

12 Sermons on Prayer

by
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Sermon 3 "Order and Argument in Prayer" (Part 1)

*"Oh, that I knew where I might find him! That I might come even to his seat!
I would order my cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments."*

Job 23:3, 4

In Job's uttermost extremity he cried after the Lord. The longing desire of an afflicted child of God is once more to see his Father's face. His first prayer is not, "Oh that I might be healed of the disease which now festers in every part of my body!" nor even, "Oh that I might see my children restored from the jaws of the grave, and my property once more brought from the hand of the spoiler!" But the first and uppermost cry is, "Oh that I knew where I might find HIM -- who is my God, that I might come even to his seat!" God's children run home when the storm comes on. It is the heaven-born instinct of a gracious soul to seek shelter from all ills beneath the wings of Jehovah. "He that has made his refuge God," might serve as the title of a true believer. A hypocrite, when he feels that he has been afflicted by God, resents the infliction, and, like a slave, would run from the master who has scourged him. But not so the true heir of heaven. He kisses the hand which smote him and seeks shelter from the rod in the bosom of that very God who frowned upon him. . . .

It appears that Job's end in desiring the presence of God was that he might pray to him. He had prayed, but he wanted to pray as in God's presence. He desired to plead as before one whom he knew would hear and help him. He longed to state his own case before the seat of the impartial Judge, before the very face of the all-wise God. He would appeal from the lower courts, where his friends had judged unrighteous judgment, to the Court of King's Bench -- the High Court of heaven. There, said he, "I would order my cause before Him and fill my mouth with arguments."

In this latter verse Job teaches us how he meant to plead and intercede with God. He does, as it were, reveal the secrets of his closet and unveils the art of prayer. We are admitted into the guild of suppliants. We are shown the art and mystery of pleading. We have here taught to us the blessed handicraft and science of prayer. And if we can be bound apprentice to Job this morning, for the next hour, and can have a lesson from Job's Master, we may acquire no little skill in interceding with God.

There are two things here set forth as necessary in prayer -- *ordering of our cause, and filling our mouth with arguments*. We shall speak of those two things, and then if we have rightly learned the lesson, a blessed result will follow.

I. First, IT IS NEEDFUL THAT OUR SUIT BE ORDERED BEFORE GOD.

There is a vulgar notion that prayer is a very easy thing, a kind of common business that may be done anyhow, without care or effort. Some think that you have only have to pull a book down and

get through a certain number of very excellent words, and you have prayed and may put the book up again. Others suppose that to use a book is superstitious, and that you ought rather to repeat extemporaneous sentences -- sentences which come to your mind with a rush, like a herd of swine or a pack of hounds -- and that when you have uttered them with some little attention to what you have said, you have prayed. Now neither of these modes of prayer were adopted by ancient saints. They appear to have thought a great deal more seriously of prayer than many do now-a-days.

The ancient saints were wont, with Job, to order their cause before God -- that is to say, [in the same manner] as a petitioner coming into Court [who] does not come there without thought to state his case on the spur of the moment but enters into the audience chamber with his suit well prepared, having moreover learned how he ought to behave himself in the presence of the great One to whom he is appealing. In times of peril and distress we may fly to God just as we are, as the dove enters the cleft of the rock even though her plumes are ruffled. But in ordinary times we should not come with an unprepared spirit, even as a child comes not to his father in the morning till he has washed his face. See yonder priest? He has a sacrifice to offer. But he does not rush into the court of the priests and hack at the bullock with the first pole-ax upon which he can lay his hand. But when he rises he washes his feet at the brazen laver, he puts on his garments and adorns himself with his priestly vestments. Then he comes to the altar with his victim properly divided according to the law and is careful to do according to the command, and he takes the blood in a bowl and pours it in an appropriate place at the foot of the altar, not throwing it just as may occur to him; and [he] kindles the fire not with common flame but with the sacred fire from off the altar. Now this ritual is all superseded, but the truth which it taught remains the same: our spiritual sacrifices should be offered with holy carefulness. God forbid that our prayer should be a mere leaping out of one's bed and kneeling down and saying anything that comes first to hand. On the contrary, may we wait upon the Lord with holy fear and sacred awe.

See how David prayed when God had blessed him: he went in before the Lord. Understand that he did not stand outside at a distance, but he went in before the Lord and he sat down (for sitting is not a bad posture for prayer, let who will speak against it). And sitting down quietly and calmly before the Lord, he then began to pray -- but not until first he had thought over the divine goodness and so attained to the spirit of prayer. Then by the assistance of the Holy Ghost did he open his mouth. Oh, that we oftener sought the Lord in this style!

Abraham may serve us as a pattern. He rose up early -- here was his willingness. He went three days' journey -- here was his zeal. He carried the wood and the fire with him -- here was his preparation. And lastly, he built the altar and laid the wood in order, and then took the knife -- here was the devout carefulness of his worship.

David puts it: "In the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee, and will look up," which I have frequently explained to you to mean that he marshalled his thoughts like men of war, or that he aimed his prayers like arrows. He did not take the arrow and put it on the bowstring and shoot, and shoot, and shoot anywhere. But after he had taken out the chosen shaft and fitted it to the string, he took deliberate aim. He looked -- looked well -- at the white of the target, kept his eye fixed on it directing his prayer, and then drew his bow with all his strength and let the arrow fly. And then, when the shaft had left his hand, what does he say? "I will look up." He looked up to see where the arrow went, to see what effect it had, for he expected an answer to his prayers (and was not as many who scarcely think of their prayers after they have uttered them). David knew that he had an engagement before him which required all his mental powers. He marshalled up his

faculties and went about the work in a workmanlike manner, as one who believed in it and meant to succeed. We should plow carefully and pray carefully. The better the work the more attention it deserves. To be anxious in the shop and thoughtless in the closet is little less than blasphemy, for it is an insinuation that anything will do for God but the world must have our best.

If any ask what order should be observed in prayer, I am not about to give you a scheme such as many have drawn out in which adoration, confession, petition, intercession, and ascription are arranged in succession. I am not persuaded that any such order is of divine authority. It is to no mere mechanical order I have been referring, for our prayers will be equally acceptable, and possibly equally proper, in any form; for there are specimens or prayers in all shapes in the Old and New Testament. The true spiritual order of prayer seems to me to consist in something more than mere arrangement. It is most fitting for us first to feel that we are now doing something that is real; that we are about to address ourselves to God whom we cannot see, but who is really present; whom we can neither touch nor hear, nor by our senses can apprehend, but who, nevertheless, is as truly with us as though we were speaking to a friend of flesh and blood like ourselves. Feeling the reality of God's presence, our mind will be led by divine grace into a humble state. We shall feel like Abraham, when he said, "I have taken upon myself to speak unto God, I that am but dust and ashes." Consequently we shall not deliver ourselves of our prayer as boys repeating their lessons as a mere matter of rote. Much less shall we speak as if we were rabbis instructing our pupils, or as I have heard some do, with the coarseness of a highwayman stopping a person on the road and demanding his purse of him. But we shall be humble yet bold petitioners, humbly importuning mercy through the Savior's blood

When I feel that I am in the presence of God and take my rightful position in that presence, the next thing I shall want to recognize will be that I have no right to what I am seeking, and cannot expect to obtain it except as a gift of grace. And I must recollect that God limits the channel through which He will give me mercy -- he will give it to me through his dear Son. Let me put myself then under the patronage of the great Redeemer. Let me feel that now it is no longer I that speak but Christ who speaks with me; and that while I plead, I plead his wounds, his life, his death, his blood, himself. This is truly getting into order.

The next thing is to consider what I am to ask for. It is most proper in prayer to aim at great distinctness in supplication. It is well not to beat around the bush in prayer but to come directly to the point. I like that prayer of Abraham's, "Oh that Ishmael might live before thee!" There is the name of the person prayed for and the blessing desired, all in a few words. Many persons would have used a roundabout expression of this kind: "Oh that our beloved offspring might be regarded with the favor which thou bearest to those who," etc. Say "*Ishmael*," if you mean "Ishmael." Put it in plain words before the Lord.

Some people cannot even pray for the minister without using such circular descriptives that you might think it were the parish beadle [officer], or somebody whom it did not do to mention too particularly. Why not be distinct and say what we mean as well as mean what we say? Ordering our cause would bring us to greater distinctness of mind. It is not necessary, my dear brethren, in the closet to ask for every supposable good thing. It is not necessary to rehearse the catalogue of every want [desire] that you may have, have had, can have, or shall have. Ask for what you now need, and, as a rule, keep to present need. Ask for your daily bread -- what you want now -- ask for that. Ask for it plainly, as before God who does not regard your fine expressions and to whom your eloquence and oratory will be less than nothing and vanity. You are before the Lord; let your

words be few but let your heart be fervent.

You have not quite completed the ordering when you have asked for what you want through Jesus Christ. There should be a looking round the blessing which you desire, too see whether it is assuredly a fitting thing to ask; for some prayers would never be offered if men did but think. A little reflection would show us that some things which we desire were better let alone. We may, moreover, have a motive at the bottom of our desire which is not Christ-like, a selfish motive which forgets God's glory and caters only for our own ease and comfort. Now although we may ask for things which are for our profit, yet still we must never let our profit interfere in any way with the glory of God. There must be mingled with acceptable prayer the holy salt of submission to the divine will. I like Luther's saying, "Lord, I *will* have my will of thee at this time." "What!" say you. "[You] like such an expression as that?" I do, because of the next clause, which was, "I will have my will, *for I know that my will is thy will.*" That is well spoken, Luther; but without the last words it would have been wicked presumption. When we are sure that what we ask for is for God's glory, then, if we have power in prayer, we may say, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." We may come to close dealings with God, and like Jacob with the angel we may even put it to the wrestle and seek to give the angel the fall sooner than be sent away without the benediction. But we must be quite clear, before we come to such terms as those, that what we are seeking is really for the Master's honour.

Put these three things together -- [1] the deep spirituality which recognizes prayer as being real conversation with the invisible God, [2] much distinctness which is the reality of prayer (asking for what we know we want), [3] with it all much fervency, believing the thing to be necessary and therefore resolving to obtain it if it can be had by prayer, and above all these complete submission, [that is], leaving it still with the Master's will -- commingle all these and you have a clear idea of what it is to order your cause before the Lord.

Still, prayer itself is an art which only the Holy Ghost can teach us. He is the giver of all prayer. Pray for prayer, pray till you can pray, pray to be helped to pray, and give not up praying because you cannot pray; for it is when you think that you cannot pray that you are most praying. And sometimes when you have no sort of comfort in your supplications, it is then that your heart, all broken and cast down, is really wrestling and truly prevailing with the Most High.

"Order and Argument in Prayer" in Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971; reprint).