

**The Life of Prayer**  
**Howard Crosby**

***"Praying always with all prayer."***  
***Ephesians 6:18***

If prayer has the definition which it has in most men's minds, and if men of the average character hear this injunction of the apostle, the words would suggest a dreary prospect. A life of prayer would seem to them a life of penance. Only sadness and gloom would be associated with the idea. Praying might be tolerated at certain emergencies, as a bitter medicine might be swallowed in a critical disease. But praying *always*, and that too with *all* prayer, leaves no margin for comfort or happiness. And yet this melancholy view of the prayerful life is all of a piece with the ordinary view men take of religion and everything that pertains to their just relations toward God.

The natural heart is enmity with God, and hence all forms of communion with God are repulsive. With this fact constantly existing, they will nevertheless deny that they are enemies to God, and consider such an allegation as a slander upon their character. Most men actually think they are on good terms with the Almighty, while they sedulously [persistently] avoid all that would distinctively bring them near to Him. They fail to see in their blindness that this alienation of theirs is the very essence of hostility. Their assumed independence of God is the waging [of] war against God, the overthrow of all His government (as far as they are able to effect this), [and] the disturbance of all the relations which He has established as their all-wise and all-merciful Creator and Preserver.

A man has not to commit murder to be a rebel against even human authority. Neither has a man to be a gross offender in palpable vice to be an enemy to God. Disobedience here is rebellion, and a life founded on a system of disobedience is a rebellious life. Where you find a man who (as the Scripture phrases it) has not God in all his thoughts, there you find an open enemy of the Most High; and his beautiful traits of character and admired position in society cannot save him from the hands of infinite justice and a rebel's doom.

The matter of prayer is one of many tests of such a condition. The prayerless man is in the hostile camp. If he were the friend of God he would draw near Him and speak to Him. Nay, he would search for Him if he could not find Him. Much rather would he run to Him when he saw His arms outstretched to receive him in the Gospel of His Son. Not to pray is to despise that Gospel--to prefer nature, and that a depraved nature, too. Marvellous [astounding] is the stupidity of man, that after a life thus spent in avoiding God he will complacently suppose it will all be well with him at last; that his confirmed course of godlessness will become by the change of death a course of godfulness, if I may use the expression. What magic has death to change his character? Is death a gospel? Or is heaven a place for God's enemies?

But, leaving this strange case of the mass of men, let us talk with Christians of that

which is their highest joy--communion with God. Let us divide our subject according to the apostle's phraseology.

I. "*Praying.*" What is it? ***First, it is a heart-exercise.*** Words play only a subordinate part. Groanings that cannot be uttered may be prayer. I say "may be," for the Scripture does not mean that *all* groaning is prayer. There may be the groan of pain, the groan of discontent, the groan of selfishness; and surely there is no prayer in such. The Scriptures refer to the Spirit's movement in the soul of man, where an intelligent and yet undefinable longing Godwards is found. And yet, while words may not be necessary to prayer, the rational man is so constituted that words are most helpful to a praying heart, and it will use them when it can. It is only a sort of spiritual indolence that would wilfully dispense with words in prayer. There may be true spiritual emotions that defy utterance, but the most of a believer's contemplations and petitions find natural illustration and expression in language.

But the language should ever wait upon the heart. Detached from the heart's feeling, it is but mockery. The Lord takes no pleasure in our mere words, but He *does* take pleasure in the movements of our *hearts* toward Him. It is this thought that should make us watchful against the formality of routine, the meaningless use of set phrases, which is a mechanical travesty of prayer. Every word should have the heart's stamp upon it, and so it will be acceptable to God.

***Second, prayer is a duty.*** We are not left to choose whether we should pray or not. Prayer is part of the economy of grace. The first mark of a Christian is, "Behold, he prays." The obedience of the soul to God is shown in this position. All God's grace to man comes by the asking, and the asking is but expressed faith. God's primal command to the sinner, "Come," is answered by prayer. And the same principle which begins the Christian life continues to sustain and develop it. The heart comes to God for all.

But while prayer is thus enjoined by God, we never hear God telling us to pray a given number of times a day or to pray for such or such a length of time. All that kind of injunction belongs to man-made religions like Mohammedanism and Popery. God commands us to pray, but He leaves the modes of prayer to the guidance of that blessed Spirit who is given to every believer. There is a Christian liberty here as elsewhere, which we are to use, while we are careful not to make it an occasion to the flesh.

[Yes], prayer is a duty. But to a Christian [this] duty involves no idea of compulsion for, ***third, prayer is a privilege.*** It is by no natural right that we go to God. Our natural condition banishes us from Him altogether. The approach to God by the soul is the result of God's miracle of grace. All the wonders of Bethlehem and Calvary were wrought to bring it about. It is a blood-bought privilege. It is the opening of the King's palace to aliens who are made children. It is a gift whose dimensions no created mind can calculate.

The sense of the privilege will be proportioned to our view of our sinfulness. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" is the natural cry of one who recognizes the contrast

between himself and a holy God. When grace meets that natural cry with the exhibition of a loving covenant between the sinner and his Saviour, then the delighted heart exclaims, "I love the Lord because He has heard my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear unto me, therefore will I call upon Him as long as I live." "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord."

Unless God's grace is recognized, there can be no true prayer. To speak to God on any other basis is fearful presumption. For an unrepentant sinner to speak to God is an act of gross hostility, for he endeavors to thrust his sin-covered soul into the holy presence of the Majesty of Heaven. It is a high privilege--the highest of all privileges--that he is usurping, and one which is only accorded to the penitent heart.

***Fourth, prayer is the confident action of communion with God.*** It is not a tentative [attempt], or test, or experiment. It is not a groping in the dark. It is true that little faith may reduce it to these proportions, but just so far the prayer is defective. In its normal character, prayer is a complete leaning on God. It reposes upon promises that can never fail and a divine love that cannot be measured. The child nestles not more securely in the mother's arms than the soul commits itself with assurance to the Lord in prayer. It has to go through no process of reasoning; but the Spirit bears witness with it that it is dealing with a tender and yet Almighty *Father*. The wavering soul does not pray. We are to "ask in faith (says the Scripture), nothing wavering; for he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." It is this confidence of prayer which gives it its crowning charm.

II. "*Praying always,*" says the apostle. Here surely a *condition* rather than *action* is designated. An action terminates, but this prayer is to continue. Or, if we call it an action, it is an action that includes the whole life. It indicates a constant need and a constant supply. We are ever to be found waiting on the Lord. The outward form of prayer may be intermittent, but the essential prayer is to be perpetual.

To use the distinction made just now, the prayerful condition may at times be crystallized into formal action, which we specially call prayer; but the life of the soul in communion with God is essentially a life of prayer. It is constantly in an asking and receiving attitude. It would not have this bond of union with the Saviour sundered for a moment, for all its help comes from Him. Without Him it can do nothing. *Praying* always is *enjoying* always the fullness of the Redeemer's bounties. To have this communication choked between heaven and the soul would be to feel want and weakness. Montgomery but expresses the truth as felt by every earnest believer, "Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air."

The continuity of prayer is but another name for the continuity of spiritual life. This continuity is interrupted most sadly by the willful permission given by the Christian to let the world come into his heart and exercise a motive power there. The Christian who is spending his time and energy to amass the world's wealth is not praying. The Christian who is fluttering like a moth around the candles of fashion is not praying. The Christian

who is full of schemes for this life, and puts the things of God aside, is not praying. The rich rewards of the Christian life are enjoyed by few because few are praying always.

Now it is very often the case that those who pray occasionally do not pray at all. The one who prays without ceasing offers a spiritual service, but the pray-er on occasion is apt to be a formalist. When a Christian can say, "I have set the Lord *always* before me," then he can add, "because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." Instead of such continual praying being dreary, it is the very source of refreshing and joy. It is the very cause of the Christian's cheerful spirit and happy life. He is drawn to the mercy-seat as a bee to the flower. The instincts of the divine life move him thither.

God does not wish in us a forced and artificial life. There is neither religion nor salvation in such a life. He wishes us to wear an *easy* yoke and lift a *light* burden, while the godless world wears the hard yoke and heavy burden. And so He gives us a new nature; and according to this new nature, this *praying always* is most natural. But many who are gifted with the new nature strangle it by their indulgence of the old. They do not use the liberty of the children of God, and hence their service is servile and not filial.

The Christian who prays always is the Christian who feels his heavenly citizenship, whose life is not to be measured by outward appearances, because his life is hid with Christ entirely out of the world's sight. . . .

III. "*Praying always with all prayer.*" This is a Grecism for "all manner of prayer," or "every kind of prayer." Prayer, then, may be of different kinds. The difference is not, of course, in its essential character (for all prayer must be at the core *communion with God*), but in its modes of exercise. We have seen how the prayerful life will at times crystallize itself into seasons of withdrawal from all else but God, when face-to-face with Him it "orders its cause" before Him and arranges thoughts of praise and gratitude, of penitence and confession, of need and petition, of joy and thanksgiving. To these seasons we are accustomed to circumscribe the appellation of "prayer."

But when the apostle speaks of praying *always* and with *all* prayer, he is leading us into a wider field of observation, and showing us how in much else than the bowed knee and earnest words the spirit of prayer may be resident. Cornelius, the centurion, was told that his *alms* had come up as a memorial before God. We are also told by the inspired Word "to do good, and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." The Scripture is full of like passages, showing that the acts of kindness performed by us as to God are direct acts of communion with Him. [Nevertheless], there is no gaining heaven by works in this. Such a doctrine is an absurdity. Our salvation is *all* of grace.

But there *is* in this a *gracious effect*. There is in true alms-giving (the real helpfulness of Christian activity) an enlargement of the spiritual life, a spreading of its branches and leaves by the action of its thrifty tendrils. It is a movement *to* and *with* God. It is in this high sense that it is rightly said, "Giving is worship." When Christ says, "Ye did it unto me," He is describing one form of approaching Him, one action of the renewing Spirit, one

of the many kinds of prayer.

Now this sort of prayer is certainly no substitute for the other; but again, neither is the other a substitute for this. Both motions of the soul Godward are needed and demanded by the new life which Christ gives. The Philippian Christians were behind none in the prayer of words, but Paul praises them for their readiness to send far away to Rome for his help and comfort when a prisoner. He says, "I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing to God."

These good works were equally a communion with God as were their verbal prayers, for they were both done under the Spirit's prompting and were the action of their godly walk. This was one of their acceptable sacrifices. The calves of their lips were another. All effort under the recognized providence of God is prayer. It is prayer put into action. If I long to help a brother, I pray with my whole being and not only with my lips. Every activity put forth in the direction of any godly aim is justly prayer.

Now, if in the light of these considerations we read the apostle's injunction, "Praying always with all manner of prayer," we see there depicted a life so spent in communion with God that all its exercises are done to God, presented to Him as offerings of faith. Let me not for a moment be supposed by any to uphold the sentimental statement of vapory religionists that working is praying--that is, that any act of kindness toward another is a prayer to God and therefore all direct petition is unnecessary. It is only the working that is done in the spirit of faith and obedience to God's holy will that is prayer, and this never as a *substitute for* but as a *result from* the prayer of direct petition.

Now, my fellow believers, just as our lives come short of this picture submitted to us by the apostle, just so far we are marring Christ's work in our regeneration; and just so far as we do this, we are interfering with our peace and our power. Living unto God (Rom. 6:11) and living with Christ (1 Thess. 5:10) are Scripture expressions denoting the true Christian life. The formula, which each of us ought to be able to adopt, is this--"The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God."

What is preventing this declaration on the part of any one of us? Whatever does is making us restrain prayer. What is it? Is it hard to tell? I think not. One answer will do for us all. It is a *divided heart*. Our Lord has not His full place in our affections, and hence the Spirit has not full sway in our lives. Surely it is not strange that the lives of Christians should be so poor a recommendation of Christ to the world. The Christian life is sustained only by prayer. The praying should, therefore, be constant. Now, if the praying be intermittent, what may we expect of the life? The world will not look on the moments of fervor and faith and judge of the Christian from those, but will look at the periods of worldliness, when the connection with Jesus is cut off, and draw its inferences of Christ and His disciples from these.

But apart from the effect on the world, why should we deny ourselves the unspeakably rich enjoyments of a life drawing every moment its fresh strength from our God and

Saviour? Why should we let the illusions of a false world rob us of our divine inheritance in Christ? Let us dig the ditch deep and broad between us and the world so that there shall be no crossing nor thought of crossing. Let us be jealous for Christ against any interference with our union with Him, and let us have the full of comfort in the Lord's grace by praying always with all prayer.

*Sermons* by Howard Crosby (Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., New York, 1891). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.