

THE FELLOWSHIP

An Exposition of First John

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN -

THE PRAYERS OF THE FELLOWSHIP

I John 5:14-17

14 And this is the confidence that we have in him; that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:

15 And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

THE Epistle is hurrying to its close. There have been occasions while he has been writing when, looking back upon what has already been said, John tackles again subjects already dealt with, enlarging the treatment of the matter or underlining it for the sake of stressing its importance. That is what happens in these verses. He has already spoken of the supreme ministry of prayer; and now, that the members of the Fellowship shall realize to the full the power and the privilege of it, he takes it in hand once more.

ITS TWOFOLD EFFECT

There are those who would say that it has no effect at all. Yet that was not what Moses found, nor David found, nor Elijah found, nor Daniel found, nor Nehemiah found, nor Paul found, nor Epaphras found, nor the church found, nor - may I add - what CHRIST found. All these, and many others then and since, down through the years testify to the intrinsic worth, and immense work, of prayer. "**This is the confidence that we have in Him**" (14), would be the common testimony of a myriad saints. What, then, does prayer do?

Its subjective effect - in our own heart and being, keeping us fresh, according to Isaiah 40:31, "**They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint**". The mountain-top breezes of prayer, so dear to the heart of our LORD, Who so often "**went up into a mountain**

apart to pray", Matthew 14:23 - how invigorating they are.

The open windows of prayer, as practiced by the intrepid warrior, who "**his windows being open . . . he kneeled upon his knees . . . and prayed**", (Daniel 6:10) - how symbolic of the freshening of spirit brought by this exercise of the soul. Freshness, yes; and strength, too, does prayer bring to our hearts.

Archbishop Trench's words are still so true:

"We kneel, how weak; we rise, how full of strength,
Why, therefore, do we do ourselves this wrong,
And others - that we are not always strong?"

If this were all that prayer does, how well worthwhile it would be; but it is not all.

Its objective effect - it obtains things from GOD; it gets things done. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the chief instrument for getting GOD's will done on earth. Oh, says some unbeliever - who, incidentally, has never prayed properly, and so knows nothing about the matter - this universe has been so constituted by Nature (as he puts it) as to be governed by Law, and your prayer cannot alter that.

Laws: how true - and all the various laws subserve each other, work in with each other: the law of magnetism counteracting the law of gravity, for instance.

Laws: how true and the law of prayer is one of them. The incontrovertible experience of the saints is, that GOD does things because of prayer that He does not do without it. What is the use of the objector saying that prayer accomplishes nothing, in the face of the work of George Mueller and his great Orphanage. Beginning in a small way, it grew to great proportions - so that during the space of something like sixty years, he clothed, fed, educated, and cared for some thousands of children, and gathered in nearly two million pounds for the doing of it.

He made it his rule never to advertise, nor to ask anyone for a penny; but simply to tell GOD, and ask Him for all supplies. He and his workers adhered to that rule through all that long period - and all their needs were supplied, whether in the day-by-day necessities, or in the matter of bigger demands. Simply and solely by prayer.

Talk about "pennies from heaven" - pounds, too! Now that is a dramatic example of the workings of the Law of Prayer. How many stories could be told of GOD's answers to prayer - for Provision, for Guidance, for Strength, for Protection, oh, and what not. Even, at times, about the weather, James 5:17-18.

It is this objective side of the matter that is the theme of this passage - as is evidenced by the word employed, "**we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him**" (15). And here again, as he deals with the subject, John does not fail to indicate that the "**any thing**" of our verse 14, like the "**whatsoever**" of 3:22, is dependent upon conditions.

Putting the two passages, indeed the whole Epistle, together, we may say that the governing

factors of successful prayer are - Being: that is, "**born of God**". Obeying: "**because we keep His commandments**". Dwelling: "**we dwell in Him, and He in us**". Knowing: "**according to His will**". Then, simply, Asking: for the definite thing. So comes the Receiving: "**we have the petitions**".

One author says that "the believer would not make his own any prayer which is not according to GOD's will. And since he has made GOD's will his own will, he has all he truly seeks in immediate and present possession. [Note Mark 11:24, "**What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them**", though the visible fulfillment may be delayed.] That is, as it seems to me, a very profound statement. Yes, if we ask, He will do.

Here is another amazing potentiality belonging to the members of the Fellowship. Now look at something else.

ITS TWOFOLD ASPECT

Two different words are used here, to describe different kinds of prayer. The distinction is not unimportant; and any point that leads us to a wider and deeper understanding of this mighty ministry is infinitely worth-while, isn't it? Some of us Christians are content with just "saying our prayers" every morning and night, a habit which can be full of earnest reality, but which also can degenerate into a mere formality.

How marked an influence we could exert upon our friends and neighbours, and right across the world in distant lands, if we were to engage in a ministry of unhurried intercession, at some regularly adopted period of the day or week - getting alone with GOD in the quiet, perhaps with a map of the world before you, perhaps with a street directory of your own district; and thus go from place to place, and pray. Who can measure what might be accomplished in this way.

It was thus that an invalid lady brought D. L. Moody to Great Britain. Listen afresh to your MASTER, "**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 . . . shall reward thee openly**", (Matthew 6:6).

We spoke just now of the Open Window of prayer; here it is the Shut Door! Well, what about those two words we mentioned? They are both here in the passage before us.

The Ordinary Word - is the one that is most often used for prayer. It is the one that is, in this passage, translated "**ask**". It is used in the familiar passage of Matthew 7:7, "**Ask, and it shall be given you**", and in many other places. One might almost call it the subordinate's word. It represents the plea of an inferior to a superior, a pupil to a master, a servant to an employer, a subject to a king, and so of a man to GOD. When we come to GOD in prayer, we must always remember that we are speaking to the All-mighty, the All-holy, the All-highest - anything other than uttermost reverence is altogether unbecoming in the suppliant at the Divine throne.

Except for one thing, it would be impossible for man to approach GOD at all. That one thing is, that GOD Himself has taken the initiative - He has opened the way, He has granted the audience.

And so, for our encouragement, we read, "**Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the Blood of Jesus**", (Hebrews 10:19), the ground of access. And, "**Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need**", (Hebrews 4:16), the use of access.

Thus, in all humble dependence, yet in bright hope, because He has bidden us come, and "**ask**", we members of the Fellowship can gladly exercise our privilege, and intercede.

The Out-of-the-Ordinary Word - now calls for our attention, It is used in our passage but once, and is there translated, "**pray**" (16). This word is used of the requests of an equal to an equal; and is the one employed when speaking of the LORD's praying to His FATHER. That first word, of the inferior, is never adopted concerning His approach to GOD. The study of the use of words in Scripture is most fascinating; and it confirms one in the old belief in the Divine verbal inspiration of the Bible.

Now, the amazing thing is that GOD allows some people, sometimes, to speak to Him in this more intimate way almost on an equal footing. He has no favourites, but He has intimates - shall we put it, those who have an absorbing love for Him, for any other condition is wrapped up in that. Such people have an entree to the presence and ear of GOD that is peculiarly near; and while normally, like the rest of us, they "**ask**" in the ordinary way, there are occasions, times, subjects, in which they may "**pray**" in the closer fashion, as friend with Friend, John 15:14, as beloved son with FATHER.

Take a prince of the Royal House - he will make his requests to his father in a twofold manner. Sometimes as to the King, when he will "ask", as the inferior subject of his Sovereign; but sometimes, in the privacy of the family, he will "pray" him, on equal terms, as the son of his Sire - but always with the respect due to the exalted station of the monarch. It is a faint picture of the dual prayer relationship that our GOD has graciously allowed His intimates.

It naturally follows that the inner prayer can seek for further things, deeper things, greater things, than the ordinary prayer - Do you not think that George Muller's intercession was in this holy category? But - there is sometimes a limit even to this kind. Why did Abraham cease in his intercession as he did? Because he had reached the limit - GOD terminated the interview, "**the Lord went His way**", Genesis 18:33.

No, Abraham, you must not pray for Sodom to be spared. Here is the same principle in our passage. Whatever be the nature of this sin, GOD declares through John, "**I do not say that he shall pray for it**" (16). No, not even that special, intimate prayer shall seek for that. One is reminded of that sore judgment, "**Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone**" (Hosea 4:17). Let him alone! "**I do not say that he shall pray for it.**" Thank GOD, Ephraim's backsliding was eventually "**healed**" (14:4), because" Ephraim shall say, "**What have I to do any more with idols**" (14:8). The sin must take its course, "**let him alone**" - until his repentance and GOD's mercy, shall coincide for eventual blessing. Oh, how GOD hates the sin, oh, how GOD loves the sinner!

And now note concerning prayer.

ITS TWOFOLD OBJECT

For Ourselves. It is reassuring to know that we may "**ask anything**" (14). It may be a very foolish thing; but GOD is able to sort things out, and if that request be not good, He will, in His answer, give something ministering to our well-being. He saw it was foolish of Paul to seek riddance of his "**thorn in the flesh**", so He gave him instead grace to bear it, II Corinthians 12:7-9. It may be a very material thing; but GOD is interested in our material welfare. Yes, "**anything**". He will not chide us for our wrongful asking, but, moulding His provision to the shape of our request, will grant us as is "**according to His will**".

So may we "**ask**" in "**confidence**" - not in our eloquence, not in our fervency, not in our merit, or desert; but "**that we have in Him**". He has undertaken to listen, He has promised to answer; and we confidently rely on His word. "**We know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him**" (15) - provided they were His will for us.

We turn to consider the other object of our prayers:

For Others. The proper description of the previous kind of prayer is Petition, while this is Intercession. The passage does not roam at large, but deals with a specific matter concerning the spiritual life of others. Note, further, that the verses do not deal with prayer for the unconverted just now, though they are not to be excluded from the influence of this ministry. You will remember that in the LORD's Prayer we have the same momentary omission, "**I pray not for the world**", John 17:9 - He means, not just at the moment.

For those outside the Kingdom, we are entitled, encouraged, and enabled to pray. Some of them will not let you talk to them about GOD; but they cannot prevent you talking to GOD about them. One day He may rejoice your heart by giving you the chance to answer your own prayer, and present you with the God-made opportunity to lead them to Himself.

But it is the "**brother**" that is here in mind - which means that he is a member of the same Family, a child of the same FATHER, as yourself, a fellow member of the Fellowship.

What, then, is this "**sin unto death**"? A number of suggestions have been advanced; and I should think it is well not to be too dogmatic; but what I have said under the "*Out-of-the-ordinary word*" will indicate what is my own view of the matter. Only I would stress that it is my opinion only, for anything that it may be worth. I think, then, that the "**death**" is physical death.

What is known as the Unpardonable Sin is a specific transgression, which, as Matthew 12:31-32 makes clear, is the persistent rejection of the testimony of the HOLY SPIRIT concerning the LORD JESUS; but I take it that this Sin unto Death is not anyone particular wrong, there is such a thing as sin that might lead to death. We know that it has led to spiritual death - "**in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die**", (Genesis 2:17) and he did die, spiritually, that moment, and all his entail following.

"**As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned**", (Romans 5:12). If, when John said, "**there is a sin not unto death**" (17), it would be a complete contradiction of this fundamental passage, if he had meant

spiritual death. But, as it appears to me, physical death puts the matter straight, and there is no contradiction.

When a Christian falls to sinning, his salvation is not jeopardized, he does not revert to his unregenerate state of spiritual death; but, in certain cases, he may incur the penalty of physical death. The Christians at Corinth were the victims of this sore displeasure of the LORD, because in some flagrant way they had abused the LORD's Supper - **"for this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep"**, (I Corinthians 11:30).

The physical death of the believer is described by our LORD as **"sleep"**, Mark 5:39; John 11:11-13. Spiritual death is never associated with a believer, because, says the LORD, with all the added weight of His doubly emphatic, **"Verily, verily"**, he **"is passed from death unto life"**, (John 5:24).

It is, then, a physical chastening of the LORD that is, in our belief, spoken of here, whether of sickness, or in extreme cases, of death; and, as the Corinthian passage continues, in verse 32, **"we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."**

"Somewhat in this sense," says Dr. Pettingill, of America, "Moses sinned unto death, Deuteronomy 32:48-52; Achan sinned unto death, Joshua 7:25; Ananias sinned unto death, Acts 5:1-11."

This, then, whatever be its true meaning, is the one forbidden ground. How vast, however, is the area of permissive prayer, wherein the Fellowship can exercise this ministry for the **"brother"**, or for the other.

To return to our previous image let us to such purpose open our windows of prayer that GOD will **"open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it"**, Malachi 3:10 - all you can do with such abundance is to overflow it to others; even **"rivers of living water"**, John 7:38.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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