

***The Shadow of the Cross:  
Studies in Self-Denial***

by  
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**Chapter 7  
"Prayer"**

***"And Asa cried out to Yahweh his God, and said, Yahweh, it is nothing for you to help, whether with many or with those who have no power. Help us, O Yahweh our God, for we rest on you, and in your name we go against this multitude. O Yahweh, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you!." (2 Chronicles 14:11)***

Asa, king of Judah, one day stood in a place where every minister of the gospel has been. As God's people faced vicious enemies, he was their leader. It cannot be said that every instant in the pastorate is filled with fierce conflict; but the moments of respite are more surprising than the battle. The Great Shepherd has sent his sheep to live among wolves. This glorious Sovereign conducts the affairs of his everlasting kingdom in the midst of his enemies. He builds his church in the neighborhood of the gates of hell, recruiting each new member of his body from Satan's precinct. It is then inevitable that every preacher contends for truth and righteousness against principalities and powers of darkness.

Assaults are made upon our congregations just as Zerah the Ethiopian attacked Judah. Humanism, materialism, and hedonism have enlisted overwhelming forces to march against a few believers. The church on earth is in a state of war. She is ever engaged in combat.

Asa heard of Zerah's invasion, and advanced to meet the enemy. Leading about 600,000 troops the king seized the offensive. Marching against him were a million soldiers who had with them 300 chariots (the swift and feared machines of death in the arsenals of those times). Asa whipped the invaders soundly; for God came down and fought for Judah. God was greatly glorified. The Ethiopians were "broken before the Lord," and "the fear of the Lord came upon" all nearby cities. The opposing forces were not merely stunned but demolished beyond recovery. There would be no regrouping for another charge.

What pastor would not love to see the forces of unbelief and sin put to flight in our day? It is the desire of every true man of God to deliver decisive blows against the batteries of hell. Our desire is that the Names of our Lord and our Father might be exalted upon earth in fresh victories. Oh, for multitudes to be awed into an awareness that the Most High dwells still in the midst of his people! If only the Almighty would bare his right arm in crushing his and our enemies, making the whole world of evil stagger before his Word!

Ezra, the writer of Chronicles, describes for us the determining factor of the ancient war. His account should captivate every heart in which there burns a holy zeal for the Lord of hosts. There was an enormous clash of arms at Mareshah, but nothing is recorded of the Israelites' skill in handling sword or bow. No doubt Asa and his captains carefully drew up their battle plan. Perhaps an ambush was set for the Ethiopians. Perhaps Zerah was outflanked. But Ezra is silent as to the strategy employed; for it was not the decisive element in the struggle.

The passing over of these aspects of the combat may disappoint some pastors. Ezra frustrates those who have become convinced that all hope of victory lies in our skill in handling our offensive weapons. Their entire attention has been turned toward the academic sharpening of men's swords and to the mastering of precise homiletical skills. Ezra completely exasperates the new cult of methodology. 'How to' experts with new programs and schemes will read Chronicles in vain for tactics. Such silence instructs us that useful ministers must demolish the golden calf of activism.

"I will tell you where the battle was won, where the critical maneuver was performed," says the servant of God who records the smashing victory. So we follow the old priest backward in time to a moment before the actual bloody encounter. The first archer has not yet drawn his bow. But we are moving behind the front lines where historians wait with notepads to record statistics and tactics. We are led to a tent where Ezra lifts the flap. Within is a man, a solitary man, on his face in prayer!

There you have the secret weapon of Judah. When Paul was reviewing the Christian's armor in Ephesians 6, he admired this instrument of spiritual warfare and named it "all-prayer". It discharges the most lethal force ever known, rendering atomic weapons insignificant by its side. Every time great exploits have been done by the people of God, this fieldpiece has been rolled out by men of like passions with themselves.

A complete history of this mighty implement of warfare would recall the names of Moses, Elijah, Asa, and Daniel. Topping the roll of honor in its skillful use is our holy Lord Jesus Christ. Since his day it has been manned by the apostles, Luther, Tyndale, Knox, and Edwards. But the list is enormous. By it many an obscure pastor has secured triumphs of great importance to the kingdom of God. Their hours alone with God are yet untold. Even where known men of prayer have brought this secret force into service, their souls' exercises have been too sacred to be revealed in full. Will these holy seasons be recounted in the everlasting kingdom?

When we review the glorious annals of "all-prayer" our faces begin to color with shame! Alongside the great warriors who mastered this weapon, we are mere dwarfs. Why are not the forces of unbelief and brazen sin driven back in our generation? Our hearts know that, at least in part, the answer is, "We have not because we ask not" (James 4:2). Our Lord has not retired "all-prayer" to a museum where it becomes a curious relic of past exploits. It has been given into our hands! Yet we are unskilled in its use.

In 1651 ministers of the Church of Scotland drew up a humbling acknowledgment of the sins of the ministry. It was a confession to their God. One section of self-condemnation reads, "Seldom in secret prayer with God, except to fit for public performance; and even then much neglected, or gone about very superficially." In other portions the confession exposes the roots of prayerlessness: "Finding of our own pleasure, when the Lord calls for our humiliation," and "covetousness, worldly-mindedness, and an inordinate desire after the things of this life, upon which follows a neglect of the duties of our calling, and our being taken up for the most part with the things of this world."

Today, as then, it is easy to bemoan the theological confusion and the immorality of the age, but it is difficult to be humbled to prayer. Victories are not won by our hands, and enemies are not vanquished, because we do not pray. Isaiah's complaint is appropriate to our times, "There is none that calls upon thy name, that stirs up himself to take hold of thee" [Isaiah 64:7].

But the painful acknowledgment that we do not pray is not sufficient. A further question must be asked. Why do we not use this great weapon which would prove devastating to our enemies?

One prominent answer must be that we cringe from the biting self-denial required in prevailing prayer. There is a definite cost to ourselves which makes us shrink back with horror from wrestlings in the place of private prayer. When we contemplate laborious prayer, all flesh which remains in us cries out with cowardly pleas for pity. Certainly our souls remember with fondness the privilege of drawing near to God in prayer, the joy of communing with the Holy One. But our flesh recalls the toil of prayer which pinches. Asa's laying hold of God demonstrates the self-denial required by exertion in prayer.

Self-denial is demanded in the circumstances of prayer. Note when it was that Asa "cried unto the Lord his God." It was at the moment when he commanded an army of 600,000 men. He was ruler of an invaded nation. Vital decisions were to be reached as he set the battle in array. Scouting reports must be examined. Counsels of war must be convened with the chiefs of staff. So many concerns lay claim to his time. None could be ignored nor sacrificed. Yet there was an inward compulsion to pray. He simply could not neglect urgent business. He must set his own ease aside. While others eat, sleep, relax or bolster their courage, Asa will pray.

Self must be denied as to *time* and attention for prayer. All-prayer cannot be wielded without the expenditure of time. "A minute with God" seldom lays hold of him. Sustained prayer is necessary. Such time may only be found by snatching it from personal pursuits, however legitimate they may be.

Ministers of the gospel find their schedules squeezed. Families may not be forsaken in order to give time for prayer, for a well-regulated home is a prerequisite to the holding of the office of elder. God's flock may not be abandoned. There are lost sheep to be sought, straying sheep to be warned, lambs to be instructed. For all these souls an account must be given. Time for study may not be surrendered. If a man is to feed the flock of God, meditation, reading, diligent search of the Word is indispensable. When then will a minister find time to pray? Tomorrow will offer no more leisure. The time can only be located in what the minister might call "his own time."

It is striking that the greatest men of prayer in history have been some of the busiest men in the world. Think of Moses forging a nation from more than two million slaves. Or look at Daniel occupied with affairs of state in Babylon. Think of Luther--professor, Bible translator, pastor, prolific writer--who prayed three hours each day. But the chief example of them all is our Lord Jesus Christ who reserved early morning or late night hours for prayer. If anyone was entitled to relax or seek refreshment, it was our holy Master. But he used his own time to pray. It is not that we are too busy to pray but that the flesh is still too insistent on satisfaction.

Days of fasting and prayer will be set aside from only one part of the calendar--yours! Days of relaxation and recreation must be shortened. Holidays must diminish. Self must be intentionally denied that you might come to your knees. How is it that ministers are too busy to be found in God's courts, but somehow the holidays are fitted in?

Self must be denied as to *energy* for prayer. There is something desperately arduous about protracted prayer. Even when it is full of delight and blessed nearness to our beloved Lord, it leaves a man drained of strength. David Brainerd jotted notes about prayer in his diary, such as

"extremely weak and overcome." Martin Luther said, "It is a tremendously hard thing to pray aright."

King Asa must have expended much energy simply to the task of giving wholehearted attention to the throne of grace. He was facing his first day ever on a battlefield. Who can blame him for distracting fears and imaginings? Should he conserve his strength for the combat? But the kind of prayer recorded is made by virtue going out of the petitioner. As Moses prayed at the battle with Amalek in Rephidim, his hands grew tremulous long before the battle was won. When Jacob wrestled with God, he limped away from Peniel. If you have never felt your soul poured out before the Lord with a consequent exhaustion, it is doubtful whether you have advanced far in the school of prayer.

Recalling strenuous effort in the secret place, a pastor's flesh begins to make many a falsely pious suggestion when the hour of prayer approaches: fascinate the mind with another chapter of theology; rush off to visit a weak Christian; look through periodicals -- to keep abreast of the times, of course -- visit a loved bookstore! Anything is easier than an earnest conference with the living God. It will sap energy from self to lay hold upon the Lord until he visits your corner of the vineyard with grace and power.

Beyond the circumstances, stern self-denial is demanded as prayer is exercised. If a cross is felt at the doorway to the secret place of prayer, it is even more keenly experienced before the throne of grace. Many hours of wrestling in secret are times of combat with self. Even on our knees, even in the presence of the all-glorious King, self asserts itself frightfully.

No doubt Ezra has only given us a glimpse of the supplications of Asa. These come from the moment in which he *really* prayed and prevailed with God. Before the utterance of 2 Chronicles 14:11 fell from his lips, it is probable that effort after effort had been sent heavenward. Requests were composed and sent aloft only to fall back upon his own head. Certain heart attitudes of the king had to be refined before he could pray with such efficacy.

At the moment of prayer, the renunciation of self-confidence is essential. Asa described his army as "them that have no power." How often may his pleas have been offered with delight in the remarkable strategy he and his captains had already set in motion? Little more would be done than implore God to bless the preparations for battle, which he already hoped would succeed. How long was it before Asa believed and felt in his heart that there was no help in man?

Then perhaps a struggle with despair would ensue. Discerning that he and his army had "no power," what was the sense in praying? Once self has been stripped of all confidence, it will attempt to retain a position of importance by arguing that if there is no help in self there is no help at all! What a struggle it is to believe at one and the same instant that with man, including self, there is no power, yet it is nothing for the Lord to accomplish our desires! "Lord, it is nothing with thee to help . . . with them that have no power." An effortless word from the Almighty executes all his pleasure in the affairs of this earth.

How common it is for pastors to kneel with a smile in the soul, a smile satisfied with preparations already completed for the pulpit. The illustrations are so plain; doctrinal formulations must be convincing; organization is thorough. Never should less be offered if it is in our power to master a text. But while self-confidence remains, the heavens are brass. Prayers do not penetrate. Only when confidence in self is mortified can we pray.

When self-impotence is felt by the preacher, the most desperate step has yet to be taken. He must assault the last bastion of self, that sulking unbelief in which self insists that if it cannot have the glory, no one will. Only when that hill is stormed, when self is slain, when the infinite majesty and power of the Lord appears to the eye of faith, only then does right earnest prayer begin. Without him we can do nothing. Yet nothing is too hard for our God. What mighty men of prayer we would be if these truths always gripped our hearts!

At the moment of prayer the renunciation of self-interest is essential. Asa's entire concern in the recorded entreaty is the glory of God. A sledge--hammer cry from his lips rocked the very foundation of heaven. "Let not mortal man prevail against thee!" Again, how many sincere and spirited requests may have reached God's throne in earlier hours? "O Lord, I am no experienced warrior; preserve my life!" "O Lord, pity my family; don't leave my children fatherless!" "O Lord of hosts, deliver me from utter failure in my first combat!" But as time wore on, Asa's self-interest melted as the dew in the heat of true prayer. His soul was absorbed in the glory of the God of Israel.

"Hallowed be thy Name" is the first petition of genuine prayer. Anyone can mouth the words; but it is no easy matter to make the request with heartfelt desire. Once the Son of God sweat blood before he could say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt" [Matthew 26:39]. Yet this grip alone will lay hold of God. Rightly implicating God's glory and honour in the object we seek moves the throne of God. It must not be done mechanically, but with a sincere craving for God to be praised.

Do you commonly pray until your fame, fortune, life and success pale into insignificance? until your soul is consumed with a sense that your Lord's honor is all-important? until you honestly seek only the public display of his glorious majesty? At such times pastors no longer seek something to say before the people or success in their ministries. Usually a fearful inward battle precedes such praying; for selfishness is very deeply rooted even in preachers' hearts. They too can "ask amiss." Indeed prayers for church and pulpit can arise from impure appetites [James 4:3].

The consequences of the king's believing and disinterested prayer were publicly known and were recorded for all generations to observe. God attended Asa on the battlefield. The Invincible Warrior went with him because there was more to Asa than his public efforts in combat. Had the leader of Judah's armies been only a public figure, giving himself to frantic, visible activity, another conclusion would have been written to these historic events. But Asa retired, denied himself, prayed. "Thy Father which sees in secret shall reward thee openly" [Matthew 6:6]. Only God's eyes penetrated the doors of Asa's tent, but all the world observed God's answer to his prayer. Open blessings in response to secret devotional exercises are a promise from him who cannot lie.

One of the sorriest creatures in all the world is a preacher who does not pray, except in public. Even with the theology of Calvin, the illustrations of Spurgeon, and the searching applications of Edwards, if a pastor has not been alone with God in secret, he is a pitiful figure in the pulpit. Without secret prayer, he is without unction, a lifeless shell. Though ministers may, as other true saints, fall into intervals of prayerlessness, he is no man of God in whom this condition prevails. He is a hypocrite who is all superstructure in plain view with no unseen foundation. Bright flowers without roots are plastic, having no life.

Spiritually discerning men detect periods in our ministry when the sharp edge has been removed from pulpit efforts. Something is not quite the same as it has been. They would be hard pressed to express why it is so. It is the same man preaching, using the same gifts, including the same external elements of a sermon. But the Lord does not send the Word as a shaft into the hearers' hearts. Often the cause is neglect of this strange weapon. It is an instrument never carried into the battlefield, but used in secret -- all-prayer!

When decline in pulpit effectiveness is noted, it is time to return with sorrow to that confession by Scottish ministers in 1651: "Exceeding great selfishness in all that we do; acting from ourselves, for ourselves, and to ourselves. Seldom in secret prayer."

Young men entering the ministry have visions of great exploits for the Lord. They should know that men who have been twenty or thirty years in the service of God and his people, once had visions too. True men are stirred with hopes of shaking the world system with "Thus saith the Lord," hopes of bringing the entire populace of a region under the fear of God, hopes of making the name of Jesus so desirable that he is generally sought after. There is a great gulf between such hopes and reality. Why we have not been the instruments of God's working that we had hoped to be, requires no clever analysis--too much public activity with too little secret prayer; failure to master the use of all-prayer.

If a man sets out to excel this generation of ministers, he will find it easier to preach than to pray. In the stern reality of the secret place, a dagger is placed in his hands. Timid men shrink back from using it. When a man will plunge the knife into self-pleasing, self-confidence, and self-interest, and will wrestle alone with God for His glory, the world will see God working openly, and granting victory on the field of battle.

Chapter 7, "Prayer," in Walter J. Chantry, *The Shadow of the Cross: Studies in Self-Denial* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981).