pay your debt by taking twice as much as before, so you make your debt four times as large, and in order to pay it you must now take eight times as much as before, and so on in endless progression. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

The Signs of the Times :: (October 21, 1897).