

We Beseech You

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Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we [are] all thy people. Isaiah 64:9 (A.V.)

Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins for ever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people. Isaiah 64:9 (N.I.V.)

It appears that many Christians have just about given up on prayer. They retain it as a form to keep appearances up, but secretly they regard it as an exercise in futility. They harbour suspicions that God is so reluctant and miserly He will not grant their requests; or worse yet, He does not even hear prayer in the first place.

But the Bible insists the problem is not with God. It consistently pictures God as anxious and eager to bless. The psalmist says: *'The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth. He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him: He will also hear their cry, and save them'* (Psa. 145:18-19).

If the problem is not with God, then there must be something wrong with our prayers. Did you notice the condition the psalmist attached to the Lord being nigh? He is nigh to all that 'call upon Him in truth.' Ah, there is the rub! We want to toss up casual, lukewarm petitions, and then we get peeved when God does not come through for us.

If we want the Lord to hear and answer prayer, we must realise that even though He is favourably disposed to the prayers of His people, He does not count everything we call prayer as prayer. In other words, we need to learn to pray.

Isaiah really models true praying for us. He summarises what prayer is all about in those three little words: 'We beseech Thee.' Let us delve into those words and seek to understand what they convey. First, there is quite obviously an –

1. Intensity of Desire

The word 'beseech' is a strong word. It is much stronger than 'ask' or 'request.' Those words are mild. 'Beseech' is fervent and feverish with passion. There is grime on the hands and sweat on the brow of this word. It means to entreat, to implore, to beg, to plead. There is no easy-going moderation in 'beseech.'

Isaiah has already indicated something of the nature of prayer. He has called it a stirring up of one's self to 'take hold' of God. Prayer is more than just a polite antiseptic asking of God 'to bless'; it is taking hold of God. What is it to take hold of God? It is to plead God's promises before Him and to refuse to take no for an answer. There is more to come on that, but for now please note that one cannot take hold of God without an intense longing for God. Look through the Bible and you will find that the people who really did business with God were those who knew an intense longing for God. Check out the accounts of Hannah (1 Sam. 1:9-18), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4-11), and the great Moses (Exod. 33:12-23)

Here is how the psalmist described his longing for God: *'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God:'*

(Psa. 42:1-2). Later we find him saying: *'... my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God'* (Psa. 84:2)

Do we really need to look any further for the explanation for unanswered prayer? How many of us really know this intensity of desire? We have been looking at the theme of revival. That is what Isaiah was praying for. But why is it so rare to see a genuine spiritual awakening among God's people? Could it not be that most of us, despite our protestations, do not really want a mighty work of God? Is it not true that genuine revival would mess up the way we are living and make us extremely uncomfortable?

For years now we have proceeded on the basis that God's people want revival and all that remains is for us to figure out how to have one. Is it not time to face up to the fact that we have been assuming the wrong thing? It seems to me that we Christians need to get our 'wanters' fixed. We want God to do a great thing but we do not want it intensely enough to earnestly seek it, or to run the risk of having our lives disturbed.

Where does intense desire for revival come from? It can come only as we look around and take note of the needs. This is what created strong desire in Isaiah. He looked at his nation and saw what she was doing and also what she was facing, and his heart was moved. I find myself wondering how bad things will have to get in our society before God's people get alarmed. The abortion industry continues its booming business. Pornography is churned out in massive doses. Homes are falling apart at a record pace. Christianity is openly disdained and ridiculed. How much more do we have to see before we get burdened? When we turn our critical gaze on the professing church in our own time, our sense of shame and alarm should increase. We ourselves are too often moulded by the patterns of thought and of life-style around us. We need to remember Christ's words to the churches, 'I know your works', and realise that if we abuse His grace He will come to us in judgment. We will never be burdened for our society while we are secretly enjoying the sinful life-style it promotes!

But there is a second element in true praying which we must examine.

2. Humility of Heart

'We beseech thee,' says Isaiah. Anyone who is in the position of beseeching is one who cannot help himself. He is powerless. He is completely dependent upon someone else to come to his aid or he would not be beseeching. In other words, humility is part and parcel of this business of beseeching God.

Humility is woven into the whole fabric of Isaiah's prayer. The very fact that God is in heaven and has to 'look down' (63:15), tells us that Isaiah is conscious of God's greatness and man's unworthiness. In confessing the filthiness of their sins (64:5-7), Isaiah was putting himself and his people in the dust before God.

You can take this to the bank – true praying is humble praying. The Bible says: 'He forgetteth not the cry of the humble' (Psa. 9:12). And again: 'Though the Lord be high, yet hath He respect unto the lowly' (Psa.138:8).

And while you are going to the bank, take this along too – revival comes only to the humble. The best known verse on revival begins: 'If my people, who are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray...' (2 Chron. 7:14).

One of the more worrisome features of our day is the cloaking of arrogance in spirituality. We seem to regard arrogance as a trademark of being close to God. Some have grown very fond of talking about what 'the Lord is doing in my life,' and somehow the 'my life' always sounds louder than 'the Lord.' It is also common today to hear people pray: 'Thank you Lord for what you are showing me in my quiet time.' Is it not enough just to thank the Lord for His Word? Do we have to advertise ourselves and the spiritual disciplines we seek to maintain? If our 'quiet time' is nothing more than a badge of our supposed superior spirituality, we are no better than the pious Pharisees of Jesus' day! How we need to heed the words of Andrew Murray: 'The chief mark of counterfeit holiness is its lack of humility.'

The only remedy for pride is to dwell much on the holiness and majesty of God. It was when Isaiah saw the Lord 'high and lifted up' that he cried out, 'Woe is me? For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen King, the Lord of hosts' (Isa. 6:1,5).

That brings us to the third element of true praying –

3. Tenacity of Purpose

This is closely related to the intensity of desire. If we are truly longing for God to answer prayer, if we are truly beseeching God, we will not give up easily. True praying is persistent praying.

Jesus emphasised on more than one occasion the need for being tenacious in prayer. Luke recalls one parable that was designed to teach 'that men ought always to pray, and not faint' (Luke 18:1). It had to do with a woman who kept on pestering a judge. This woman had some legal problem that she wanted the judge to take care of for her. The problem was this judge was notorious for being unconcerned about people and their needs. This woman did not let that deter her. She went to the judge and cried out 'avenge me of mine adversary.' The judge refused. But the woman did not let it rest there. She continued to pester the judge. We might picture being at his office each day, following him through the streets to his home, and staying outside his home. Everytime he turned around, there she was. Finally, in order to be free of her, he granted her request (Luke 18:1-8).

God is not like that unjust judge. God is concerned about the needs of His people. And if a judge like that can be persuaded by persistence, how much more reason we have to expect God to reward our persistence in prayer!

But some will ask why it is necessary for us to be persistent in prayer. After all, if God knows we need something, why does He not just give it to us? The answer is that we need to be persistent not so much for God's sake as for ours. Benefits easily gained are not duly prized. That which has been won by toil and hardship will be guarded diligently, while that which comes to us easily will be squandered carelessly away.

In other words, by being persistent in prayer we show how highly we prize God's blessings, and God is more inclined to grant His blessings to those who prize them. Isaiah had determined that he and his people so desperately needed God that he would not rest until God renewed them (Isa 62:1,6-7). When we decide we cannot live without God, we shall become as tenacious in prayer as Isaiah was.

In light of these things, is it not time we stopped blaming God for unanswered prayer and began looking to ourselves? How many of us pray half-heartedly, selfishly, and spasmodically? Is it not time we stopped muddling along without God's power and began to pray with intensity, humility and tenacity? May God help us to begin today.

EPILOGUE

These pages have been written with the dual conviction that God is hiding His face from His people, and that it is not an easy thing to seek His face.

The church today seems largely unwilling to face either of these realities.

She insists on one hand that God really is blessing her, and to prove it she cites all kinds of glowing statistics. But statistics can never measure the spiritual climate of the church. The church can have impressive statistics and be sorely lacking in holiness and spiritual power. Sadly, the church has often used statistics to pull the wool over her own eyes. A church can be bustling with activity and bursting at the seams and at the same time be infiltrated and permeated with the world's thinking and doing.

True revival cannot come as long as the church insists she is all right.

Then there is the other problem. Sometimes the church does catch a glimpse of her desperate condition. But what is her response? All too often, it has been to think that revival can come easily and quickly. We seek revival too casually and claim it too rapidly. Repentance is painstaking work. Glossing over it will never bring an extraordinary work of God.

Isaiah's prayer gives full play to each of these. His prayer 'Come down, Lord!' reflects his understanding of God's distance and of the need for thorough repentance. My hope is that all those who read this will catch Isaiah's vision and join in his prayer.

© **Roger Ellsworth** – from his book "Come Down, Lord!"