

REACHING CHILDREN

By

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CHAPTER THREE

TEACHING THE CHILD TO PRAY

STRETCHED out before the teacher is the "*beautiful garden of prayer*" - a sunny, eastern slope with lofty heights and many lovely nooks and dells.

In her hand is placed that of another, not a full grown man who has seen it all before, but a tiny toddler, a precious little child.

It is her glorious privilege to introduce this place of wonder and beauty to the child. She will not expect her little charge to exhaust its wonder in a day - ah no, they will make many trips before even a part of this garden is traversed. For the child is very small, and he has never been this way before.

Besides, his little legs are weak, and as she would use patience and love in teaching him to walk physically, she uses just as much patience in acquainting him with this beautiful garden.

No matter what his actual age, spiritually he is just a new-born child of GOD. She will not be discouraged if he can only take a step or two at first. She will not give up if he forgets just where that beautiful flower grew that she showed him the day before; but over and over again she will show him some small thing, then lead him a bit farther day after day, until soon he has grown to love the garden, and can come to it even when she is not with him.

The entrance to the garden is the gate of salvation.

Only the redeemed ones, born-again children of Father GOD are permitted inside. [71]

She does not make the mistake of trying to show the garden of prayer from the outside through this gate. The child, being so small, could not see over the wall, and soon it would grow very dull to him, even if he should pretend to walk its paths. But once he has entered through faith in CHRIST JESUS, even though he gets only a little glimpse, he wants to come again and each time the garden grows more precious to him.

THE FIRST PRAYER

Ideally, the child makes his first prayer as he enters the gate to the garden.

That is when he accepts CHRIST as his personal Saviour.

GOD's Word says that the way into the holiest, the very presence of GOD, is through the blood of JESUS. **"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh"** (Hebrews 10:19, 20).

The mere repetition of words is not prayer.

Reciting by rote does not necessarily gain the audience of GOD. True prayer is coming into His presence through the Blood of His only Son; audible words may or may not be used. So in teaching our little ones, let us bring them by the right way unto Him in prayer.

It is so easy to teach them correctly in the first place, but much more difficult to train them after they have been instructed erroneously. Let us remember that this discussion concerns the child in the meeting, not the child in the home.

For by the time he is old enough to come to meetings, he is generally old enough to be brought to the Saviour. Thus the child's first prayer, through which he enters into the beautiful garden, is that one in which he receives JESUS CHRIST as his own Saviour. [72]

This prayer is not difficult, and should not fill the worker with apprehension, for it is merely talking to GOD and asking for His salvation.

The teacher makes the children understand what it is.

The word "pray" or "prayer" may not even be mentioned.

For the average child a mysterious something with which he is .not familiar is brought to mind along with this vocabulary. Of course, these words are introduced as time goes on, but we must take care not to frighten the child or he will be afraid to take this first step.

Other suggestions are given in the chapter "*Inviting the Child to CHRIST.*"

If you had never seen a group at prayer, would not the sudden bowing of heads, and closing of eyes arouse your curiosity?

Be one jump ahead of the child who is always curious. Tell him in advance what is going to happen, and then he will not be curious.

"When we talk to JESUS, we bow our heads (teacher bows her head), and close our eyes (teacher closes her eyes), and think about JESUS, for it is to Him we are talking."

Then the teacher has the boys and girls follow her example. If these instructions are given every

time before prayer with the smaller children, they will soon learn to have a quiet, reverent attitude. Some would ask, should we have the children kneel? The answer is to lead the child a step at a time. If you try several, he may stumble.

One group of children were earnestly listening as their teacher explained salvation. She had them kneel, and the experience was so new and different that they became occupied with it, and started to giggle. [73]

It was only with difficulty that she recaptured their attention. It might have been wiser to have waited to teach them this physical position for prayer.

THE PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

The entrance to the garden is so close to the flower of thankfulness that the second prayer may follow close on the heels of the first.

The child's thoughts are already centered on what CHRIST has done for him, thus it requires little effort to get him to say "thank you" to the Saviour.

This is a flower that the little child loves to visit. Somehow it seems that it does not appear so lovely to the older ones.

I have seen a group of twenty Primary and Beginner children drill with eagerness as they were asked, "Who would like to thank JESUS because He died on the Cross for us?" Twenty little hands would go up, and no one was satisfied until all twenty little hearts had thanked their dear Saviour.

It was not just once, but time after time these dear little tots stopped before the flower of thankfulness and enjoyed its beauty one after the other. Cannot we adults, so eager to get to the place of petition, learn a lesson from these little ones?

"Oh, that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" (Psalm 107:31).

Yes, we have His goodness in the sunshine, our parents, our food, and in various physical blessings, but we must not forget to teach the child to thank Him because we are His children, because He has forgiven our sins, because He is going to take us to Heaven, and because He answers our prayers. [74]

Remembering our "step at a time" rule, mention only one of these at a time, or if you wish, mention several, and let each child choose with you before prayer time the one for which he wishes to thank the Lord.

Children do not understand a "season of prayer," therefore we go around the entire group in an orderly manner mentioning the child's name before that one prays, or having the child who wishes to pray next, raise his hand.

THE EMERGENCY PRAYER

After the prayer of thanksgiving, teach the child the emergency prayer - that short prayer in which the heart is lifted to GOD in time of need.

- The prayer of sinking Peter is an example of this.
- The hard place in which the Israelites found themselves as they faced the Red Sea was depicted to one class of children.

"There was a mountain to the left, a mountain to the right, the sea in front, and behind them came the onrushing Egyptians. They did not know what to do. They were in a hard place. The Bible says they cried unto the Lord. That means, children, that they prayed. The Lord rolled the waters back and made a dry path right through the Red Sea. They were safe from the Egyptians. Now, this next week some of you children may be in a hard place - we cannot tell. If you are, will you remember to ask the Lord to help you? Next week we will ask you to tell about the hard place that you were in and how the Lord helped you."

In one class the following week little Ralph, a freckled-faced red-haired mischief of eight spoke up:

"Well, I was in a hard place. Our neighbors lost their dog, Shep, and they called and called him, and he didn't come. [75]

He was a good dog, too. I hunted and hunted for him, but I couldn't find him. Finally I thought, Why, this is a hard place, I'll ask JESUS to help me: And so I did. Then I went right over a little hill, and there was Shep. JESUS really helped me."

Now that child has experienced a definite answer to prayer, and it will not be so difficult for him to voice an audible prayer.

Little Dorothy reported, "I was in a hard place, too. My tooth was loose, and Daddy wanted to pull it, but I was afraid. I asked JESUS to help me, so I wouldn't be afraid, and He did. Then I let my Daddy pull it, and it didn't even hurt."

It is the desire of the Lord not only to have these boys and girls, but to enter into every part of their lives.

The pulling of a tooth, or the finding of a lost dog is very real to a little child, and if he finds the Lord sufficient for these things, he will trust the Lord as he grows older.

PRIVATE PRAYER

Coming to the "garden of prayer" with the teacher is precious, but coming all alone is infinitely sweeter.

A fragrance comes from the lives of those who have this habit which others do not know. Even a child is not too young to form the habit of coming regularly to the Lord in prayer. What power

there would be in our churches today if all the members were accustomed to spend time alone with GOD every day.

There is no better story to introduce this new step than the age-old one of Daniel.

Daniel, who prayed regularly. Daniel, who was not afraid of the officers who sought his downfall. Daniel, who would rather pray and be thrown to the lions, than not to pray. [76]

What an example of courage and bravery!

What a hero to present to young worshippers!

And then to bring home the story. "Will you pray every day? No one will throw you to the lions, but someone might make fun of you. Will you be brave enough to stand against that and still pray? Or will you be a coward, and quit? Or will you say, 'I'm too tired tonight.' That's not being brave. I hope everyone in our class will be as brave as Daniel was."

In seeking to develop regular devotional habits in the believing child it is well to employ a prayer chart.

The teacher may make these previously, or the children may make them in a handwork period.

Use colored construction paper as the base.

Paste at the top a picture suggestive of prayer, such as Daniel in the lions' den, CHRIST in Gethsemane, or the boy Samuel at prayer.

Rule a piece of white paper to resemble a calendar, but omit the numerals. List the days of the week at the top of this white sheet over the proper squares. Punch two holes in the top of the construction paper, and use yarn or colored string through them so that the chart will hang on the child's bedroom wall.

Each night the child marks "P" in the proper square if he prayed that day. He draws a circle around the "P" if he read the Bible.

Although this is a very simple device, the teacher will be surprised at the interest it will arouse in regular prayer and Bible reading.

The chart serves as an ever-present reminder against the old excuse, "I forgot."

Gordon was only eight years old, but he had made a prayer chart in Sunday school. [77]

His mother said to the teacher, "It doesn't make any difference how late it is, or in how much of a hurry I am, Gordon simply will not go to bed until he has read the Bible and prayed."

The little books, "*Daily Bread*," by Ruth P. Overholtzer, are ideal to use in a planned devotional program for children.

Each book contains an appealing reading for each day in a month, with suitable stories and poems illustrating Bible verses, especially for children.

Of course, nothing takes the place of the Bible.

The private devotional life of a Christian is the basis for his growth.

Therefore, let us do everything in our power to firmly establish this habit in the lives of our saved children in order that they will stand true to the Lord in spite of trials and temptations.

PUBLIC PRAYER

If the suggestions already given have been followed, the child has:

- prayed publicly upon receiving CHRIST as his Saviour,
- he has prayed again publicly thanking JESUS for saving him,
- he has turned to the Lord in time of emergency, and
- he has prayed by himself at home.

By now he is more or less familiar with the mechanics of prayer, a foundation has been established, and the child is ready to proceed.

It may take a period of several weeks to arrive at this point if there is only one contact a week with the child. But do not make the mistake of trying to build without this foundation, for it simply will not stand.

In seeking to lead children in prayer it is better to make the step that you ask them to take so small that you are reasonably sure that they will respond in the way you desire, rather than making such a big step that the children would be afraid to try. [78]

This truth cannot be overemphasized.

Do not expect too much at once, but have your goal in mind and proceed that way slowly, but very definitely.

I believe that there is no great truth of the Bible or of the Christian life that cannot be taught to children if this is kept in mind.

Review is implied here to a great extent.

GOD said, "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isaiah 28:10).

In having public prayer in a class there should be some definite reason for it.

A classmate who is ill, a child's father who needs work, and friends and relatives who are not saved, are all suitable subjects for prayer.

At first it might be well to have one request and let several who desire pray about it.

Later on the children themselves may bring the requests and the teacher appoint or let different children take certain requests to the Lord in prayer.

Remember that this is the children's prayer time, and only those things that are real to the children should be prayed about.

If the teacher desires that the children pray for some missionary friend, this person and the field should first be made real to the children by means of letters, pictures, stories, etc.

Children generally do pray in faith, and we have available a great power for GOD if we would train our saved children to pray for the Lord's work.

It must also be remembered that adult prayers before children should be suitable. Paul says that we are to pray "**with the understanding,**" but how can this be if the adult prays with a vocabulary foreign to the understanding of the, child. [79]

These prayers should be simple and short.

As the children grow in grace the prayers may be a trifle longer, but as a rule they should be kept short.

If you have someone visit your class who is known for his long-winded praying do not honor him by asking him to lead in prayer. It will throw cold water on the child's interest. Honor him some other way.

As the children grow in grace even prayers usually voiced by an adult may be entrusted to a child.

Think what agony these children will be spared if when older someone calls suddenly upon them to lead in prayer.

THE MEALTIME PRAYER

The story of JESUS feeding the five thousand is an example to give to the children in establishing the practice of thanking the Lord for our food.

Possibly many children come from homes where this Christian practice is not observed, but where the parents would not be antagonistic if their pride and joy were to make the suggestion that he thank GOD for the food.

Besides establishing the children, this gives a definite testimony to parents who need it.

Make the suggestion to the older children when they are no longer afraid to pray publicly, and at the next meeting inquire as to what success they had.

The younger children might pray with the teacher through the day's meals after the class is over. They could mention what they had on the table for breakfast, and one child could thank the Lord. Enough meals could thus be pretended to give each child a chance to return thanks.

No one knows the effect these simple prayers will have carried to unbelieving parents. [80]

Sometimes for variety the following verses may be used as mealtime prayers.

The second goes with the melody of the Doxology.

GOD is great and GOD is good, And we thank Him for our food,
By His goodness all are fed, Give us Lord our daily bread.

We thank thee Lord for this our food,
For life and health and every good.
Let manna to our souls be given,
The Bread of life sent down from Heaven.

ELEMENTS IN PRAYER

We have discussed the occasions for prayer, but a few words on the elements of prayer might be suitable.

Worship, thanksgiving, petition, confession, and communion are all elements of prayer.

Most of these have been mentioned, but one or two need further developing.

Worship

The spirit of worship is necessary to true prayer.

Too many children's meetings are of the "hip, hip, hurrah" variety, with no thought given to true worship.

The leaders should be enthusiastic, and keep the interests of children in mind, but each meeting should have a time of quiet worship.

One way which was most helpful in fostering this spirit in several groups was the use of the prayer chorus.

Public prayer was held at a regular time in each meeting, but before the prayer, heads were bowed, eyes closed, while the piano softly accompanied muted voices singing a quiet chorus. Then the room was still while all the hearts listened when one or several led the group to the throne of grace. [81]

There was no hush-hushing of the group to get them quiet enough for a hurried prayer. The

chorus had brought about a reverent spirit of worship. There are many such choruses. Search through your chorus books for one appropriate to your group. Use this chorus only before your prayer, not at any other time, except while learning it. Always sing it softly and reverently, and you will find a true spirit of worship will prevail in your prayer time.

One we used with great effect is to the tune of "*Into My Heart*." The author of the words is not known.

Out of my life, out of my life,
Shine out of my life, Lord JESUS;
Shine out today, Shine out alway,
Shine out of my life, Lord JESUS.

Thanksgiving and Petition

For a discussion on the second element of prayer, see "*The Prayer of Thanksgiving*" at the beginning of this chapter. Petition is also discussed under "*The Emergency Prayer*" and "*Public Prayer*."

In addition, the children should be taught:

- to ask in JESUS' name, John 14:13, 14;
- in faith, Mark 11:24;
- recognizing the Father's will, I John 5:14, 15;
- making definite requests, John 14:14.

To encourage them in faith, tell them of your own answers to prayer, and the answers that other children have had.

Encourage them to tell in class when GOD answers prayer for them.

Confession of Sin

Just as we need to teach the child to thank the Lord and ask Him for his needs, so we also must teach him to confess his sins to the Heavenly Father. [82]

I John 1: 9: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

During a junior girls' handicraft class several girls seemed to be quarreling. As the days went by their spirit became worse, and different ones began to tattle to the teacher. None of the tales agreed, but knowing that these girls had publicly accepted CHRIST, the teacher knew that this spirit of anger and bitterness should not exist. Each one tried to tell her side, and the bickering almost spoiled the class.

Finally the teacher drew each of the four girls into an adjoining room, and handed each a Bible. "Now, I don't want to hear each one of the sides of this quarrel. That would not do any good at

all. But I want us to see what GOD has to say. Let us turn to Ephesians 4:31, 32. Mary, you read it to us.

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as GOD for CHRIST's sake hath forgiven you."

"Now the Lord says," went on the teacher, "that there are five things that He wants put away from you. Alice, tell us what these five things are."

Alice read the list in the passage.

"I am afraid, girls, that these things have been very much present in our class. What do you think? Have you been guilty?" The little heads which had been so erect as each owner was so sure she was right, began to droop as the HOLY SPIRIT did His work.

"Now the next verse says that we are to forgive others even if they do things that are wrong. The reason is that CHRIST has paid for their sin. Therefore, we must not hold it against them. [83]

If we do not forgive, we are disobeying the Lord, and we will be unhappy. How many of you have disobeyed Him?" Four little heads drooped lower as four little hands went up.

Then they all turned to I John 1:9 and the teacher explained that we must not just confess all our sins, but that we must tell the Lord what they are. Each girl admitted that she had sinned, and told the teacher she wanted to ask the Lord to forgive her. A time of prayer followed, with each child taking her guilt to the Lord. After this, those four girls became bosom pals. Instead of quarreling about their handiwork, they were always helping one another. The most ardent disputer confided to the teacher, "Everything is so different now. I'm happy, and those girls are my best friends."

Teachers do not always have such a situation in which to teach confession of sin, but there are many that might unconsciously be passed by. Every time that the truths of the Christian life can be applied to the child in his actual experiences, those truths will be much more real to him than those he learns in theory only.

Through the gate of salvation the teacher has led the child into the "beautiful garden of prayer."

It has been a wonderful privilege, for the wonders and glories of this garden are never to be exhausted even if one should spend a lifetime there. It is enough that the teacher should introduce the child to this place and make him sufficiently acquainted with it, so that he will come there by himself; for then the Head Gardener will lead him into paths of communion large enough only for two, so sweet and so precious that they are not seen if another is there. [84]

~ end of chapter 3 ~
