

PRAYER'S FRONTIERS

by Ray C. Stedman

I always come to this time of the year feeling like the children of Israel felt as they were about to march into the land. Many of them were feeling fearful about what was ahead of them; the same way many of us feel, perhaps, as we look toward the New Year. Many of them, however, were sensing the great possibilities that lay ahead: the wilderness was now behind them; a new land lay before them. Moses seized that occasion to preach to them. I think that is a very appropriate thing to do. (You can read the messages he preached at that time in the book of Deuteronomy.) It's a great time to preach, so I am going to preach on this occasion too. I hope you will arise either greatly strengthened, or awake greatly refreshed!

This message is part of the series on prayer, and this morning we will be looking at the great prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. This is a unique prayer from the Old Testament. It is, perhaps, the only passage in the Old Testament that is a report of a formal prayer uttered on a great state occasion.

The whole nation -- or at least a great portion of it -- had gathered in the courts of the temple to dedicate the new building that Solomon had erected according to the plans that his father David had drawn, based on the structure of the tabernacle in the wilderness. But this was a much larger, much more beautiful and splendid building.

The nearest thing we would have to this scene in America today would be the Inauguration of a President. Very shortly, many of us will be watching that take place. And, like our Inauguration, on this occasion a special platform had been built for the king in the great courtyard of the temple, in front of the brazen altar, where the sacrifices for sin were offered. On that platform King Solomon stood and then knelt, as the description of this very impressive occasion tells us in the preamble to Solomon's prayer, in 2 Chronicles 6:12-17:

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread forth his hands. Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court; and he stood upon it. Then he knelt upon his knees in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven; and said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven or on earth, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to thy servants who walk before thee with all their heart; who hast kept with thy servant David my father what thou didst declare to him; yea, thou didst speak with thy mouth, and with thy hand hast fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep with thy servant David my father what thou hast promised him, saying, 'There shall never fall you a man before me to sit upon the throne of Israel, if only your sons take heed to their way, to walk in my law as you have walked before me.' Now therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, let thy word be confirmed, which thou hast spoken to thy servant David."
{2 Chr 6:12-17 RSV}

Solomon begins this prayer with a recognition of God's promise to David, his father, that there would never lack a man to sit upon the throne of Israel. This theme of kingship runs all through the Old Testament. When we read about the kings there, we ought always to remember that this reflects the truth the New Testament teaches us that God has called every man and woman to be a king in Christ, that we are to reign in life through Jesus Christ. It is very helpful to think of yourself as being given a kingdom over which you are to reign -- the kingdom of your own life and of all that comes into your life. We are, in a sense, to be in charge of these matters. Now we cannot dictate everything that happens, but we react to everything that happens. In that sense every one of us is called to be a king, and the kingship of the Old Testament is a reflection of that very truth.

Notice how Solomon brings out the fact that that kingship rests always on a dual basis.

First, there is a divine promise of reigning given to us. When Paul uses that phrase in the New Testament, he is not talking about reigning in heaven someday. In fact, he uses the very phrase, "reign in life" {Rom 5:17} right now, through Jesus Christ. That possibility rests upon the promise of God. But there is also the requirement of a human responsibility. Notice how Solomon brings that out:

"... 'if only your sons take heed to their way, to walk in my law as you have walked before me.'" {2 Chr 6:16b RSV}

Everywhere in the Scriptures we find that blending together of the divine promise and the human response which must be made. We are to be obedient to the word of truth, and that obedience releases the fulfillment of the divine promise. Now, we understand, as well, that our response is, in turn, triggered by the urging of the Spirit within -- so that the sovereignty of God always overarches everything -- but the human response is very important. I stress that, because many today seem to be moving away from that requirement.

Solomon's prayer consists of eight great, wide-ranging requests which concern the temple and the place of prayer in the life of the people of Israel. We are going to read through this prayer and comment very quickly upon these requests. As we read this, I hope we understand that, though these requests had specific applications to the people of Israel, they have specific application in our own lives as well.

For instance, the Jews were to face the temple when they prayed, no matter where they were in the land. Now, you know that Mohammedans face Mecca when they get down to pray. Well, in the same way the Jews, even when they were in foreign countries, faced toward Jerusalem because that was where the temple was. Solomon's prayer will bring that out here as we read through it.

But in our own lives this has a specific application as well, because we remember that, in this beautiful pictorial function of the Old Testament, we have a picture of something that is true of us. In the New Testament we are told that our bodies are the temple of the living God. Now, this is a truth that is often missed today. It is very hurtful when Christians refer to buildings as the "house of God." The New Testament never calls any building the "house of God." Church buildings are not the houses of God -- you are. Everywhere in the New Testament the answer to the temple of the old regime is the human body and our personal lives. We are the habitation of God, by the Spirit. When we gather together, as this morning, when all these temples are in one place, the whole place becomes the temple of the living God; God dwelling among his people by the Spirit.

Now, that is what makes our coming together a recognition of the presence of God in our midst. Jesus said, "where two or three [or two or three hundred] are gathered together, there am I in their very midst," {cf, Matt 18:20}. What makes a church service meaningful is the recognition that we are gathering as the temple of the living God, so all these words concerning the temple apply to us. This very truth is taught powerfully in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. In the light of this, this prayer of Solomon's becomes a marvelous teaching ministry on the place and the power of prayer in our lives, and I want to read it now from that standpoint.

In Verse 18, King Solomon goes on to give us the first request:

"But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" {2 Chr 6:18 RSV}

Isn't that amazing? The temple is called "the house of God," but on the very day of dedication, Solomon acknowledges that it cannot hold God. God is bigger than any house.

"Yet have regard to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, hearkening to the cry and to the prayer which thy servant prays before thee; that thy eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where thou hast promised to set thy name," {2 Chr 6:19-20a RSV}

Put your own self in that scene. You are the true house of God, and God has promised to be available to you day or night. This is the effect of this promise.

"that thou mayest hearken to the prayer which thy servant offers toward this place. And hearken thou to the supplications of thy servant and of thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yea, hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, forgive." {2 Chr 6:20b-21 RSV}

That is a great plea for increasing confidence in prayer, resting upon an obvious divine response. Solomon is praying, "Lord, let this place be a place where you answer prayer, where people begin to see that a prayer-hearing and a prayer-answering God is at work." Bob Roe was telling some of us on the staff last week an interesting story about a contact of his who had become a new Christian. I do not know if you have noticed, but God often surprisingly answers the prayers of new Christians more than any others.

This particular new Christian was learning to fly an airplane, and flying around one day he found himself all locked in in clouds. He did not know enough about flying yet to go down through the clouds by instruments, so he was in trouble, and he prayed, "Lord, open a hole for me." Almost immediately a hole opened in the clouds, and he went down through it and there was the airport right below.

Later, when he was with some of his non-Christian friends on a duck-hunting trip in Mexico, he told them about this, but they all scoffed and said, "That was just coincidence." He said, "No, it was not. God works that way." So they said, "Well, all right, if your God works that way he ought to be able to control what we have for dinner tonight." He said, "That sounds reasonable. What do you want for dinner?" One of them said, "I'd like Swiss steak." So the man went over to the Mexican cook and asked what he was serving for dinner that night. "Swiss steak!" said the cook.

The next morning they were out in the duck blind and some ducks flew by. It looked like they were coming within range, but just as they did so, they turned around and flew off. One of the men said, "If your God is so good, turn the ducks around." This man went, "Quack, quack!" and the ducks turned around and flew right back and the men got their shots!

As they were leaving to fly home, the Christian man, who had not brushed his teeth that morning, said, "Oh my, I wish I had a tooth brush." One of the fellows said, "Well, your God is so good he ought to provide a toothbrush." The Christian said, "Yes, that's right." As they were about to board the plane he looked down on the ground, and lying there, probably having fallen off of a previous flight, was a new toothbrush in its box.

On the way home one of the men said, "You know, this God is rather impressive. I have been giving some thought to becoming a Christian."

Now when you hear stories like that, you have to remember that that is the action of a very tenderhearted Father, bowing over and watching the faltering steps of a new little babe in Christ. But we have to grow up too. We cannot expect those kinds of answers to prayer all our lives. The Scriptures do not encourage us to think that God is going to run at our beck and call any time we pray. Sooner or later we have to learn that there will come some extended delays that we do not always understand. There will come unexpected responses; there will come apparent refusals on God's part, in an effort to test us and strengthen us. Yet with all that there will come a growing sense of God's faithfulness to his promises. So this is Solomon's first request, a consciousness of the reality of prayer, that God answers the cries of his people.

Here is his second request. Verse 22:

"If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath, and comes and swears his oath before thy altar in this house, then hear thou from heaven, and act, and judge thy servants, requiting the guilt by bringing his conduct upon his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness." {2 Chr 6:22-23 RSV}

This reflects the situation of a man who is in trouble with his neighbors. He has done something wrong, and he swears that he is innocent. In order that they might believe him they take him to the temple and make him take an oath on the altar that what he says is true. We find a vestige of this in our law courts yet today, when a

man has to put his hand upon the Bible and take an oath that what he says is true before God, or raise his hand and say, "So help me God." This is a reflection of that very situation.

This was the basis of our Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "Do not swear at all, neither by heaven or earth, but let your yea be yea and your nay, nay," {cf, Matt 5:34-36}. Let your "yes" be yes and your "no," no, and let that be enough, he said. In other words, Solomon is praying that we may recognize that in the temple, the dwelling place of God, which we are, we are dealing with the holiest thing on earth. What Solomon is saying here is that as you pray, as you communicate with the God of truth, this consciousness of the importance of your word begins to deepen and increase and you become aware of how valuable it is to be a man or woman of your word, without requiring any other kind of support or defense.

That does happen to those who pray. The amazing thing is that as you grow as a Christian, faithfulness and responsibility is an evidence that you are becoming increasingly the temple of the living God; God is filling out his habitation.

The third request is found in Verse 24:

"If thy people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against thee, when they turn again and acknowledge thy name, and pray and make supplication to thee in this house, then hear thou from heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again to the land which thou gavest to them and to their fathers." {2 Chr 6:24-25 RSV}

Here is a recognition that prayer -- faithful, earnest, honest, open prayer -- is the only proper response to defeat in the life of faith.

Remember how John puts that, "If we confess our sins [that is prayer], he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. Do you know how great it feels after you have been working in the yard or on your car, and, covered in dirt, you take off all those dirty clothes and take a fresh shower and wash all the dirt away? Well, that is the great provision God has made for prayer in the life of a believer. "If we confess our sins." We do not justify them, we do not excuse them, we do not blame somebody else for them, we just admit them and acknowledge that God knows how to handle them and has a cleansing for us. If we confess them, he is "faithful and just to forgive us." We can take that forgiveness again and again, as often as we need it, as often as we sense that we have fallen into some wrongful thing. God cleanses us and we are set free again, renewed in spirit and strengthened again by his grace. It is the provision of prayer for the place of defeat.

Then the fourth request, Verse 26:

"When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against thee, if they pray toward this place, and acknowledge thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou dost afflict them, then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy servants, thy people Israel, when thou dost teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain upon thy land, which thou hast given to thy people as an inheritance." {2 Chr 6:26-27 RSV}

Here the problem is one of drought arising out of sin in the nation which has long been tolerated and which has been excused. Withholding rain is God's way of getting people's attention. It is rather remarkable that, here in California, we are about three inches behind our normal rain supply. What does that say? God is getting our attention. Three or four years ago, when we had great, prolonged drought, even the newspapers began to reflect the need for prayer. The mayors of cities called for prayer. People began to pay attention to the fact that man really does not run the weather, even though we get weather reports every day and we have weatherman who talk as though they controlled the situation. But they do not; God is in charge.

The same thing happens in an individual life. You can go through periods of spiritual drought, when nothing seems to turn you on spiritually; everything is barren and desolate around you; the rain of God's love and blessing seems to be withheld. What do you do? Well, that is what prayer is provided for. Prayer is the means

by which we confess sin, and God restores. James tells us, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you," {Jas 4:8 RSV}. That is the simplest formula I know for recovery from a period of barrenness and drought.

Now here is the fifth request, Verse 28:

"If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar; if their enemies besiege them in any of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by any man or by all thy people Israel, each knowing his own affliction, and his own sorrow and stretching out his hands toward this house; then hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and render to each whose heart thou knowest, according to all his ways (for thou, thou only knowest the hearts of the children of men); that they may fear thee and walk in thy ways all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest to our fathers." {2 Chr 6:28-31 RSV}

Again, God awakens our concern and gets our attention by some form of calamity, some threat to us. Notice how personalized it is: "Each one knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow." We get in trouble sometimes by looking at others too much. God knows that what may touch one person will leave another completely untouched, so he chooses the type of affliction that will get your attention.

Have you noticed that he always seems to allow the enemy to come at us in ways that hurt us in the most sensitive spots? That is God speaking. Often the sin is so close to us that we do not even recognize it. Others see it, it has troubled them for years, but we are blind to these places in our lives. That is why, oftentimes, God has to get our attention by some disease, some illness, some plague, some blight, some financial failure, some calamity, whatever it may be. This can happen in an individual life as well as in the life of a nation.

So our prayer response sometimes is incomplete because we do not see things. That is why Solomon stresses here, "God knows the hearts of the children of men."

I often think that we are like that man whom Jesus touched and opened his eyes, but only part way. The man said, "I see men as trees walking" {Mark 8:24 KJV}, and the Lord had to touch him again and open his eyes further. This type of problem sometimes requires repeated treatment on the part of the Lord, and gradually our eyes open to reality.

The prayer request that Solomon is making here, therefore, is that we may begin to understand the meaning behind some of these trials and afflictions in our life and respond in a proper way so that God may use them to our benefit.

Then the sixth request, Verse 32:

"Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of thy people Israel, comes from a far country for the sake of thy great name, and thy mighty hand, and thy outstretched arm, when he comes and prays toward this house, hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to thee; in order that all the peoples of the earth may know thy name and fear thee, as do thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by thy name." {2 Chr 6:32-33 RSV}

Those words were the basis for our Lord's cleansing of the temple, when he took a whip made of cords and turned the tables over and drove the money changers out, saying, "It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations" (and he is quoting from these very words), "but you have made it into a den of thieves," {cf, Matt 21:13, Mark 11:17}. His anger on that occasion reflected the importance in God's sight of a concern for the strangers in our midst.

Solomon is praying here that the truth of the living God may be a powerful attraction to those who are stumbling and blinded and seeking reality in the world. We ought to be aware of that, to be open to them and responsive to their needs that they may see the beauty of lives committed to God, and thus they might turn and draw near to him.

I am encouraged by the outreach of many in this congregation, but I remind you of the many strangers around us. Do you know that there are over one thousand foreign students from various countries of the world here at Stanford University? Those young men and women are going to be the leaders of their nations when they go back home. How great it would be if some among us would open our homes and our hearts and take in these strangers in our midst, many of whom are looking for help and hungering after reality.

Now for the seventh request, Verse 34:

"If thy people go out to battle against their enemies, by whatever way thou shalt send them, and they pray to thee toward this city which thou hast chosen and the house which I have built for thy name, then hear thou from heaven their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause." {2 Chr 6:34-35 RSV}

Here is prayer as the recognition of the presence of God, which nerves us to reach out in new undertakings to attack the citadels of evil all around us. We are aware, in this area particularly, of the rise of homosexuality. What a stronghold of evil that is. Young men and women are unwittingly being captured by a false philosophy of life. But this attack does not require a hardheaded, heavy-handed approach; it requires an understanding heart to deal with it. Nerved by the fact that we have the living God in our midst, we are to move out and attack some of these things. Racial tensions, rising crime, family breakups, drug traffic -- these are the strongholds of evil which can be attacked by those who know their Lord.

Then we have the eighth, and last, request, Verse 36:

"If they sin against thee -- for there is no man who does not sin and thou art angry with them, and dost give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to a land far or near; yet if they lay it to heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to thee in the land of their captivity, saying, 'We have sinned, and have acted perversely and wickedly'; if they repent with their mind and with all their heart in the land of their captivity, to which they were carried captive, and pray toward their land, which thou gavest to their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name, then hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place their prayer and their supplications, and maintain their cause and forgive thy people who have sinned against thee. Now, O my God, let thy eyes be open and thy ears attentive to a prayer of this place." {2 Chr 6:36-40 RSV}

How many people do you know who are taken captive today? Lust has carried them away to a strange country; they are in the grip of sexual perversity which controls them. That is happening to a lot of people today. In this very congregation, I know there are those who are struggling to be freed from the bondage of wrongful use of their sexual powers. They are captives in a strange land. Maybe a quick temper holds you in constant bondage; it destroys your relationships, and knocks you down every time you try to stand up. You are always losing control of the situation because of a quick temper; you are held captive by it. Alcoholism, perhaps, has bound some to the bottle, sabotaging all their good intentions, all their efforts to recover. Maybe greed has gripped your heart and mastered you; money is your god, and all you live for is to get ahead and make a lot of money.

Well, Solomon's word is that if you are in that situation then pray; communicate with God with all your heart. Stand before him and plead for his mercy and for his grace. Each day seek his face and his support, because, as Romans 6 puts it so beautifully, "Sin shall not have dominion over you for you are not under law but under grace," {cf, Rom 6:14}.

So Solomon's prayer comes to a close.

When he had ended it, the fire of God came down from heaven. God marvelously answered and supported the prayer of this great king of Israel, visibly demonstrating that he had the power, the resources and the love to carry out these requests.

What a lesson we have here on the place of prayer. It is the place to build personal integrity; the place where

we can be restored when we have been defeated in the life of faith; the place of refreshment to the barren, parched spirit of many of us; the place of refuge for the afflicted; the place of love for the stranger; the place of return for those who have been held in captivity.

God grant that we may learn how to pray afresh in this our day, that we, the people of God, may be a testimony to the nations around us.

Prayer

Our Father, we do not ask for fire from heaven; we have already seen the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world. We need no greater testimony of your love and of your concern. But we do pray that we may become people of prayer, boys and girls, men and women who learn to pray, who learn to communicate with the God of Glory, who find in the place of prayer the answer to the personal needs that afflict us day by day. We pray that this may be taught to us by your great Spirit in the New Year, for we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Title: Prayer's Frontiers
Series: Studies in Prayer from the Old Testament
Scripture: 2 Chr 6:12-40
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 3741
Date: Undetermined Date from Fall of 1980 to Spring of 1981

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