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Prayer

by T. Austin-Sparks

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We go on now with some of the difficulties in relation to prayer following upon the difficulty which arises in reconciling importunity with submission and submission with importunity. There is the difficulty which also sometimes creeps in in the matter of relating faith to persistence and persistence to faith. Here also, there sometimes seems to be conflict in the mind, and as we have said about the other matters, this, not being squared down to and clearly defined and seriously taken up and thrashed out by us, remains as one of those weakening things in the matter of prayer. Does persistence deny faith? Does faith mean that you stop your persistence? Mentioned, of course, as merely an intellectual or mental difficulty, we can immediately see that there might be something to be cleared up, but apart from bringing it out into a clear form of words, the fact does often lie in the background of our minds. So we must seek to get rid of this bit of difficulty if it is there or if it should come there, and as far as possible forever arrest it.

Now, there are those with whom we have come into touch (and perhaps we ourselves have been found in the same category) who try to cultivate a state where they just quiescently accept all and trust that God will do His best for them. They seek to accept all that comes, refusing nothing and pressing for nothing, and their idea is that this is faith at its very best, so that anything like importunity or persistence in prayer has no place; it is not according to faith. Now, to make such a position absolute is, to begin with, to deny the Bible teaching on prayer and faith. You cannot rightly apprehend the teaching of the Word on either of those matters and make a position like that absolute or settle it finally. It is true that persistence or insistence - I think the latter word in this connection is the word which fits better - insistence may be lack of faith and acceptance may be

faith's way, but before you can decide that it is so in either case, there are other things to be taken into account.

For instance, Paul was at one time found in the realm of persistence which, if it did not wholly amount to insistence and that in relation to his thorn in the flesh for which thing he sought the Lord thrice. And knowing the man, his strength of nature, temperament, we might not be misjudging him if we said that his persistence amounted to insistence, or very nearly so. His attitude was that this thing must go. It was a hindrance which was a limitation and so he persisted in seeking the Lord that it might be removed; acceptance on his part became faith's way. But he had, through exercise, to come to see definitely that acceptance was faith's way. He did not, right at the commencement, take the attitude: "Well, I have got a thorn, the Lord knows all about it, I will not say anything, I will just take it." No, he did not take things like that, he entered into a very persistent enquiry of the Lord about this, seeking the Lord about this thing, and through his exercise he came to see that his faith was in coming to accept. Faith for him was a matter of acceptance and not deliverance. Insistence may, therefore, be a lack of faith. He came to a conviction. There has to be conviction through exercise before you accept the situation. You must come to the positive. Faith is a positive thing.

Now, acceptance and passivity may be absence of faith, and action may be absolutely necessary so that importunity or persistence is not in conflict with faith; it is an aid to faith and works in the direction of faith, and becomes the ground upon which we are established in our faith. I hope this method of argument is not too abstract, that you are able to grasp it. The thing that we have said is that acceptance and passivity may be an absence of faith and action be necessary - action leading to conviction and conviction being the foundation of faith. You do not come to an established faith only through action by which you have reached conviction. That is all against a merely passive initial acceptance of a situation on some line of, "Well, the Lord is good and I leave everything with Him, taking what He sends." That is not His will for us because, as we have pointed out, the will of God is relative so often in our case, and it is only as we take up the situation that we get to the object of the permissive will of God, the positive ground. Now in this matter God has been known often to provide a place for argument and reasoning with Himself. We have ground in the Word of God for saying that: that the Lord will go as far as either to take an attitude Himself, create, bring into being a circumstance or a set of circumstances, or call for an argument with Himself directly: "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord."

And in the case of Moses, more than once he entered into what might be called a controversy with God, and the issue was, on the face of it, that Moses won. We shall see in another connection presently that he did not win, God won. But the Lord had projected the situation in order to draw out His servant into a real argument with Himself on a matter in order to reach a positive end. It was a situation precipitated by the Lord which could not be accepted as consistent with the Lord's ends and purposes, and the Lord wanted His servants to see the inconsistency of it and draw him out, so that in the end this should be changed. If Moses had said: "This is a pretty bad situation. I do not understand it, but the Lord has permitted it and I must accept it. With all the mystery and apparent contradiction of it, I must believe the Lord knows what He is doing and try and go on". The Lord did not intend him to take that attitude; the Lord had precipitated that thing just for the opposite purpose so that a merely passive acquiescence was contrary to God's will. Therefore, if the Lord provides a place for argument or debating with Him reverently upon questions of His own honour, it is settled forever that anything like the aggressive with the Lord in importunity and persistence is not contrary to the Lord's mind. We will touch that again presently in another connection.

Let us say again then, faith is always an active principle and never a passive, whichever way it works. If faith comes to acquiescence and acceptance, it has to come to that through exercise and therefore it is an active thing and not a passive thing. If faith takes the opposite course it is obvious that it is not passive; that is, if it takes the opposite of acquiescence and acceptance then surely it is not passive. But faith is always an active principle whichever way it works, and it is not faith just to sit down and say, "Things are as they are and I accept them, I do not murmur, I do not ask for anything else, I trust the Lord in His goodness... it will all be alright". That is not co-operation with God in faith. There is a place for enquiry about everything and after the exercise and enquiry we may come to the place where we have to say, "Yes, alright, that is the Lord, I accept it". That is faith active. We may after enquiry come to say, "In my heart the Spirit of the Lord says that situation is not to be taken as God's will, and therefore, I cannot accept it and my faith stands that it shall be changed, moved, or made to serve a purpose and then put aside". We must never think prayer is intended to be a labour-saving device. (You can make of that what you like).

Now we pass on to a further difficulty which is so often present, that is, the question of Divine knowledge in relation to prayer. The question is: does the perfect Divine knowledge make prayer unnecessary? "Your Father knows what things you have need of before you ask Him"; then why ask? That is a very simple form of the problem, but it opens out to a very much larger range. God is all knowing - to use a more academic word, He is omniscient. He knows all our needs, we can inform Him of nothing. We can tell Him nothing that He does not already know, and He knows the end from the beginning. "He knows the way that I take." His knowledge is perfect. Does prayer then become unnecessary? Is there no place for telling the Lord things, asking the Lord to meet needs which are brought to Him, needs which we make known? Is there no place for making known to the Lord our needs, seeing He knows all things? And does the finality of His knowledge, that He reaches towards the end of a thing in His knowledge and knows exactly what the end will be, mean what can we hope to effect by prayer? That question or problem can be stated in more ways than I have presented it. We proceed to seek to illustrate it and open it up and answer it in measure at least. And here again there comes in that which we have said in other connections, that while God's 'all knowledge' stands, prayer is the Divine way of bringing us into the Divine knowledge. It is one thing to have simple requests granted in the matter of many outward things. It is quite another thing, and well in advance of that, when we can say as the result of prayer education: I have come to learn that the Lord does not do things in this way or in that way, but that the Lord acts upon definite principles and by definite laws.

Now, those are two levels of life. One is the child, kindergarten level; the other is the son level, the maturity level. It is a very lovely thing, a very delightful thing, just to ask the Lord to do something of the objective external kind in the many ordinary incidents of daily life, or in life's course, and just get an answer. It is done, you see it is given; very lovely, but the question still remains: what principle have you learned? You simply ask and receive. When you come up against the far bigger and more complex things of the problems of the work, and other people's spiritual problems in the work of the Lord where the ultimate forces of the universe are involved, where Satan has got a footing and the powers of darkness have got a grip and there is a situation which is not a simple situation by any means, and you ask the Lord to change it, and you seek to have it dealt with just as you would deal with perhaps, say your next meal: "Lord you know I have no breakfast, please send me some tomorrow morning" - and the Lord answers; to try to deal with the thing on that principle and the thing does not work, does not happen - where are you now? There is a knowledge of God which is perfect in relation to that thing and which is capable of solving that deeper problem, but the Lord wants us to possess that knowledge, or enter into that knowledge, and know the principles and the

laws which govern it, and prayer is the way by which the Lord brings us into Divine knowledge and into the truth of things.

Now, the Holy Spirit is within us as what we may call a pilot, and as we watch Him at work in our own hearts, in our own spirits, we shall learn many lessons of a heavenly character - lessons of a heavenly order. I do not know if ever you have stood beside a pilot. I remember on one occasion being on the bridge of a ship when the pilot came aboard. The captain handed over and the pilot gave his instructions to the man at the wheel. There was the harbour; it was to be entered. Here was the open sea. Instead of making straight for the harbour the pilot turned the ship out to sea and came by a circle into a straight line with the harbour. Any ordinary observer saw no reason whatever why he should not have made straight for the harbour. There were no apparent obstructions, depth of water seemed to be no question, and I said to the captain: "Why this way in?" Well, he said there are two landmarks, one is a church steeple in town and the other is some point, a tower or something, on the shore and the pilot knows that when he gets those two things absolutely in line he has got mid-channel and he can go straight in, and his work is perfectly simple. He comes right alongside, and he has not to wriggle in when he gets in to be pushed in. He has got a knowledge of this thing which we do not possess; we simply have to stand by and we learn. No doubt having been in this harbour with a pilot I could do it myself, but I have learned his secret of getting into that harbour.

It is just like that. The Holy Spirit is in us with heavenly knowledge, and as we watch Him in our own spirit we learn things after a heavenly order, and that is mainly done in prayer, that as we pray the Spirit takes a certain course in us which, if we are spiritually sensitive, we recognise. The Spirit is taking this course, the Lord is indicating a certain thing; and we come to conclusions: "Oh, that is how the Lord does it! That is the Lord's principle of operation!", and so we come to possess a higher knowledge and wisdom and enter into a knowledge of God over things in prayer. So that God does not, and is not content to have all His knowledge only as in Himself. He has created us that He might share that knowledge with us, not to make us omniscient, to invest us with the attributes of Deity, but to cause us to share His knowledge and to come to see that His understanding of things ever transcends the understanding of men. So that faith in this second connection is not blind plunging on; it is inward intelligence, fellowship. Faith is never blind plunging on, faith is always an intelligent thing, not the ordinary human knowledge, but that inward knowledge. Read Hebrews 11 again and you will see that although they did not see on the natural level, the whole course of things, the faith of the saints was always based upon some spiritual intelligence. Why did they refuse deliverance? It was not a blind taking risks, chancing the consequences. It was because inwardly faith apprehended God that that was God's way for them and must lead to a God-glorifying issue. And the whole of that chapter, Hebrews 11, is written to vindicate faith; not to vindicate a blind plunging on on the part of people, but to vindicate faith in its intelligence. But spiritual intelligence is a thing in itself. It is apprehending the Divine wisdom.

Prayer is the realm in which the Spirit teaches knowledge and we should, therefore, seek to register the direction of the Spirit when we wait upon the Lord. Prayer is not just a going into the presence of God, taking a posture and asking a lot of things, getting up and going away. Prayer is a waiting upon the Lord to get a registration from the Lord of the Spirit's direction. Further, the Lord has bound us to Himself by His Spirit; the guidance of the Spirit demands walking in the Spirit. The foundation of a life in the Spirit is prayer. Take the Old Testament type, the pillar of cloud. By that pillar of cloud the Lord's people were linked with Himself. The stopping, the going on, the direction were all related to the pillar of cloud, but that was not enough. Their eyes had to be on the cloud to know when to go,

when to stop, and which way to take: and it is our spirit, quickened, illuminated, joined to the Lord which acts for us as the eye which sees which way the Spirit is going, when the Spirit is going, and when He is not going. That is where Moses was so much in danger on one occasion, in appealing to his father-in-law to come and to be to them as eyes. It was a very blessed thing that it broke down.

Now here again in this connection moral training comes up. Learning in prayer what God likes and what God dislikes. This is moral knowledge which is important. The other kind of knowledge (that which is, shall I say, more mental knowledge of the Lord) is a very important knowledge. But with the Lord moral knowledge takes a very great place; that moral knowledge which is of this character, the knowing of what is favourable and what is not favourable to the Lord, what the Lord likes and what He dislikes. That is the making of conscience in us, the spiritual conscience, a new creation moral conscience, the formation of a taste. You may think that taste is natural, it is a part of our constitution, but if you think a little more carefully you will decide that it is not. That taste is formed. And taste is very largely, if not entirely, a matter of what you are used to and what you are not used to. You can acquire a taste or you can so grow into a thing that anything other than that is not to your taste. Some people can eat and relish cheese that is well advanced in mortification! To others, they have never been trained that way; it is an acquired taste. The poor creature who lives in all the squalor, neglect, darkness and filth of a heathen city does not register anything of revulsion to it. They have grown there. That is their native life. If you cleaned them up they would feel uncomfortable and not know what to make of it. They would have to acquire another taste for cleanliness and order. We are not born so much with taste as it is a matter of what we have had and not had - something developed by reason of the life we live - what we have and what we do not have.

Now, that is a sidelight upon moral taste from the Divine standpoint, what God likes and what He does not like, and we have to learn that spiritual and moral taste and acquire it. We do that in the presence of the Lord in prayer. There is no place where we come more clearly to recognise what the Lord likes and does not like, more than the place of prayer and prayer ought to have that effect upon us. So that moral knowledge (this is what we call "moral knowledge") is developed in prayer, and prayer is for that very purpose. And it is a most impressive and striking thing that while in the ordinary business and work of life we may go on in certain ways through the day, and when we come back to the quiet time of prayer with the Lord something comes back and strikes us as having been in the day, and we were not alive to it at the time. The Holy Spirit acts to us as a superconscious mind which stores up everything and at the right time, when it gets into the right realm, a clear atmosphere, He shows us in prayer things wrong during the day. We did not register them at the time; likewise the Holy Spirit approves of what is according to the mind of the Lord, and knows a sense of peace and rest, clearness with the Lord. Well, this is moral knowledge. This is our entering into the knowledge of the Lord, so that rather than being a deterrent to prayer, the omniscience of the Lord is the very occasion for prayer, that we might come into a knowledge which we do not possess either mentally or morally. Divine 'all knowledge' is rather a reason for prayer than the contrary.

Then again, prayer bringing us into the presence of the Divine omniscience has the effect of setting up a government of our secret life. One who lives in communion with the Lord will find a swift check to thoughts and judgments and criticisms etcetera, which may never have been given expression to by the lips. In our lives towards one another we refrain from saying a lot of things, either because we should be ashamed for them to be heard or we would be afraid of the consequences of them being heard. There is a good deal of silence in this world which is judicious silence because of

consequences. You may be most libellous in your thoughts, but if you put it into words you would have a writ, so you do not say them. The libel is there just the same. Come into the presence of the all knowledge of God and you realise the libel is just as blatant in His presence as it would have been had you put it into words in the presence of man. In the presence of His perfect knowledge all the secrets of our hearts are open and bare and we know it. We can never be a lie in the presence of God and we know it if we dwell in His presence, so that prayer, bringing us into the place of all knowledge, has the effect of setting up a government of our secret life. And one who lives much in fellowship with God has his secret life well governed, and if he thinks a critical or unkind thought he is judged inwardly; he need never say it. If he feels a bad feeling about somebody, he is judged instantly; he knows it.

So you see, prayer and the all knowledge of God are not contrary because it is when we come into the place of prayer that the all knowledge of God becomes a government in our secret lives to deliver us from what is not well-pleasing to the Lord. So for all criticism, whether expressed or unexpressed, for all judgments that are wrong, for all feelings and thoughts that are not according to the Lord's mind, a deeper prayer life is the cure because it has this effect. In fellowship with God we know that the Lord knows all about that and it has the effect upon us and that more deeply than would be the effect of our having said something with our lips that afterwards we were ashamed that anybody should have heard. It sets up an inward government of our secret life in the realisation of Divine omniscience, and prayer life in the light of the all knowledge. His perfect knowledge, is a positive thing, a positive contribution. These are all reasons against accepting the all knowledge of God as the occasion for dispensing with prayer. We put it all on the positive side and say it is rather an argument for prayer than otherwise.

Life can easily become artificial, even our much ministry for the Lord can take on artificial forms. We may be committed so much to work or programmes, the demands, that an artificiality comes into our lives, something which is rather more professional than real, something which is the worker rather than the man - in the technical sense the worker - and life is a very artificial thing, and human relationships are all calculated to make us artificial: that is, to be something before others that we really are not. There is that covering of life - that not intentionally to deceive, in that we would try and make them think that we are different from what we are, but there is a covering or veneer of life, as life is organised in these days, which tends to make it artificial, and all unrecognised and imperceptibly we in simple ways may be prone to play a part. So much so that we may even become strangers to our real, genuine selves. You cannot have anything of that in the presence of God. All unreality goes in His presence, there is no being a stranger to yourself, you come up against the real facts; what you are, who you are. We may, before man, be doing a lot of preaching and that may convey to men that we are living a preacher's life as it ought to be lived, but in the presence of God we are found out, and we come up against the fact that for us in the mind of God, the thing of infinitely greater importance than the work is the worker. Far more important in His eyes is the state than the activity. That is the value of a prayer life which brings us into the all knowledge of God and those who have not an adequate prayer life become artificial, professional, external and they even drift away from the knowledge of their own hearts.

Well, you see the whole weight is on the side of the knowledge of God being the occasion for prayer rather than to limit prayer or make prayer unnecessary. Now we want to get away from words, theory, really to the practice and spiritual value of all this.