

# A Life of Prayer and Holy Obedience in a War-Wracked World

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Considering the relationship between the life of prayer and holy obedience in a war-wracked world is a massive task. In an existential sense, prayer brings us into the holy of holies in the Christian life. We move from the periphery to the center.

Edward Payson said, "Prayer is the first thing, the second thing, the third thing necessary to a minister. Pray, then, pray, pray, pray." Sir Thomas Buxton wrote, "You know the value of prayer; it is precious beyond all price. Never, never neglect it." William Penn said of George Fox, "Above all he excelled in prayer." Archbishop Tait said, "I want a life of greater, deeper, truer prayer." Martin Luther declared, "He who has prayed well has studied well."

Most pertinent of all are the words of William Carey, "Prayer—secret, fervent, believing prayer—lies at the root of all personal godliness." Our task is to see how prayer opens us to this personal godliness and to meditate on that reality within the wider social context of war and peace.

## *Prayer drives us into holy obedience*

My first point is a very simple one: prayer drives us into holy obedience. The primary purpose of prayer is not to give us spiritual goosebumps. It is not to titillate our fantasies with visions and dreams and manifold revelations. It is not to bring about such great answers that the wonders of God are known throughout the land (and, incidentally, so are *we*). By the grace and goodness of God we are given times of goosebumps, and revelations, and answers that boggle the imagination. These, however, are byproducts of something much deeper and more profound. The primary purpose of

prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that we are conformed into the image of his son Jesus Christ. We are inwardly taken over, changed, transformed.

Douglas Steere said, "To pray is to change." Frankly, none of us will keep up the work of prayer for long unless we are willing to change. We will either give it up, or we will turn it into a little system that keeps the form of godliness but denies the power of it—which is the same thing as giving it up. In prayer, if we are not into the life and the power of the Spirit we are not into prayer. When we begin to walk with God he is gracious, and marvelously answers our feeble, egocentric, greed-motivated prayers. We think, "Hallelujah, this is great! God is real after all." Then, after a time, we try to push that button again and God says, "Wait a minute! I would like to be your teacher and to lead you into a more excellent way. I want to set you free of your greed and avarice, your fear and hostility." We may chafe under that and struggle against it for a while, but in time we learn the goodness of God's grace. We begin to be set free of our bondage to ourselves. We begin to live in obedience.

One of the most lovely things that comes into us through this process is the ability to lay down this everlasting burden of always needing to get our own way. Do you know what freedom that is? No longer is there the stifling preoccupation with ourselves. We have new, liberating desires to care deeply for the needs of others. Most wonderful of all, we can lay down the crushing burden of the opinions of others. François Fénelon witnessed, "With this purity of heart, we are no longer troubled by what others think of us, except that in charity we avoid scandalizing them." We do not have to be liked. We do not have to succeed. We can enjoy obscurity as easily as fame. We begin to understand the meaning

of self-denial. We begin to live in communion, worship, and adoration. We begin to walk in holy obedience. We begin to think God's thoughts after him. We begin to desire his ways, not out of obligation, but because it is what we truly want. We begin to care and love the way he cares and loves. The words of an old hymn, "He walks with me and talks with me," cease to be pious jargon and become living reality. We are *driven* into holy obedience.

All the saints have testified that this is so. Think of Joseph. In a dream he had sheaves bowing down to him; as well as the sun, moon, and stars (Genesis 37). Joseph said to himself, "How can a guy be humble when he has dreams like this?" The Lord answered, "I'll show you!" And as you know, Joseph went through many experiences before he learned to walk in holy obedience. I can imagine that he had experiences of communion with the Father the likes of which I have never dreamed about, in order to come out eventually with that incredibly compassionate spirit toward his brothers.

So it is with us. It is a wonder, this living in communion, this hearing God's voice and obeying his word. It makes all the plastic extravaganzas of our modern religious world seem pale by comparison, and so they are. Prayer—that wonderful gift of conversation between a finite spirit and the infinite spirit of the universe—will drive us into holy obedience.

## *Prayer draws us into trust*

A second reality, which we need to underline particularly in light of our concern for a war-wracked world, is that prayer draws us into trust. My children like to eat pancakes, so once in a while I get up early to fix them a batch. It is interesting to watch those boys. They wolf down pancakes as if there were an endless supply. They are not worried one whit about the price

of eggs or my ability to provide them with more. Not once have I seen them slipping some into their pocket thinking, "I don't know about Dad; I had better put away a little stash so that I can be sure of pancakes tomorrow." As far as they are concerned, the reservoir of pancakes is infinite. All they need to do is ask—they know they will receive. They live in trust.

Prayer will give us this posture of trust. And without this spirit of trust, it is impossible to live on the basis of prayer for daily bread. No, we would need an adequate stash somewhere just in case—and be assured that what we now have is *never* adequate.

The life of trust which comes through prayer frees us from our greed. Remember the words of James, "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war." That is the way of the world in which we live. That is the spirit of the flesh. James goes on to describe another way, a more excellent way, the way of the kingdom of God. "You do not have because you do not ask." The way of prayer brings us into the life of trust which sets us free from our greed.

James goes on to say, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Many of us, as we are moving into this life of holy obedience, have not yet had the spirit of greed removed and been able to enter into this life of trust. But as we go along, we're set free from the need to desire things that do not please God and are not consistent with his way. As we grow and enter into holy obedience and its essential partner, trust, there are many things we simply do not need. For what we do need, we can ask, and we will receive. No longer is there the need to watch out for number one; we are told to "cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you." We live in trust.

Trust defeats the spirit of climb, push, and shove. In trust we are set free from the spirit of fear: fear that we won't have enough, fear that we will be left out in the cold, fear that inflation will impoverish us, fear that the communists will overtake us, fear, fear, fear. In the ministry of prayer we are freed from fear. "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control."

Think of the misery that comes into our lives by our restless gnawing greed. We plunge ourselves into enormous debt and then take two or three jobs to stay afloat. We uproot our families so we can have a more prestigious job or house. We grab and never get enough. Our flashy cars and sports spectaculars and backyard pools have a way of crowding out much interest in civil rights or inner-city poverty or the starved masses of India. Greed has a way of severing the cords of compassion. The apostle Paul saw this clearly when he warned that lust for wealth causes people to fall into "all sorts of foolish and dangerous ambitions which eventually plunge them into ruin and destruction" (1 Timothy 6:9, Jerusalem Bible).

But we don't need to be imprisoned by avarice. We can be ushered into a life of peace and serenity. We can say, "If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content." And it is only as that kind of experience undergirds our lives that we are able to speak with prophetic vigor to a greedy, covetous, war-wracked world. Prayer draws us into trust.

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#### *Prayer invites us into compassion*

A third reality occurs in us with the life of prayer: Prayer invites us into compassion. Prayer gives us the power to sense people's spirits. As we learn to walk with God and to live a life of perpetual communion, we come into a gentleness by which we love all people. We have an amazing discernment to see what is in people—not out of curiosity or because it will give us an edge over them, but so that we can enter into their fear, hate, and hurt, and thus call forth the peace and healing of Christ.

Do you remember the story in 2 Kings of the woman who came to Elisha in desperation because her son was dying? Elisha said, "She is in bitter distress; and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me." Note that Elisha was surprised that he did not perceive her inward distress; evidently he often had that kind of sensitivity.

Are you able to enter into the spirit

of individuals and see what controls them? I'll never forget one committee meeting early in my days of learning to pray for people. This was an ordinary meeting to discuss the youth work in our church, but I noticed one woman and could feel the anger, hurt, and disappointment in her. I decided to make her a little prayer project during the committee meeting. Throughout the three hours that meeting went on, she was constantly taking little jabs at a young couple in the group. Her hurt was coming out in bitterness toward those two. I thought, "I'm not doing very well in this prayer project." But, right when the meeting came to a close, she turned and began to cry and asked the group, "Would you pray for me before you leave?" She began to share the hurt and bitterness in her heart. Then the most beautiful thing occurred. That young couple came over and surrounded her and prayed a marvelous prayer of healing. You could just feel the bitterness and hostility ease away and the peace of Christ come in. In the lives and words of that young couple the peaceable gospel of Jesus Christ had become a reality.

Of course, it isn't only people that we come to know inwardly, but all of creation. In this way of prayer and walking with God, we have the gentleness to love the little creatures that creep on the earth and even love the earth itself. Have you ever walked about and felt the very earth groaning and crying for the redemption and healing that it needed? I hope you pray for the peace and healing of Christ to come on the earth, to trees and plants and animals. We pour poisons into the ground and waters. We slap pavement over everything. We rape the land. There needs to be people who will pray for this earth's healing.

Do not get me wrong. I'm not talking about some kind of sentimentalism or mushy peace that wants to avoid conflict at all costs. The peaceable gospel of Jesus Christ brings the sword of the Spirit that divides and judges. As we enter into the spirit in people, we are incensed at the poverty, injustice, and evil in human society. We seek to call people to relinquish vested interests, anger and hostility, prejudice and fear. We sense deeply the societally incarnated nature of evil and seek its defeat in the power of the Lamb.

#### *Prayer leads us into conquest*

That leads to my fourth and final

point: prayer leads us into conquest. Prayer enables us to wage the peaceable war of the Lamb against all principalities.

I have always been moved by Ephesians 6 where we have the description of our weapons of warfare. Paul writes, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." In saying that, Paul does not mean that flesh and blood are unimportant. He simply means that behind the flesh and blood, and controlling them, are powers and principalities of a spiritual nature. The aim of our attack is to defeat the principalities that control and incarnate themselves in flesh and blood.

When we approach an absentee landlord of ghetto apartments, we speak to the principality of greed that controls him or her. When we confront political policymakers or corporate executives, we do so with an inward strength born out of prayer and fasting, seeking to defeat the inward spirit of vested interest and covetousness. Paul goes on to describe the armor we are given: loins of truth, breastplate of righteousness, having our feet shod with the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. Here Paul's metaphor runs out, but that does not stop him from adding more weapons, especially prayer: "Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."

What we so often fail to understand is that those weapons are incredibly powerful. They are more powerful than B-1 bombers, and Trident missile systems, and M-X missile systems, if we will only learn to equip and train ourselves to use them effectively. No weapons system is effective unless soldiers are trained to use it. I am often drawn to those powerful words of James Naylor when he wrote, "Christ puts spiritual weapons into our hearts and hands to make war with our enemies . . . , not as the prince of this world with prisons, tortures, and torments on the bodies of creatures, to kill and destroy men's lives, but with the word of truth, returning love for hatred, wrestling with God against the enmity, with prayers and tears night and day, with fasting, mourning and

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lamentation, in patience, in faithfulness, in truth, in love unfeigned, in long suffering, and in all the fruit of the Spirit, that if by any means we may overcome evil with good." Are we going to learn to say "No" to the little tin gods of our modern nation states that try to call us into their blasphemous intertribal wars?

Consider the story in 2 Kings, when Syria was warring against Israel and the king of Syria would set his battle plans, but God would reveal the plans to the prophet Elisha and he would leak the information to Israel. That, of course, made it very hard to wage an effective war. Finally he discovered that God was giving the information by revelation to Elisha. The king sent a huge army to take this one man and the next morning Elisha's servant woke up and saw an army with horses and chariots surrounding the entire city, and he was petrified.

But Elisha said, "Take it easy, don't be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then he turned and said, "Lord, would you open the eyes of my servant?" And the Lord opened his eyes and he saw that the mountains were full of the horses and chariots of the Lord surrounding the other army. Wow! That's power.

Then Elisha prayed, "Lord, would you please blind this entire army," and they were blinded. And Elisha went up to them and said, "This isn't the place where you need to go, let me lead you to the right city." And he led them right into the heart of Samaria. Then, of course, the armies of Israel surrounded them and Elisha said, "Now Lord, I would appreciate it if you would give

them back their eyesight." And, when they were able to see again they realized that they were surrounded and they surrendered.

The king of Israel said, "Ha, ha. Now, Elisha, shall we let 'em have it?" and Elisha replied, "No, leave them alone. Just feed them a good lunch and send them home." And so they did, and that particular war was ended.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Well, that was Elisha, and I'm not Elisha." My question is, "Why not?" God needs a number of Elisha-type people in our day. Obviously, we won't do it the way Elisha did, but the power and presence of God are to be manifest on the face of the earth in ways that will not be unlike what Elisha did. Prayer gets us in touch with the power source, and when we have our hearts straight in this matter God can use us in wonderful ways.

Frank Laubach tells about a small group who gathered to pray for Franklin Roosevelt during World War II. They put a picture of Roosevelt on the fireplace mantel and gathered around it in a circle to be a channel of the light and power of Jesus Christ into this man. He tells how Rufus Jones, a member of the group, led them in one of the most powerful prayers Laubach had ever heard. As they were finishing, the telephone rang. It was President Roosevelt seeking the counsel of a member in that group on an important matter.

No one can prove that their prayers caused the President to seek counsel from a member of the group, but it is absolutely amazing how these things begin to happen when people genuinely seek to bring the gospel of Christ to apply specifically to the world in which we live. We cannot do it in an attempt to get our own way or make our little pet projects come to pass, but to see the goodness of God spread abroad in the hearts of human beings.

We live in a war-racked world. Are we applying the weapon of prayer, along with all the other weapons of Ephesians 6, to the task of bringing the everlasting gospel of peace to this world?

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are quoted from the Revised Standard Version.