

Life Begins With God

to keep and use as you desire. I make only one request: Will you welcome me one day a week as your guest, and give me that much of your time?"

Could we be so ungrateful that we would refuse the gift and the love bestowed upon us? This is what the heavenly Father has offered us. He gives us life and all our possessions. With these benefits He makes a request, He asks for one seventh of our time. Shall we refuse God's love? Shall we selfishly preoccupy the sacred time that we might spend in communion with our Lord? May we acknowledge the divine claims, and with joy and reverence make the Sabbath the richest experience of life.

13. "A THING OF BEAUTY"

DURING a winter storm on the coast of Oregon a group of guests sat in a beach hotel before the crackling log fire in the huge fireplace. Sheets of rain beat against the windows, and the roar of the gale rose to a crescendo that would sometimes drown the conversation. For twenty-four hours preceding the storm the Pacific had been blanketed by a heavy fog, and in the treacherous sea a great ocean liner had gone aground on a sandspit as it was attempting to enter the mouth of the Columbia River. Shortly after the vessel had stranded, the storm broke in its fury. Since noon a hundred passengers and crew members had waited on board the ship for help from the shore.

As night brought darkness with increasing fury of the storm, the guests in the hotel were talking of the heroic efforts being made to save the men and women on the wrecked liner. During a pause in the conversation a woman quietly said, "I've been praying very earnestly for their safety since the news of the accident reached us."

"What good will that do them?" came the gruff retort of a man as he pointed toward the window facing the roaring combers. "I'll back lifeboats and breeches buoys, well manned, in such an emergency against all the praying we could do."

"Perhaps a combination of prayer and physical effort would be the best," replied the quiet voice. "Man knows about breeches buoys and lifeboats, but he has never fully tested the power of prayer."

The shipwrecked voyagers were rescued by the coast guard, but the part that prayer had in their salvation will not be known in this world. If we could see how the golden threads of prayer are interwoven with our lives and the experiences of others, we might realize that "More things are wrought by prayer Than this world dreams of." [1]

Why should men scoff at prayer simply because they cannot fathom its divine power? Radio is a miracle of science which few of us can actually understand, and yet we accept it as an integral part of our everyday living. As we speed along the highway we are able to tune in lectures, news, and entertainment. If men can invent instruments of communication such as the telephone and radio, cannot God talk with His children, and give them the privilege of talking to Him in prayer? Our unbelief is challenged by the poet in these lines:

"If radio's slim fingers
Can pluck a melody
From night, and toss it over
A continent or sea."

"If petals of white notes
Of a violin
Are blown across a mountain
Or a city's din."

"If songs, like crimson roses,
Are culled from the thin blue air
Why should mortals wonder
If God hears prayer?" [2]

There is eternal beauty in the lives of Christians who are bound to the Father above with the invisible ties of prayer. Every human heart calls out to a higher power in the hour of extremity. God planted the cry for help within every living soul. A study of the non-Christian peoples shows that they have offered

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prayers to their gods for millenniums. The Hottentots of Africa called out to a “great spirit,” the Callas of East Africa made their cries known to the gods to keep them from hunger and famine, and the Aztecs called upon a supreme being even amid cruel sacrifices. Truly men have sought for the Creator, though to them He was the “unknown God.”

Prayer is the golden opportunity given to men to speak with heaven. When we pray we are seeking God’s direction for our lives. “Prayer is to ask not what we wish of God, but what God wishes of us.” However, we often come to the Father stipulating what we want Him to do for us, forgetting what He desires to give us for our growth and development. How many times we have looked upon prayer as a signed blank check which may be filled out for immediate payment. But we cannot choose what we shall receive; it is our privilege to ask for heaven’s blessings to be given as the Father directs.

We cannot develop a strong spiritual life without regular devotions. Amid the stress and anxiety of our civilization we have too often neglected the study of God’s word and private prayer. One of the admissions of students in Christian academies and colleges is that they fail to stop in the busy routine of classes, activities, and entertainment to take deep breaths of spiritual air. Perhaps as we fall on our knees for a moment in the morning and again before we tumble into our bed at night, we repeat set phrases we have known since childhood; but we fail to grasp the deeper meaning of our devotions. Meditating upon the love of God, pouring out the heart’s desires to Him who loved us enough to give His Son to die for us, remembering His words, and listening to His answers to our questionings -these are a part of the prayer life.

There is beauty in an hour of meditation with God when the bickering cares of the world are shut out. We can relax from the anxiety that infests the mind by following the admonition of the Lord, “Be still, and know that I am God.” The great crises of life must be faced alone with our heavenly Friend. Jesus knew what it was to pray and meditate alone, away from His closest disciples.

“His heart craved sympathy, But He was alone.
He was fighting the battle for all the race, And He was alone.
He was pitted against all the powers of hell, And He was alone.
He was lonely -desperately lonely, And He was alone.” [3]

To a certain degree this is the experience of every man as he journeys through life, and in those hours of solitary thought and prayer there is strong development of Christian character.

Our prayers must be filled with thought. There is a vast difference between praying and saying a prayer. Until our minds call out after the Eternal One, until we see the need of the whole world, our prayers will be shallow and self-centered. The narrower the vision the smaller will be our prayers. When we have the unselfish love for others in our hearts we can pray the larger prayer; we will call out to God, “Here I am! Send me,” instead of “Here I am! Give me.” When youth of the twentieth century lift their eyes to the horizon, when they listen to the cry of suffering humanity, they will pray for all men.

The prayer that Jesus offered in the Garden of Gethsemane reveals the submission to the divine plan that must be ours. As the Master thought of the advancing mob, the unjust trials, the taunting and torturing, and the death by crucifixion, His human nature shrank from the ordeal. In His struggle between the flesh and the spirit He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass by Me.” So often this is our prayer as we face the difficult moments of life, and it is right that we should pray for a way of escape; but we must willingly complete the prayer as Jesus prayed it: “Yet not as I please but as You do!” [4] How strong is our faith? Are we willing to submit our plans to the divine Architect, or do we attempt to snatch the blueprints of our life from Him in headstrong defiance? The lesson of submission is our supreme need in prayer; it is one of the hardest for the child of God to learn.

A modern parable of submission has been related by the Rev. Iddings Bell. A small boy saw an electric train in a department store window about a month before Christmas. He told his mother that he would pray every night to receive that toy as a present. Now his mother was a widow who did sewing to feed the family, and she knew she could never afford to buy the expensive present for her son; but she was afraid he would be disappointed if God did not answer his petitions.

Christmas came and there was no train. That night the mother knelt beside her ten-year old boy as he prayed, and she said, I hope, John, that you are not terribly distressed because God did not answer your request for the train.”

The child looked at his mother in wonder and replied, “why, mother, God answered me all right. He said, No.” [5] If we could learn this vital lesson of submission to the will of the Father, we would be saved many doubts, perplexities, and bitter disappointments.

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To understand the power of prayer we must learn to pray. Martin Luther said: "No one can believe what power and efficacy there is in prayer, unless he has learned it by experience. It is a great thing when a soul feels a mighty need and betakes itself to prayer."

There is courage for the Christian as he knows that the Son of God is praying for him. When Peter was on the verge of denying his Lord, Jesus said, "O Simon, Simon! Satan has obtained permission to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail." [6] We are encouraged when we know that father and mother are praying for our success; but how much more wonderful it is to know that Jesus Christ is interceding in our behalf. As we think of His earthly ministry we remember His prayer in the garden, beyond Brook Kedron, "Holy Father, keep them by Your power which You gave Me, so that they may be one just as We are." [7] Strength to follow the narrow way comes as we know Jesus is praying for us. "Therefore, He is able to save forever all who come to God through Him, because He lives and intercedes for them forever." [8]

We do not know how to pray as we ought, but we must come boldly to the Father's throne. As William James declared: "The reason why we do pray is simply that we cannot help praying. That is why we breathe. It seems probable that, in spite of all that science can do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time. For most of us a world with no such inner refuge would be the abyss of horror."

If our prayers have been narrow and shallow, we should seek wisdom from above. "Lord, teach us to pray," will be upon our lips. Real prayer may cost us a great deal, for we must be willing to do anything we ask God to do for us. If we ask for health, we must be willing to observe the laws of health. If we ask for peace, we must be ready to live peaceably with all men. If we ask for an education, we must be anxious to make the most of every opportunity to learn. If we ask for forgiveness, we should be willing to forgive those who wrong us. If we seek God's love, we must be ready to love all our fellow men.

Reverence for God is an integral part of our public as well as our private devotions. In ancient Israel the Lord asked that His people build a sanctuary that He might "dwell among them." [9] God longs to meet with His children today as He did in ages past. Jesus emphasized the sacredness of His Father's house by declaring: "The Scripture says 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a robbers' cave.'" [10]

Do we go to the church to meet with God and to acknowledge His presence in the edifice dedicated to His worship? Or do we consider the church as little more than a convenient place to sit and listen to the preacher? "To the humble, believing soul, the house of God on earth is the gate of heaven." [11] There should be beauty in the worship of God in His sanctuary which surpasses all other religious experiences. In the magnificent temple of Israel there was beauty which produced awe and reverence. The sacred altar and the other furnishings were of gold, the incense arose from the burning coals to impress upon the senses that the place was holy, and rich music appealed to the hearts of the worshipers. Frequently the psalmist mentions how men should worship the Lord in "the beauty of holiness."

My thoughts on reverence were challenged not long ago when I read the following statement: "Nothing would be so beneficial as to have our pulpits silenced for a year. The other phases of worship would be restored the worship of prayer, praise, and enlightened faith. Some of them are entirely gone from the churches. The people no longer pray, but listen to the minister as he prays. Worship has become a passive matter. The congregation has become an audience - a body of listeners." [12] It would certainly be wrong to do away with preaching; but at least the statement stimulates thought. Indeed, there are other parts of the service in the church in which every worshiper may reverently take part.

Our hymns and sacred music should be chosen to express the adoration and praise we offer to God. Light songs with no depth of spiritual experience are not the most fitting form of music to offer the King of kings.

The worship of God is to be an active, living experience in every Christian. Passive, listless silence or stagnant, sleepy indifference is not reverent worship of the Lord. Alert, keen minds should concentrate upon prayer and meditation as well as upon the sermon. "The moral taste of the worshipers in God's holy sanctuary must be elevated, refined, sanctified!" [13] Thoughts of business or secular interests should have no place in our minds as we come before the loving Father.

David could write of attending the services in the temple with all the joy and fervor of a devout worshiper. "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord." [14] Such an experience as the psalmist found has been discovered by many young Christians in our day. Discussions in the college classrooms have shown me that youth loves the beautiful in nature, in art, and in religion. I have been drawn very close to God in the beautiful vesper service in the church," wrote a freshman girl in her theme. "The deep harmony of the organ, the words of the psalm in all of their sweetness and power, the quiet

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meditation-all of these made me realize God was very near. How I wish that all our churches had reverence and beauty in the service. I need to find peace in the church that will go with me in my daily humdrum work.”

Reverence begins in the thoughts of the individual, and when our devotion in private has been shallow and superficial, our worship in public may be mere form. The humble follower of Jesus Christ will find many more blessings in the church services if he has known the beauty of constant private prayer and meditation. We must keep the lines of communication clear between God and the soul. If sin blocks the two-way conversation, a defeated life is the result.

During the invasion of France by the Nazi armies the lines of communication of the defenders were broken. When the soldiers could not hear from the staff headquarters, disorganization and retreat were certain to follow. Rumors of defeat spread from post to post, and enemy propaganda did its work. In the Christian's life there is a battle between good and evil, and it is absolutely necessary to keep the line of communication open. If the voice of our Captain is not heard, the temptations and doubts of the enemy assail us on every side. Prayer is the communication line by which God's messages reach the listening ear of the Christian.

There is an escape from the sordid machine age with its raucous din, there is relief from the ugly realism of this crime-, and war-ridden age. It is found in the peace and strength of our devotions. We can tune out the static noises which destroy the music of life, and heed the still, small voice: “Go, My people, enter your chambers, And shut your doors behind you; Hide yourselves for a little while, Till the time of wrath go by.” [15]

Alone with the Master when the fog of doubt thickens about groping humanity, alone with God in the dark watches of the night, talking with our Friend when all men revile and forsake us, listening to His voice when no other message can bring comfort and cheer-this is the enduring religion of the true Christian, the crowning friendship!

14. THE SYMPHONY OF LIFE

THE musicians are seated upon the broad stage and the audience is hushed as the conductor enters from the wing, takes his place, and lifts his baton. The music from a hundred instruments blends in the “Fifth Symphony” by Beethoven. Here is a mighty orchestra in all of its strength, grandeur, and superb musical quality. Every musician plays his part. There are the high delicate notes of the flute and the low full tones of the bass viol, the soft tremolo of the violin, and the weird vibrations of the oboe. The immortal music of the masters is re-created by the great symphony orchestras.

“Symphony” is defined as a harmonious blending, such as the mingling of sounds and colors. Since any harmony may be described as a symphony, it is fitting to consider the symphony of life. In human relationships every man plays his part. The music of his life is not the same as his brother's score, yet he must blend himself with a thousand other people and bring harmony and happiness to the multitude. How monotonous it would be if we were all alike. Our individual differences are of great value for where my brother is strong I may be weak, and he can help me with his peculiar talent. “None of us lives only to himself, and none of us dies only to himself.” [1] The abilities we possess will influence other lives.

Jesus Christ gathered a little symphony about Him and trained them to produce immortal music. He could not mold them into perfect harmony without discipline and practice. There was Simon Peter, the impetuous, intrepid radical who was talking constantly. The rugged fisherman was ready to rush into any crisis and repent afterward. In direct contrast with him was his brother, Andrew, the conservative, reserved disciple. He never spoke an unnecessary word. What a queer combination of brothers were Peter and Andrew, yet in spite of their eccentricities the Master found a place for each in His plan.

James and John were surnamed “sons of thunder,” probably because of their fierce, turbulent natures. They were jealous of the highest position next to the Lord, and they were anxious to call down fire upon their enemies. Yet John became the beloved disciple, faithful in his devotion to his Master through the lonely years of his ministry and exile.

Thomas was the doubter and pessimist. His faith was often a minus quantity; but the Lord was tolerant with his weakness. He loved the doubting one and saw within him talents that would make him an apostle.

As the Master Conductor, Jesus worked long to bring harmony among His followers. Bickering, jealousy, sarcasm, and scorn broke the harmony of the twelve men time and again. Peter attempted to pry