

# ELEMENTS

## of True Prayer



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Prayer has been well described as “the Christian’s vital breath” (Dabney). Commentator Matthew Henry rightly asserts, “You may as soon find a living man without breath as a living Christian without prayer.” Prayer is the evidence of salvation experienced in the soul. “God has no dumb children” was Spurgeon’s simple, but searching observation.

Prayer is vital in the Christian’s walk. Like Abraham, the Christian pilgrim must erect his altar and call upon the name of the Lord everywhere he goes. In a sense, the heart should be like the Old Testament altar of incense on which the fire never went out and from which the fragrance never failed to ascend heavenward.

Prayer is also necessary in the Christian’s work. John Bunyan declared, “You can do more than pray, after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.” Prayer stood at the forefront of apostolic priorities: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

“Labouring fervently . . . in prayers” (Colossians 4:12) is paramount in God’s work. It is prayer that commits God’s work into His hands and keeps it there.

Prayer is essential in the Christian’s warfare. The Christian armour must be put on with prayer (Ephesians 6:18). Puritan

William Gurnall warns, “The Christian’s armour will rust except it be furbished and scoured with the oil of prayer.” If he is to wage a good warfare, the Christian soldier must emulate those who “cried to God in the battle” (1 Chronicles 5:20). The secret of victory in Jesus’ name is “lifting up holy hands” in prayer. What then are the vital elements of true prayer?

### Adoration

True prayer is an exercise in divine worship. It begins and ends with God as exemplified in the Lord’s Prayer. Prayer with us is so easily, and so often, self-centred. We rush into prayer, but as Samuel Chadwick cautions, “Hurry is the death of prayer.” We fail to be still and know that He is God (Psalm 46:10). We fail to cultivate a sense of God’s presence. But we should not think of uttering one syllable of prayer, in public or private, until we are conscious that we have come into the presence of God and that we are actually praying to Him.

Prayer is a calling upon the name of the Lord, that is, upon God as He has been pleased to reveal Himself. How much then do we need a scriptural understanding and a sensible appreciation of God’s greatness and glory. In prayer we should never be forgetful of His infinite majesty. We require



as well an awareness of His goodness and grace and of the relationship He sustains to us in Christ as our Heavenly Father. Nothing is more certain to warm our hearts and to give liberty of utterance than the realization that we are approaching our Father. We can see why the godly McCheyne confessed, “A great part of my time is spent in getting my heart in tune for prayer.”

## Confession

In Scripture, adoration goes hand in hand with humiliation. Our deepest consciousness of sin arises from a clear sight of the glory of God’s holiness. As John Calvin admonished, “The beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer, is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt.” Sin that is not dealt with disturbs and disrupts our fellowship with God. The divine injunction is that we “confess our sins” (1 John 1:9).

There are three essential ingredients in such confession. First, we must have a great sense of sin. We often confess our sins very glibly, but in prayer we should ever be conscious of the plague that afflicts our hearts. John Owen tellingly observes: “He that hath slight thoughts of sin never had great thoughts of God.” Second, we must have a godly sorrow over sin. Our hearts

need to be duly affected with a sense of our utter unworthiness because of sin. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:17). Third, we must be looking with the eye of faith upon that satisfaction for sin made in Christ. His atoning blood makes atonement and secures acceptance and forgiveness for us. Only upon the basis of sin daily confessed and therefore pardoned can there be any true fellowship between us and God this side of heaven.

## Supplication

“Real prayer seeks an audience *and an answer*” (W. S. Plumer, emphasis added). Supplication is our humble petitioning of heaven. “In everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6). How all-embracing is this directive! Nothing is outside the scope of prayer. Consider Bunyan’s masterful definition of prayer: “A sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Spirit, for such things as God has promised.”

In order to receive answers to our prayers, we are to pray sincerely. Prayer is an exercise of the heart more than an employment of the tongue. We are to pray simply. “Give us this day our daily bread” breathes out the essence of that simplicity. In presenting ourselves before God, we please Him by making known our desires plainly and pointedly. We are to pray scripturally. We are to ask according to the will of God (1 John 5:14–15). We can do no better than frame our petitions in the very language of God’s promises. As Spurgeon said, “Every promise of Scripture is a writing of God, which may be pleaded before Him with this reasonable request—‘Do as Thou hast said.’”

## Intercession

Intercession is pleading before God on behalf of others. Few people have the

impulse or the inclination to pray for themselves. Who will cry to God for them if not God’s people? God directs “that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (1 Timothy 2:1). We are to intercede for sinners as Abraham did for Sodom. Our Saviour “made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). We are especially to be “praying always for all saints” (Ephesians 6:18). This is taught very clearly in the Lord’s Prayer where all the pronouns are in the plural number. “What a corrective for self-centeredness!” exclaims A. W. Pink. As members of God’s family we are to “pray for one another” (James 5:16).

## Thanksgiving

It is “with thanksgiving” that we are to let our requests be made known unto God (Philippians 4:6). Someone has said, “Be not hot in prayer and cold in praise.” All prayer should gather itself up and crown itself in thanksgiving. If we do not thank God for His mercies, how can we expect Him to bless us with further mercies? Our thanksgiving should be definite and detailed. Let us keep a catalogue of God’s blessings. Our thanksgiving should be discerning and discriminating. The greatest of God’s blessings ought to solicit our greatest thanksgiving. Let us see to it that, in the words of the Puritan William Jenkyn, “praise shall conclude that work which prayer began.” ■



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