



WHEN GRACE COMES ALIVE

LIVING THROUGH THE LORD'S PRAYER



by



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To my mother and father,
whose hearth was the school of discipleship
in which I learned my first prayers.





I

Preliminaries







Foreword

What should we think of an army facing mighty foes in life and death battle that failed to employ its most effective weapons? How sympathetic would we be towards troops who were grieving their losses, and yet had neglected ‘to crank up’ their tanks, helicopters, missiles (or whatever)? Who would be surprised, or even compassionate, over such foolish defeat? It is doubtful that any military force in the world would ever be guilty of such horrendous negligence; but what about that ‘mighty army, the Church of God’? I may be wrong, but it has long been my impression that much of the church has for too long failed to take up one of her mightiest weapons: ‘all prayer’ (listed in the spiritual weaponry of Eph. 6). In the United States, for instance, I lived through a time when the majority of evangelical churches closed their Wednesday night congregational prayer meetings (in the late 1950s and early 1960s). We laid down a mighty weapon just at the time our culture was exploding; just at the time when we had never more needed the timely blessings of the Spirit of God, who is given in answer to prayer (Luke 11: 13). I often wonder: would the Western nations have gone so secularist had the Church kept fervently praying?

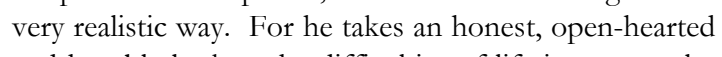
But rather than lamenting past failures, it is best to confess sin (including prayerlessness), and by God’s





WHEN GRACE COMES ALIVE

grace ‘press forward unto those things which are ahead’ (Phil. 3: 13). In a sense, the worst times are the best times, and from that perspective what tremendous opportunities open before us, if once again we press forward with ‘the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God’ and the weapon of all prayer! We can scarcely imagine what local congregations and the whole Body of Christ (the Church militant!) will then be empowered to accomplish for the glory of Christ! And no doubt this is already happening in various parts of the world (especially, I think, outside ‘the West’).



I am delighted with Terry Johnson’s *When Grace Comes Alive*, specifically because it could serve as a clarion call to humble and believing prayer in thousands of churches across the world. His book gives the clear and convincing rationale for taking up this neglected weapon of divine power, and assists us in doing so in a very realistic way. For he takes an honest, open-hearted and humble look at the difficulties of life in our secular culture, as well as our own weaknesses and struggles. He is our fellow pilgrim; fighting the same battles that we all do. Terry has been an effective pastor for many years in a large, historic church in the heart of a major port city, with challenges aplenty! Belief in Holy Scripture as the very Word of God written, and the practice of much prayer have been his mainstay, and God has not failed to bless significantly those exposed to his ministry.

Three things in particular remain with me from this fragrant exposition of the Lord’s Prayer: first, the judicious, Biblical balance of this call to prayer. It is not a cheap way to get out of God what we want in order to please ourselves. On the contrary, it is the vital breathing of life lived in union with Christ, with



FOREWORD

an eye to the glory of God and the needs and welfare of others (and in that context, the needs of family and self will indeed be taken care of most graciously). Secondly, I sensed a gentle, and yet powerfully convicting summons to a deeper, more sincere, and universal endeavour to be like Christ in every relationship of life. That is the grounds for effective intercession (I John 3: 22 – 24). Every concern for true holiness has a way of throwing us back on the sheer grace of God, so that we look afresh to Jesus who is our holiness. When we feel at our most unworthy, and are driven afresh to Christ as our very righteousness and life, how many new springs of intercession come bubbling up! It is no surprise that things around us (and within us) strangely begin to change. Thirdly, I found his discussion of ‘praying without ceasing’ to be sensible and hopeful for us ordinary Christian folk. If this book blesses others as it has me, great good for the Kingdom of God will come from it!



Douglas F Kelly
September 2003







Acknowledgments

This book began as a series of sermons preached at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, between July 1999 and July 2000 as part of a larger series of sermons on the Gospel of Matthew.

I am indebted to my secretaries, Debbie Parker, who translated my chicken scratch into standard English, giving the manuscript its original shape, and to Lesley Sadler, who labored to bring it into final form. Proofreading is a tedious and thankless job. Joan Paez endures both my spoken and written sermons every week at IPC and has done much to improve my grammar. Likewise my mother-in-law, Mrs Howard Hartley (Annette), has offered a number of helpful suggestions in her reading of this and other of my manuscripts.

I am grateful for the gracious people of the Independent Presbyterian Church, who have been charitable in receiving the content of this book as well as its predecessor on the Beatitudes, also a part of this series on Matthew, *When Grace Transforms*. Likewise they have served as the proving ground for my evolving understanding of prayer, kindly appreciating the prayers that arise from the convictions expressed in the following pages.

In addition, the leadership of IPC has understood my role as a minister of the gospel in such a way as





WHEN GRACE COMES ALIVE

allows significant time for study and writing on a weekly basis, as well as periodic study weeks throughout the year. Without that designated time, this and other writing projects could not have been completed.

A sizeable number of sources have been helpful in understanding Matthew 6:1-13 and Matthew 7:7-11. Among the commentators on Matthew, L. Morris, D. A. Carson, and R. T. France have been the most illuminating of the modern expositions; Calvin, Ryle, the incomparable Matthew Henry among those of previous generations. J. Stott and M. Lloyd-Jones are both, in their own ways, indispensable in their expositions of the Lord's Prayer found in respective works on the Sermon on the Mount. Among the books on the Lord's Prayer and prayer generally, Douglas Kelly's *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?*, Henry's *Method of Prayer*, Watt's *Guide to Prayer*, and J. I. Packer's exposition found in *I Want to be a Christian* have been the most valuable. I have tried to keep the text of this work uncluttered by indicating sources listed in the bibliography only with names and page numbers or simply page numbers.

The folks at Christian Focus have been a great encouragement to me. To my surprise and delight, they have appreciated my writing and encouraged it along. Throughout they have been patient with deadlines and my unending revisions. I owe much to William MacKenzie and his merciful staff.

My wife, Emily, and my five children have been wonderfully supportive throughout the writing and revising process. Our daily family devotions have also been an important context in which we have learned to pray as Jesus taught His disciples to pray.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finally, the single most important factor in the shape and direction of my life is the fact that I was reared in a Christian home. My mother and father took me to Sunday School and church every Sunday from birth to adulthood. It was in their home that I realized personal faith in Christ and developed the central convictions that would define my life. To them this work is gratefully dedicated.









Introduction

‘I know very little about prayer’, I found myself thinking some time after my fortieth and before my forty-fifth birthday. Don’t misunderstand. I had been taught to pray at home and in church as a child, cutting my spiritual teeth on the Lord’s Prayer as well as that simple childhood prayer,



God is great and God is good,
Let us thank Him for our food..
In Jesus name, amen.



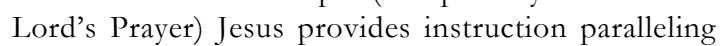
I have often thought the whole mystery of providence is summed up in that opening line affirming both the greatness and goodness of God. Indeed, the whole problem of evil may be “solved” by denying either side of the equation (God is not great, so He can’t prevent evil; God is not good, so He delights in evil). Instead our children are taught to affirm by faith this mystery from the very beginning.

In my early twenties I began praying fairly seriously, soon found myself leading others in prayer, and before too long was even teaching others to pray. Yet in my forties it began to dawn on me that I actually knew very little. My own outlook was evolving. I had begun my adult prayer pilgrimage with what I might call a ‘prayer list’ approach, repeating lists of objectives to



WHEN GRACE COMES ALIVE

God in the hope of good results. On the other end of this pilgrimage I began to see that prayer is primarily *drawing near to God* (e.g. Jas. 4:8-10; Heb. 4:15, 16; 10:19-22). What am I doing in prayer? I am consciously moving into the presence of God. Prayer was evolving in my thinking from being primarily about requests (an experientially sterile idea) to being primarily about fellowship with God. Prayer is that time when I draw near to God to contemplate His greatness, search my soul, confess my sin, and plead for help. Prayer for me was becoming increasingly *personal, relational, and indispensable*. Moreover, it was also moving from being a discipline to be maintained with difficulty to being a privilege to be guarded jealousy.




There is no more vital subject for the disciple of Christ than prayer. There are other spiritual disciplines, and in Matthew's Gospel (our primary text for the Lord's Prayer) Jesus provides instruction paralleling that which He gives on prayer (6:2-4, 16-18). But on prayer alone He elaborates. Matthew Henry points out that this is because, 'In prayer we have more immediately to do with God' than in the other disciplines. Lloyd-Jones in his indispensable *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, says prayer is 'the highest activity of the human soul' before which all else 'pales into insignificance' (vol. 2; 45, 46). 'Man is at his greatest and highest when, upon his knees, he comes face to face with God', he insists (45). Robert Murray McCheyne's oft-quoted assertion rings true:

What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is – and no more.

The study of prayer is serious business. We can turn to no more valuable text than the Lord's Prayer, the most




INTRODUCTION



beloved and widely-used prayer ever composed. For generations the Lord's Prayer has taught the people of God how to pray. Serving as a *form* of prayer for the liturgy of the church, it has been recited countless times in the private and public services of the church, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. It has also served as a *pattern* for prayer, an outline of how we are to formulate our own prayers. It seems that Jesus had both uses in mind from the beginning. Presumably Jesus taught this prayer on numerous occasions and in various settings. In Luke's account of one of those occasions Jesus says, 'When you pray, say...' In other words, here are the very words you are to use. The disciples ask, 'Lord, teach us to pray', and He answers (in effect) 'Repeat these words after me', giving them the words of the Lord's Prayer as a *form* to be repeated (Luke 11:1-4). Matthew's setting is the Sermon on the Mount, and in this context Jesus says, 'Pray, then, in this way' or 'Pray like this'. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew is not a form but a 'perfect summary', a 'kind of skeleton' that 'covers everything' in outline form says Lloyd Jones (49). Apparently it can function in either way, as a prayer to be repeated verbatim, or as a 'model prayer to guide disciples in their devotional life', as Morris puts it (143). Indeed it has served the church well in both capacities.

The Lord's Prayer is both a simple prayer and yet comprehensive. All that we need to know is summarized in its few lines. Matthew Henry finds it to be 'remarkably concise and yet vastly comprehensive' (*A Method for Prayer*, 189). 'No part of Scripture is so full, and so simple at the same time as this', says J C Ryle (50). 'Never was prayer so admirably and curiously composed as this', notes Thomas Watson





WHEN GRACE COMES ALIVE

in his classic work *The Lord's Prayer* (1). 'He has mercifully supplied us with a simple yet comprehensive directory', notes Pink. 'Every part or aspect of prayer is included therein' (72). It is a 'breviary and compendium of the gospel', says Tertullian, 'a system or body of divinity', adds Watson (1). It is a gracious and kind thing that Jesus does in teaching us to pray. He condescends to our weakness and meets us in our need, providing in the words of Douglas Kelly, 'that most perfect form of prayer, "The Lord's Prayer"' (5).

I hope to impart something of what I am learning on the following pages. My aim is to provide an exegetically competent and thoroughly practical exposition of prayer as Jesus taught it and as we are meant to experience it.

