J. OSWALD SANDERS
formerly General Director of the
Overseas Missionary Fellowship

EFFECTIVE PRAYER

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we consider it supplemental, not fundamental."

OMF BOOKS
INTRODUCTION

Prayer is a paradox. No spiritual exercise is such a blending of complexity and simplicity. It is the simplest form of speech that infant lips can try, yet the sublimest strains that reach the Majesty on high. It is as appropriate to the aged philosopher as to the little child. It is the ejaculation of a moment and the attitude of a lifetime. It is the expression of the rest of faith and of the fight of faith. It is an agony and an ecstasy. It is submissive and yet importunate. In the one moment it lays hold of God and binds the devil. It can be focussed on a single objective and it can roam the world. It can be abject confession and rapt adoration. It invests puny man with a sort of omnipotence. Small wonder, then, that even its greatest exponent and example was forced to admit, "We do not even know how we ought to pray". But he was swift to add, "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness... Through our inarticulate groans the Spirit Himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because He pleads for God’s own people in God’s own way" (Rom. 8:26-28, New English Bible).

Our Lord left us in no doubt of the part prayer was to play in the missionary enterprise. He clearly placed it on a prayer basis in the memorable words: "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth labourers into His harvest" (Matt. 9:37, 38). Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey to the accompaniment of prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2-4). Ever since, the missionary cause has advanced upon its knees. Where prayer has been prevailing, it has prospered. Where prayer has been lukewarm, it has languished.

Is it not strange that in spite of our conviction of its privilege and necessity, we are all plagued with a subtle aversion to praying? We do not naturally delight in drawing near to God. We pay lip-service to its value and potency and yet so often fail
to pray. “When I go to pray,” confessed one eminent Christian, “I find my heart is so loth to go to God, and when it is with Him so loth to stay.” It is here that self discipline comes in. “When thou feelest most indisposed to pray,” counselled an old divine, “yield not to it. But strive and endeavour to pray even when thou thinkest thou canst not pray.” Here is an area in which we can avail ourselves of the Spirit’s promised assistance in our weakness.

Intercessory prayer will take time, but could hours be more strategically spent? Time is a commodity of which there seems to be a universal and chronic shortage. Lack of time is a much overworked excuse for neglect of duty. And yet, strangely enough, even in the midst of an exacting routine we always contrive to find time for all we urgently want to do. In reality, the fundamental problem lies not in the time factor, but in the realm of will and desire. We each have all the time there is, and we each choose our own priorities. We automatically place first that which we deem most important. If prayer is meagre it is because we consider it supplemental, not fundamental. To our Lord it was not a reluctant addendum, but a fundamental necessity. The time we spend in prayer will depend on the way in which we allocate our priorities. If we share Christ’s view of the indispensability of prayer, we will somehow make time for it.

That prayer in one aspect is spiritual warfare is clearly taught in Scripture. “Our fight is not against human foes but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens. Therefore . . . give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty; pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit. To this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God’s people” (Eph. 6:11, 12, 18, 19, New English Bible). In this aspect of prayer, three and not two are involved. Between God and the devil, the god of this world, stands the praying man. Though pitifully weak in himself, he occupies a strategic role in this truceless warfare. His power and authority as he battles in faith are not inherent, but are his through his union with the Victor of Calvary.
Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is seen occupied not so much with the wicked men and evil conditions He confronted, as with the forces of evil behind them. In the words of well-meaning Peter, in the treachery of the traitorous Judas, Jesus detected the black hand of Satan. "Get thee behind Me, Satan," He said to Peter. Behind the hideous idol the missionary sees the foul spirit which enslaves the devotee. We see souls bound in sin, but our concern in prayer should be not only to pray for them, but also to pray against Satan who holds them captive. He must be made to relax his hold on them, and only the power of Christ’s victory, appropriated and applied through the prayer of faith, can achieve this. Jesus dealt with the cause, not the effect, and if we are to pray effectively we must follow the same pattern.

In a graphic illustration our Lord likened Satan to a well-armed strong man who kept his palace in peace. Before he could be dislodged and his captives liberated, Jesus said he must first be bound. Only then could the rescue be effected (Matt. 12:28, 29; Luke 11:21, 22). "We may be spiritual and prayerful, courageous and determined," writes Arthur Wallis, "we may even succeed in breaking into the strong man’s house, but if we have not learned the secret of prayer warfare and how to bind the strong man, he will very likely return in fury and drive us out. Such a counter-attack can have a devastating effect on those who have been praying and labouring hopefully, and it can also supply opposers with the ammunition they require."

What does it mean to "bind the strong man", if not to restrain his activity by appealing to the conquering power of Him who was manifested to destroy—render inoperative, powerless—the works of the devil? (1 John 3:8). And how can this be done but by the prayer of faith, which lays hold of the victory of Calvary and believes for its manifestation in the situation on which prayer is being focussed? Let us not reverse the Lord’s order—"first bind . . . then spoil"—and still expect to effect the rescue without neutralizing the Adversary. Let us confidently accept our divine-given authority and exercise it. "Behold I have given you authority . . . over all the power of
the enemy” (Luke 10:19, R.S.V.). Of what value is this delegation of authority if it is not exercised?

“Satan dreads nothing but prayer,” wrote Samuel Chadwick. “His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”

In the history of the China Inland Mission (now called the “Overseas Missionary Fellowship”) the tide in many a crisis has turned when its workers have met the situation with prayer and fasting. Many a stubborn city has opened, many an intransigent heart has yielded, many a financial need has been supplied and many a delicate personnel difficulty has been resolved by this means. While fasting is always optional in the New Testament, the record indicates that it was resorted to in the face of special temptation (Matt. 4:2); where there was a yearning after a closer walk with God (1 Cor. 7:5); where there was deep concern for evangelizing the regions beyond (Acts 13:1-3); where there was spiritual travail for the development of a church (Acts 14:21-23); where some stubborn situation had yielded to no other method (Matt. 17:21). There is still a place for prayer and fasting, though not on legalistic grounds.

The thumb-nail studies in this booklet, which have appeared in The Millions, suggest some of the principles underlying effective prayer, and illustrates them from the lives of praying men and women of Bible times. They are presented in this form in the hope that they may prove suggestive and helpful in the hour of prayer.

J. OSWALD SANDERS.