

Prayer and Spirit

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The apostle Paul, in addressing the church which he praised most of all said; “We know not how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered,” or rather “with inarticulate groanings.” This ignorance was not absolute. Both he and those to whom he was writing did know to some extent how to pray, they knew from the instruction which Jesus gave on that subject, and from what they found in the recorded prayers of accepted men. But they and all deeply earnest Christians found moments when the heart was heavily burdened with longings and desires which they could not find words to express; and I suppose it is to these that the apostle refers when he speaks of “inarticulate groanings.”

In such moments, if our prayers were addressed to a man, they would be a failure. But, being addressed to God, the Spirit of God within us knows what we mean when we cannot say what we mean or what we desire; and thus he relieves us of what would otherwise be a very serious infirmity. This fact, however, does not excuse us from making intelligent use of that knowledge which has been imparted to us through the teachings and examples of the sacred Word. The very fact that instruction has been given to us on this subject, implies the duty on our part of reflection and meditation on our prayers, so that we may apply to them the instruction which has been given. We take a good deal of time and hard labor sometimes in premeditating our sermons so as to determine as best we can what we should say on a given occasion to a given audience. If that is true, how much more would it appear that we should premeditate what we should say to God on a given occasion when we are to express to him the wants and aspirations of a whole audience of worshipers. If we do not premeditate our sermons, we are apt to speak a good deal of nonsense. And is it not nonsense to indulge in random talk to the Lord? Are we not likely to do somewhat as did the old farmer who prayed, “O Lord, bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more.” If he had premeditated on what he was about to say to the Lord he would never have said what he did. So of that Confederate soldier of whom General Gordon relates that in the time of our civil war was called on to pray in a soldiers’ prayer meeting. He said; “O Lord, we pray thee to help us. We need thy help and we need it badly. We pray thee, O Lord, to take a right

view on this war and be on our side.” If he had premeditated, his prayer would have taken a different shape.

If we offer our prayers in public, or in the prayer meeting, or in the family, without premeditating, without thinking what we should pray for, we shall either fall into the habit of saying over and over and over again on different occasions the same prayer, or else we will offer some foolish prayer. I have known some preachers, and quite a number of elders and deacons who officiate in the prayer meeting, to fall into this habit, so that the young people in the audience learn to repeat the good brother’s prayer and laugh about it. Now when a man drops into this habit, he loses the sympathy of the audience and becomes wearisome to them. He has fallen into a habit which makes his own mind inactive. Such a prayer may not weary the Lord, but they certainly weary everybody else.

If you were going to meet king George of England, and knew that you would be expected to talk with him for a time, you would be very much concerned as to what you were going to say to him. You would settle it in your mind how you were going to address him. If you did not you might find yourself saying, “Good morning Mister George. How are Mistress George and the children?” But, if you were going to meet him tomorrow, you would spend the whole of this day thinking what would be the proper thing to say; and you would get advice from others who had spoken to kings. Now, if you are going to address the great God and father of us all, and to do so in behalf of a large audience of praying people, will you rush right into his presence without premeditating beforehand how you will address him? You would consider yourself unfit to offer a prayer if you did that. Not one of you would be guilty of it. If you would fairly premeditate you would ask yourself, what, on the occasion of tomorrow, would be the most suitable subject on which to address my Lord and Savior? You would consider the wants and wishes and necessities of the congregation. And in that way your prayers would be in harmony with the instructions that have been received in the scripture, and the prayer would be edifying to the audience. All could say Amen. Paul exhorts those who pray in the congregation not to pray in an unknown tongue so that the brethren would not be able to say Amen.

While I was a student in Bethany College, I heard of the prayer offered by an old brother in western Pennsylvania, not far from the place where Gen. Braddock was defeated and his army almost exterminated by the Indians. While this incident was still fresh in the minds of the people, an old brother who had fallen into the habit of making very long prayers in the family, always mentioned Braddock’s defeat. He had a boy who had heard his father pray so much that he

knew his prayer by heart. One night the boy had a visitor about his own age, and they kneeled during the prayer close together. The home boy fell asleep and the visitor awakened him, He asked in a whisper, "Has father got to Braddock's defeat yet?" "No." "Well, then I can take another nap." There are a great many prayers that are of this character for the want of premeditation. Have you thought of this? Or have you had a strange kind of feeling that, while it is all right to think through my sermon beforehand, it is rather irreverent to think beforehand through my prayers. What I have said, and what your own minds will suggest, is enough to show you that this want of premeditation is unwise if not irreverent. The most solemn thing that a man can do is to stand before an audience of praying people, with some among them who never pray there, offer the common petitions and supplications of a whole multitude. There is a very heavy responsibility lying on the man who does this. And I do not think you should be any less anxious about what you should pray for and how you should pray for it, than you are about what you should preach and how you should preach it.

One of the greatest difficulties I have in preparing these addresses is to find time to condense them into the allotted time! Isocrates, the Greek orator, at one time spoke much longer than he was in the habit of speaking. And one of his friends asked him why he spoke so long. He answered, "I didn't have time to make it any shorter." He didn't have time to reflect upon what he was going to say, and make it so mature as to be brief. You will find this difficulty, in your own experience. You rise with nothing particular on your mind that you want to say, and you keep on talking until everybody wishes you would quit! And so with respect to your prayers. One is often called on to lead in prayers very unexpectedly. You have no time to reflect what you should pray for before beginning. On such occasions you have this relief: You know that there are certain spiritual wants and aspirations that are common to all worshipers, and if you present any of these you will not have gone amiss in respect to the present audience. When you enter an assembly in which it is probable that you will be called on to lead in prayer, begin at once to reflect on the prayer [for] the occasion, and offer it in silence.



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