

## IS PRAYER PROFITABLE?

Job 21:15

"What profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" Job 21:15.

This question may be asked cynically by bad people, as was the case in our text, or it may be asked inquiringly and earnestly by good people.

Job was hit hard by trouble. He was fundamentally a man of faith but, like many other men of faith, he was having trouble in keeping his balance when the blows of adversity and pain hit him in such fierce succession.

One thing that caused Job difficulty was the long-continued prosperity of selfish and wicked men. They ignored God, and grew rich. They did not show any repentance, and were as full of laughter as a lark is of song. They defied the laws of righteousness and lived on to old age.

It is to that sort of persons that Job is referring when he puts upon their lips the salty defiance that marks our text: "What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?"

"What profit?" Fix your mind on the word "profit." Whether this question is raised by the godless or the godly, it needs to be faced with care or we shall be led astray. Think of a person who finds himself wanting something with a kind of desperation of desire. Maybe it's a person who prays once in a while or one who does not pray. In either case there is a prayer upon the lips -- maybe for a job, or for health, or for food, or for money, or for success in an undertaking. In that situation you have a two-fold danger. On the one hand, if the prayer for this particular thing does not result in its being granted, this person we are imagining may give up praying, saying sourly, as some have been known to do, "I tried prayer -- tried it when I needed something badly -- and it didn't work." On the other hand, there is a danger if the thing asked for is granted. There is the peril of thinking that prayer, in circumstances that are too much for you, is simply a device for getting things by "talking" God into granting them.

We are such self-centered and self-motivated creatures that, unless we live moment by moment in the power of the cross where "Give me" becomes "Make me," even prayer can be turned into pious selfishness. To put it differently, it is possible for God's children to think of this word "profit" in connection with prayer in much the same way that businessmen use the word in the commercial world.

The real value of prayer is not uncovered by the question, "How much can you get out of God?" Its full value comes to light in the question, "How much can God get out of you for the fulfilment of His purposes and the glory of His Kingdom?"

So, let us take the question that in our text was asked insincerely and cynically, and try to ask it sincerely, humbly, wisely, and with the dominant desire and purpose of finding and following the will of God for our lives. Very earnestly let us ask: "Is Prayer Profitable?"

The answer to this question is an unequivocal "Yes." The reasons for such a positive answer are valid and manifest. Prayer is profitable because:

### I. Prayer Creates Communion.

Not all begging in prayer is a sign of spiritual immaturity, but much of it is. Far more important than asking God for things is asking Him for Himself. Prayer is not primarily coaxing God, but it is communing with God. It is conversation -- the two-way street of love over which the merchandise of the heart travels quietly. If you are going very far in prayer, you would do well to say to God:

"Heavenly Father, I ask for nothing but a chance to tell Thee of my love for Thee, and an opportunity to listen as Thou dost tell me anything Thou knowest I need to hear." Let something like that be the golden door through which you pass into an experience of enriching comradeship with God. Isaiah wrote these impressive words: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31).

Prayer shows a rich return of profit because it is a creator of communion between our souls and God.

## II. Prayer Cures Pride.

Pride causes so many other sins to be committed. The reason for this is the fact that pride is the sin that says, "I will not let God govern my life; I will run my own life." Pride is the root sin that refuses to accept a place of dependence. Far too many people foolishly assume that they are self-sufficient. In a world where microbes are stronger than man, where sorrow waits, and where death stalks with violence, it is so foolish to pretend that we do not need a refuge.

Real prayer puts a stop to that sort of vanity and nonsense. Prayer puts a man on his knees. Prayer causes a man to raise his hands to God who is infinitely high above him, even at the very moment He is working mercifully with him.

Isaiah was listening one day when he heard God say: "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). Part of the profit of true prayer is the strangling of pride or the slaying of self-sufficiency.

## III. Prayer Cleanses Motives.

The words "motive" and "motor" come from the same root. A motor under the hood of your car propels it. Similarly a motive in your heart impels you, directs you, or drives you to pray a certain prayer. What you put into your prayer is important, of course. But why you put that in your prayer is even more important.

All of us would do well to read and study the fourth chapter of James. There, among other things, you learn that it is possible to say prayers to which God does not pay any attention. It says: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). Phillips translates that verse as follows: "You ask in quite the wrong spirit — you only want to satisfy your own desires."

Psychology has shown us the danger of misinterpreting and misreporting our motives. For example, it is a commonplace for people to say they vote as a Republican or as a Democrat because they believe in the principles of the party. Using that word "principles" sounds so highminded and virtuous. But an honest and good psychiatrist would say that the Republican is very probably voting that ticket because in fact he hopes for lower taxes, while the Democrat is voting that ticket because in fact the Democrats gave or promised his brother a job for which his salary will come from the taxes collected. The mixing of motives is very common. That is why prayer is needed in order that the Holy Spirit may search our desires and evaluate our motives and cleanse our intentions. It is by means of earnest prayer that mixed motives are sorted out and unworthy desires are put away. That is clear gain. Is your motive right in God's sight when you pray?

#### IV. Prayer Conquers Circumstances.

Sometimes prayer conquers circumstances by changing them, and sometimes they are conquered by changing us with regard to them.

Think for a moment of the first of these two ways of conquest that we find through prayer. In Acts 12 we are told about Peter being cast into prison. The Christians in Jerusalem prayed for him and his release. The Bible says: "Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12:5). What was the result? Peter was miraculously released, his enemies were filled with consternation, and those who prayed were astonished and filled with amazement. When God's purposes can best be achieved, prayer can change the circumstances.

Years ago the late Dr. John R. Mott was touring India, conducting preaching missions at various university centers. The halls in which he spoke were well filled, but the students, whether Hindus, Mohammedans, Buddhists, or Parsees, were almost without exception antagonistic. It was not uncommon for the very mention of the word "Jesus" to call forth hisses.

The experience was a difficult, agonizing and exhausting one for Dr. Mott. As the itinerary unfolded he came to the city of Madras. Here the students were even more violent in their hostility. Their rudeness tempted Dr. Mott to think that he should not try to finish his message. Besides, he noticed that he was losing part of his audience, for students were going out, their reason for leaving being, as he supposed, their disinterest in his message. He went on, doggedly, but hopefully. Before long he was aware that something unusual was taking place. A strange quiet came over the crowd. He could see that they were listening and could feel them responding. On to the point of making his appeal he went. When the invitation was given, scores of those students stepped forward, signifying their acceptance of Christ and their surrender to Him.

Later Dr. Mott learned that those men who had left the auditorium, so far from being unfriendly, were Christian students who, almost as though it had been prearranged, felt impelled to go out to an adjoining room and engage in an impromptu prayer service. There they had asked God to show His power and make effective the gospel witness concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. In telling about it afterward Dr. Mott remarked gratefully: "Even as Christ stilled the tempest nineteen hundred years ago on the sea of Galilee, so in modern India He quieted the storm of antagonism and hate in that Madras pavilion." Here was the power of prayer taking hold of adverse circumstances and dissolving them.

But, frankly, it is not always so when we pray. There are times when it is not the circumstances that change but ourselves in relating to those circumstances.

Acts 12 portrayed Peter emerging from prison and a praying assembly of Christians filled with grateful wonder as a consequence. But James didn't get out of prison. Herod put him to death with the sword. The victory of prayer in the case of James was the victory of a faith and a loyalty that remained dauntless to the end. His grim circumstances might have changed him into a coward and a cynic, but they didn't. Prayer's conquest in his case was not to transform the circumstances, but to transcend them — not to dissolve the outer difficulty, but to reinforce the inner ability.

God commands us to pray. It is a grave sin when we neglect to pray. Prayer is an incomparable privilege and an inexorable duty. We sin against God, others and ourselves if we neglect prayer. Prayer puts us in tune with God, keeps us from self-sufficiency, cleanses our motives, and conquers circumstances.