

Dr. J. R. Beeke

## PRAYER

(Lord's Day 45, Questions 116-119)

Psalter 281

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-21

Psalter 72

Psalter 150

Psalter 398

Dear congregation,

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent someone to give recreation. But our greatest need is forgiveness and reconciliation, and so God sent us a Savior — a Savior to be born, a Savior to suffer, a Savior to die, and a Savior to be raised again from the dead — in order to work salvation in our hearts. A critical part of that salvation is to teach us to pray, to make us supplicants, and to keep us on praying ground. Salvation, forgiveness, and prayer are inseparable. Of every born-again believer it may be said, "Behold, he prayeth." With God's help, we wish to begin today a consideration of the final section of our Heidelberg Catechism, which deals with prayer — prayer out of gratitude to God. We ask your attention for Lord's Day 45 of our Catechism, Questions 116 through 119:

*Question 116: Why is prayer necessary for Christians?*

Answer: Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us; and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them.

*Question 117: What are the requisites of that prayer which is acceptable to God and which He will hear?*

Answer: First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested Himself in His Word, for all things He hath commanded us to ask of Him; secondly, that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty; thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that

He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word.

*Question 118: What hath God commanded us to ask of Him?*

Answer: All things necessary for soul and body, which Christ our Lord has comprised in that prayer He Himself has taught us.

*Question 119: What are the words of that prayer?*

Answer: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

It is this prayer that we will be expounding for the next few months to come, God willing, in Lord's Days 46 through 52. So our focus today will be on Questions 116 through 118, and we will do so in conjunction with Matthew 6:6a: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet."

Our theme today is:

### **Prayer**

1. Its Necessity: Why We Need Prayer
2. Its Manner: How We Are to Pray
3. Its Content: What We Are to Ask For

Our theme and points are very simple today: Prayer: First, Its Necessity (Question 116); secondly, Its Manner (Question 117); and thirdly, Its Content (Question 118).

After expounding the Ten Commandments, our Catechism expounds the Lord's Prayer, but prior to doing that it speaks about prayer in general in Lord's Day 45. This order, moving from commandments to prayer, is a biblical order. We read that David says in Psalm 119, "Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!" (vv. 4-5). When David considers the commandments, the commandments drive him to prayer. And when we have been looking at the commandments for many months, the question

arises, Have they driven us to prayer? Do we sense our inability to keep those commandments? And does that inability make us storm the mercy seat to pray with Augustine, "Oh Lord, grant what Thou hast commanded, for only then wilt Thou not have commanded in vain"?

Our Catechism introduces the subject of prayer in a very direct manner: "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" Our Catechism is never vague, and on the subject of prayer it is again straightforward. It presents the question before our faces, "Why should you pray? Why must we pray? And especially, 'Why is prayer necessary for Christians,' for believers?" Today there are many people who shrug their shoulders when it comes to prayer, and they say, "Well, what's the use of prayer? Prayer doesn't help anything. Prayer doesn't change anything. You have to simply take life the way it comes. You have to grin and bear it." That's the world's philosophy in our day. The world today does not really believe in a God who gives, who hears, and who answers prayer. "Well," the world may say, "if it makes you feel better, go ahead and pray, but prayer doesn't really help. You have to make the best of life, and you have to just face things as they come and do what you can." That is a very old philosophy. The old heathen stoics already approached life in this way. They said, "Let us eat and drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." They said, "There are no real answers to life's riddles. The best way to live is to not get too depressed when sad things come or get too exuberant when prosperity dawns, but simply seek to be self-controlled. Seek not to have your emotions fluctuate too much one way or another. Seek to just take things as they come." That's the stoic philosophy of life, and many people have taken that over today. They say, "Let us eat and drink, and be merry. We'll take life the way it comes. There's not much we can do about it anyway."

The Christian has a very different view of life. The Christian believes in a wise, a just, a

prayer-giving, a prayer-hearing, a prayer-answering God. The Christian believes not only that this entire world is governed by God and that it moves according to God's wise decrees, but also that God responds to the prayers of His people. Isaiah tells us that the idols of the heathen are gods who have ears but cannot hear and who have eyes but cannot see. But then he goes on to exalt the God of Israel, and says, "This God hears the cries of the needy. This God has ears to hear, has eyes to see and to pity. This God commands us to surrender our needs and our miseries into His hands." This Jehovah God says also to you and to me this very day, "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15).

There is a God, congregation, who is ruling this world, and this God is a personal God. This God is a God who delights to give prayer. This is a God who hears and who answers prayer. And so we need a biblical conception of God, and to get that conception we have to turn, of course, to the Bible. If our conceptions of God are formed by the Bible, we will also have a biblical conception of prayer. You see, not only people out there in the world have wrong ideas about prayer, but also people inside the church today have wrong ideas about prayer, and often we have wrong ideas about prayer because we have wrong ideas about God. Sometimes, when we go on family visitation or pastoral visitation, then the subject of prayer comes up, and we ask people, "What do you think about prayer? Do you have an inner closet? Are you obeying Matthew 6:6?" Sometimes we receive an answer like this: "Well, yes, I pray, of course, but it seems like it's no use to pray. Prayer doesn't change anything for me. If you're not one of God's elect, you can pray your entire life and it won't do anything, it won't bring you any profit; prayer won't help you. And so, well, yes, to answer your question, I pray, but I never get anything out of it. I feel no contact with God. Prayer isn't real in my life." Maybe you, too, have thought this way,

but this is an unbiblical way of thinking, congregation. It is rooted in an unbiblical idea about God, because, in the first place, no one can tell you whether you are elect or not. Election is a foundation that gives you every encouragement to pray and never ought to discourage you in any way from praying. Do you know when a person learns that he is reprobate? Only when he comes into hell, and then he will confess, "and justly so." As long as you are alive there is hope. As long as you are not in hell, there is hope, because God *is* an electing God. According to our standards, Manasseh and the thief on the cross and Saul of Tarsus would all be reprobates, but God has a way of making great trophies of mercy from the greatest of sinners. We don't know who the reprobate are, but we do know what God has revealed to us in Scripture, and what God has revealed to us is, "Call upon me .... Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Ps. 50:15; Matt. 7:7). God is a God who loves to hear prayer. You often think He doesn't hear, because you have a wrong idea about who God is. God wants to save sinners. "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). Could it be that your prayers are so cold and so impersonal and so distant because you keep pushing away and resisting God, refusing to "turn from [your] way and live," yet continuing to embrace a wrong idea about the God of Scripture?

Our instructor answers this question, "Why is prayer necessary?" by picking out only one reason from many. There are many reasons why we need to pray, and I won't go into all those reasons either today, because our instructor doesn't, but he picks out one reason which coincides with his purpose here, since he wants to speak about prayer as an expression of gratitude to God, and so he answers the question, "Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires

of us." Maybe that answer surprises you. You say, "Well, I can understand that prayer would be the chief part of the section of misery, that when sinners get convicted they cry out, 'God be merciful to me a sinner,' but that prayer is the chief part of thankfulness, what does that mean?" It means two things: It means, first of all, that without prayer we cannot truly thank God. Thanking and praying, congregation, belong together (Ps. 50:14-15), "Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: and call upon me in the day of trouble." The psalmist brings them together, and so does Paul in the New Testament when he speaks to the Philippians, "in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6). John Bunyan put it this way, "God's people pray with their praises. A sensible thanksgiving for mercies received is a mighty prayer in the sight of God."

There are two extremes, then, that we must avoid in this matter of thanksgiving in prayer. On the one side we must avoid the extreme which does nothing but thank God in prayer. Some people pray, "Father, I thank Thee for this, and I thank Thee for that," but they never come to any adoration or confessions or petitions. There are no petitions in their prayer. That's one extreme. But we in our circles are prone to go to the other extreme where we don't thank God at all, where we offer Him only petitions and confessions. He answers our prayer, but we don't thank Him for the answers we receive. Rather, we just go on asking petitions and making confessions, but we don't mix our petitions, like Paul said to the Philippians, with thanksgiving. That is wrong, congregation.

We ought to be thanking God daily for His Son and for His grace and for His Holy Spirit. And if we don't, we will bring darkness upon our own souls. That's what our instructor says basically in the answer to Question 116. "It is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires

of us; and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only, who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him [so there are the petitions], and are thankful for them [there is the thanksgiving]." So if we don't continue to go to God with petitions and with thanksgiving, God is going to take away, says our instructor, even that which He has given to us. Boys and girls, if your mom and dad give you a bicycle you've wanted for a long time and you don't thank them, but you take that bike and smash it on the ground and break it, and you're reckless with it, do you think they're going to go out the next day and buy you another bicycle? Of course not! They're going to say, "You weren't thankful when you got it, and you didn't use it rightly, so you don't deserve another one." Carelessness and unthankfulness are also the attitudes with which some people pray. They pray and they pray, but they never thank the Lord for anything they receive. Do you? Do you thank the Lord? The chief part of thankfulness is prayer. "Enter thou into thy closet," and thank the Lord. There is so much to be thankful for. Every person here, whether converted or unconverted, has much to thank God for. And so, in essence, our instructor is asking us in Question 116, "Are you thanking God for His mercies — special mercies, common mercies — in prayer?"

But secondly, without prayer we not only cannot thank the Lord rightly, but without prayer we cannot truly walk in the way of God's commandments. Prayer is the best weapon a Christian can use to resist the devil and to walk in the way of God's commandments. Notice that our instructor does not say here that the chief part of our thankfulness and our greatest strength lies in our conversion or in our experiences, but he says it lies in prayer. Thankfulness is best practiced on our knees, out of the obedience of faith and a godly walk. "If ye love me, keep my commandments," Jesus said (Jn. 14:15). So when the believer goes to pray and he thanks God in

prayer, he also has in his soul an earnest desire to pray for strength to walk in the way of God's commandments. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20).

Furthermore, prayer is the chief part of thankfulness, because the believer realizes he's prone to go astray. So he not only thanks God in prayer, but it's the chief part of thankfulness because, knowing his proneness to go astray, he throws himself in prayer in dependency upon God, and he asks God for grace to grow in the way of His commandments.

Oh my friend, is that how you pray? In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we read that there are parts of Christian's journey in which he could run. There are other parts of his journey in which he could only walk due to the heavy burden on his back. But there are also parts of his journey where he couldn't even walk, where he had to get down on his hands and knees, as in going up Hill Difficulty. The ascent was too steep. He couldn't walk, he couldn't run, but he got down on his knees and crept up Hill Difficulty. Well, in the Christian life there is many a Hill Difficulty and there are many temptations, many times when we cannot face something, when we cannot walk through something or run past something, but times when we can only go forward on our knees.

The Puritans put it this way: "Prayer is the means by which a soul trades with heaven." Is that what prayer is for you? Do you trade with heaven? Do you ascend to heavenly places in prayer? Is prayer for you your contact with heaven?

A praying believer is a weak man and he is a strong man. He is a man who looks at himself, sees how weak he is, and at times cannot walk and cannot run but must creep and groan and sigh and cry to God, "Lord, I am helpless and I am hopeless. My own strength cannot give



deliverance. I need Thee, oh God. Have mercy upon me." He is a weak man, but a praying believer is also a strong man. We read of Jacob that he, reverently speaking, bound the hands of the Almighty by praying and wrestling with Christ, the Angel of the covenant, so that even God had to ask him, "Let me go" (Gen. 32:26). It is even at this juncture that Jacob's name is changed to Israel, because he had "power with God and with men, and hast prevailed [in prayer]" (v. 28). You read a similar thing of Moses on the mountain when he prayed, "[Lord,] if thou wilt forgive [Israel's] sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Ex. 32:32). And God said to Moses, "Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book. Therefore now go .... " (vv. 33-34a). It's as if He said, "Speak no more, Moses, for if you keep on praying like this, I will not be able to destroy Israel." A praying man is a strong man. A praying people is a strong people.

You know, my friend, if you have an enemy and he turns his back on you, you need not really be too afraid, but if you have a Christian acquaintance with whom you are at odds, who gets down on his knees and brings his case before almighty God, then you must fear, because a praying man is weak in himself but he is strong in Christ. That's why Mary, queen of Scots, was so afraid of the prayers of John Knox. When a believer prays in Christ's strength, he feels his own weakness, and then that very feeling of weakness and that surrendering, in God's strength, is part of gratitude. It is gratefulness by which the believer surrenders to the Almighty. And then it is in prayer that we realize afresh that God is our ally, our stronghold, our covenant God. Then we experience in all our weakness a surge of strength, even as we pray. Then the believer may cry out, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

But now, how do we pray that way? That's an important question. It's wonderful to hear

about what prayer should be, but what are the requisites of prayer? Our instructor gives us three requisites in Question 117, but we will consider them after we sing first from Psalter 150, all stanzas.

"What are the requisites of that prayer which is acceptable to God and which He will hear? First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested Himself in His Word, for all things He hath commanded us to ask of Him." So prayer is in the very first place something that flows from the heart. It's the unburdening of the soul. It is the unveiling of my heart and laying my heart before the heart of God. The psalmist said it well. He said, "Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee .... Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him" (Ps. 38:9; Ps. 62:8). Do you know what that means, my friend, to pour out your heart, to unburden yourself, to hold nothing back, and with thanksgivings and with supplications to bare your soul in the presence of the Almighty? That's the foundational requisite of prayer. Bunyan said, "Better let thy prayers be without words than thy words without heart." Prayer must flow from the heart. Rutherford put it this way: "A dumb beggar gets more when he can't talk than when he can. Tears have a tongue and a grammar and a language that the Lord alone can understand." You see, words are only the body of our prayer. Words are only the outward garment of our prayer. It is the outside of prayer, if you will. Words are important, but they're only the shell of prayer. Real prayer flows from the heart, and the Lord knows what the heart is like and what the heart desires, even before anything is uttered. That's what Jesus says in Matthew 6:8, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." God approves of no half-hearted prayer. God loathes a divided heart. As much as God loves a broken and a contrite heart, so much He loathes a divided heart. Do you remember those two women

who came before Solomon, boys and girls? The one woman did not want that baby cut in half because it was her child. The true mother would not have her child divided, and God, the living God, will not have His people's hearts divided. The believer is God's child, and God does not want you, dear child of God, to give Him half-baked prayers, divided prayers. Thus, when you spend your day in the world or when you spend your day indulging in temptations, you are then so far from true prayer because you cannot have a divided heart and approach unto God. God wants to hear a living prayer, and living prayer is whole-hearted prayer.

I read this past week about a man who was seventy-three years old and prayed for the first time in his life. He said, "My mother taught me to pray when I was three years old." I prayed for seventy years but never prayed with my heart." We don't admire that, of course. It's awful that he didn't pray in truth for seventy years. But at the same time, dear seniors in our midst, if you have never prayed, God is almighty to teach you to pray even when you are seventy-three years old, and it must be your cry, "Oh God, teach us to pray from our heart!"

We do so much praying that is not from our heart — even God's people. In public prayer we have to edify a congregation. There are even times we have to pray when we don't feel like praying. But in private, oh, do we ever pray from the heart? Are there ever times when you are driven into the inner closet — "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet" — when you enter into the closet, not at stated times of prayer, but because your heart is full and you must be alone with God? Those are the best times in the life of God's people, when they have to be alone with God to pray from the heart, to pray down God's blessings and to pray for His glory and the coming of His kingdom, to pray to the one true God. Oh, congregation, in praying from the heart, there is a sweetness, there is a preciousness, there is a treasure that the world cannot give you and

that the world cannot take away from you.

You remember that story of Spurgeon who gave some money to a bricklayer who was using God's name in vain. He said, "I will give you this money if you never use the name of God again. But remember then, you can never pray, because you can't use the name of God." That man's child grew very sick. That man came into great need; he had to pray but couldn't pray. Finally he gave Spurgeon his money back. He said, "I must pray."

Dear congregation, one true prayer is worth more than all the money and all the goods of this world. "There is a sweetness in prayer," said William Bridge, "even if I never receive the mercy I prayed for." Do you understand that sweetness? A few days ago, coming home on the plane, I sat next to a lady who was going through a divorce. She told me, "I never loved this man." That's what she said. She said, "If only I could find someone whom I could truly love from heart-to-heart." Heart-to-heart! That's what prayer represents for God's people. There is heart-to-heart contact, there is true love that goes forth in prayer to God for man, but there is a sweetness in that love, when I may unburden my soul before God and view Him as the Bible presents Him to be, as a God who delights to give prayer, as a God who yearns to hear the faintest whispers and cries of a beggarly people, and as a God who delights to give them abundantly above what they ask or think. Truly, heartfelt prayer goes beyond all that this world offers.

But then, secondly, our instructor tells us, another requisite is "that we rightly and thoroughly know our need and misery, that so we may deeply humble ourselves in the presence of His divine majesty." That's an amazing statement, is it not? He says, in other words, "If we

don't know who we are, we won't really approach God as He is. If we come without a sense of our need, we will come without a sense of His majesty." So here we are back to what we saw at the beginning of the Catechism, that when the Holy Spirit teaches us, He teaches us these two things at the same time: who God is and who we are. When He teaches us that, we see God in His majesty and we see ourselves in our misery, our sin, our need. And as the Holy Spirit teaches us — and the Holy Spirit is the author of all three of these requisites we are mentioning here now, congregation — we then see we cannot pray without the Holy Spirit. For even when "we know not what we should pray for as we ought," the Holy Spirit, says Paul, "maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). The Holy Spirit is the author of prayer, so it is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to pray from the heart, but it is also the Holy Spirit who teaches us our need and misery so that we may pray to God and bow in His presence before His great majesty. And that's what true prayer is. True prayer is not flippant. That's why we are prone to react negatively to those who thank the Lord and do nothing but thank the Lord in prayer, because so often their thanksgiving seems so flippant and we want to avoid that flippancy in prayer, so we tend to go to the other extreme and we avoid thanking Him altogether. In true prayer there is that sense of my need, and out of the sense of my need and the sense of God's majesty I bow with reverent thanksgiving, confession, and supplication. I approach God as the King of kings who sits upon the throne as an unworthy one, undone and ruined and lost in myself. Sometimes that is so real in the lives of God's people that their prayers become very short, their sin presses down upon them. There is no reason in them for God to have mercy upon them, and still they cry out, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). Sometimes their prayers are as short as that Canaanitish woman's, "Have mercy on me, O

Lord, thou son of David.' I don't know how Thou canst bear with me anymore. I stumble into sin so easily. But help me, Lord! Save me, Lord! Deliver me, Lord!" Do you know such heartfelt, humble, simple prayers? Oh boys and girls, if you're four years old and you pray, "Lord, help me," the Lord is willing to hear that cry. You don't need to be big, you don't need any schooling, you don't need to be smart to pray. You just need to feel your need and go to God. Sometimes — maybe you've had that, too — sometimes I couldn't get beyond the word, "Lord" — just one word. And yet I wouldn't trade sometimes that one-word prayer for my longest prayers, because just the word "Lord" is already a prayer, congregation. The word "Lord" means *possessor*, and when we may cry out to Him, "Lord, Lord, Lord!", we are crying out, "Take me and possess me and make a full conquest of me, oh God, and deliver me from myself and deliver me unto Thyself." That can be a wonderful prayer, just the word "Lord."

But then, a further requisite, says our instructor, is, "thirdly, that we be fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word." What a beautiful illustration this answer is of what John Owen once said: "You can have the greatest assurance of God's accepting you in Jesus and the most profound sense of your need, misery, and sin at the same time." Here, you see, our instructor on the one hand says, "When there is true prayer, I feel my need and my misery, I feel my nothingness before the Almighty, and yet, on the other hand, I remember who He is, a God who is willing and desirous to reach out to sinners who are wholly unworthy, and a God who has provided a way to so reach out in His own gospel and His own Son. And so, even though I have no grounds in myself, I am 'fully persuaded that He, notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised

us in His Word." James put it this way: "But let [us] ask in faith, nothing wavering" (Jas. 1:6).

So, in summary, the first thing we need in prayer is a heart for prayer, to pray to the one true God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. The second thing we need is to feel our need and misery. And the third thing we need is saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This faith believes that God will "certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised in His Word." In the epistle to the Hebrews, we read that we must believe that God is and that He is a rewarder of them who diligently seek Him. And deep down, congregation, every true petitioner in every true prayer believes that. Consider even the publican, where was he? Although he came with nothing to offer, smiting on his own breast, and he wouldn't so much as dare lift up his eyes to heaven, he was, nevertheless, in God's house. And what was he doing? Praying. And what was he praying? "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). He was coming to God as a God of mercy. He was coming with expectation to the heart of what God is, for the heart of what God is, is mercy.

And so in prayer I come not only realizing who I am, a sinner full of need and misery, but I come also realizing who God is, a holy God full of mercy. And that's what gives me the courage to come, because of who God is, notwithstanding I am unworthy. He is worthy to be approached, because He invites me, yes, He commands me to come to Him by faith. He declares from Genesis to Revelation that He delights to hear the cries of poor, needy sinners. He promises, "I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD" (Zeph. 3:12). And so, the believer says, "Here I am, Lord. Do with me what seems good in Thy sight, but I cannot stay away from Thee. I come with expectation in Thee alone, for Christ's sake."

"For Christ's sake" — it is so important to realize that experientially — "for Christ's

sake," because we can never, never come to God for the sake of anyone else — not for the saints' sake or the angels' sake or for our own sake or for our neighbors' sake or for our God-fearing father's sake. It is only and exclusively for Christ's sake that we may come to God in true prayer. In the book of Revelation we read that the prayers of the saints were poured out on the altar of incense. You know who the altar of incense is — that's Jesus. Jesus is the altar of incense. And the true petitioner, you see, casts himself, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, as an unworthy sinner upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He lays his prayer on the altar of incense, pleading, "Lord, hear me, for Calvary's sake. Hear me for Jesus' sake."

When we pray that way from the heart, when the Holy Spirit enables us to come with the heart, to come sensing our need and misery, to come by faith, there is something in prayer that gives us an inward strength that nothing else can give. There are times we can go to pray and we are so weak, so hopeless, and needy, so condemning ourselves and so filled with wrong thoughts of God and wrong thoughts of everything that we hardly know where to begin or we hardly dare to begin. But if the Holy Spirit groans within us in that prayer, by the time we arise from our knees we can feel strength in the inner man, and we arise with a totally different frame of mind than that with which we started when we have gone down upon our knees. Even though not one circumstance or one providence or one thing has changed around us, everything changes within us. That's the beauty and the power of prayer. I'm sure that there's not a single person sitting here today, who is a real child of God, who must not say with me, "Oh, that I could pray more! Oh, that I could pray better! Oh, that I could pray more deeply!" Everyone who is in love with someone else wants to love them more, and similarly when you fall in love with God through Jesus, you want to love Him more, you want to have more heart-to-heart communion, you want



to have more prayer. And so for everyone of us our prayer must be, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Our instructor teaches us at the close of this question that there are three foundations upon which we plead — Christ Himself, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13); secondly, God's promises, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13); and thirdly, God's Word, "Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope" (Ps. 119:49). So he says, "notwithstanding that we are unworthy of it, [Thou] will, for the sake of Christ our Lord, certainly hear our prayer, as He has promised us in His Word". So Christ and promise and Word are brought together, and at root these three, congregation, are inseparable. The written Word, the Bible, declares the living Word, Jesus. The heart of the written Word is God's promises. God's promises are personified in His Son, they are yea and amen in Christ Jesus. So these three things belong together — Jesus, God's promises, and God's Word.

What are your pleading grounds in prayer? Can you say, "Nothing of myself, but I come in Jesus' name, I come clinging to God's promises, I come showing Him the handwriting of His own Word"? That is the way to pray, because God is tender-hearted concerning His Son, His promises, and His Word. One of the old Puritans said, "Show Him His handwriting. He has a tender heart for His own letter to you." God loves to answer His own Word.

And then, prayer comes full cycle. Prayer originates in the heart of the Father who gives prayer for Christ's sake, and Christ sends His Spirit to work prayer in the soul. And when the Spirit labors with the individual believer, making intercession for him with groanings which are unutterable, the Spirit sends those groanings back up unto Christ who takes them and bathes and fills up their own insufficiencies with His own merits, and He in turn presents them back unto the

Father, so that they are accepted in the Father's sight. Prayer is thus the work of a Triune God.

And finally, in Question 118, our instructor addresses the content of our prayer, or what we are to ask for: "All things necessary for soul and body." The soul is primary. Do you notice that? The soul is most important, boys and girls. No matter what our need is, the soul need is our greatest need. If someone is sick, if someone is ready to die, their greatest need is the welfare of their soul. Do you remember that paralytic, boys and girls, whom four men let down through the roof, when they brought him to Jesus' feet? Jesus didn't first heal him and then set him on a chair, saying, "Now that you are healed we are going to talk about your soul." No, rather, the first thing that Jesus said when that man couldn't even move was, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mk. 2:5). He dealt with his soul first. What did David deal with first in Psalm 41 when he was so sick, when he prayed that the Lord would make all his bed in his sickness? He said, "LORD, be merciful unto me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee." We must come primarily with our soul needs, for that is God's command to us: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

But also we may and must bring our bodily needs. We will see more of that later on when we discuss, "Give us this day our daily bread." But our instructor would have us realize, as it says in James 1:17 that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." Soul and body covers everything. Nothing is too big and nothing is too small for the Lord to hear. We must bring everything to the Lord, remembering that no case is too impossible for the Lord to answer. This week I read of a minister who was approached by a woman who said, "My husband has left me. My case is hopeless. He's gone to a far country." The minister said, "There's only one thing we can do." He said, "Let's bow our knees right now and

pray that the Lord may convert him tonight." Six months later this woman appeared in church with her husband, and they figured out what had happened. The very hour of the very day that that minister bowed with that woman in prayer, that man found a sermon on the ship on which he was sailing, which was that very minister's sermon. As that man read that sermon, the Lord stopped him and convicted him, and after he landed on shore, he took another boat to come back home to his wife. The Lord is almighty. He can answer the most impossible of cases. Pray to Him, bring Him your soul needs, bring Him your physical needs. And remember, prayer is not in the first place to get Him to follow our will, but prayer is to get us to follow Him. Expect great things from God, and expect nothing from yourself. You see, our problem is that too often we ask only for little things because we are too big in ourselves and we make God too small in our eyes.

Oh, dear congregation, how is it with your prayers? Can your wife, can your children, can your parents say of you, "Behold, he prayeth"? Can you get up and begin your day without prayer? Can you go through the day without prayer? Can you end the day without prayer? Remember God's instruction for a profitable day, "Enter thou into thy closet." In the inner closet life's richest treasures are to be found. And whatever you do, whatever you accomplish, whatever you seek to perform, remember what John Bunyan said, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed." Prayer should be the beginning of all that we do. Everything that we do needs God's blessing. Everything we do needs to be dipped in prayer for our soul and for our body. We can't keep our soul a moment, and, as various catastrophes and accidents remind us, we can't keep our body for a moment. We need the Lord, congregation. You need the Lord, boys and girls. You need the Lord, teenagers. Any day,

any moment, can be our last. We are all praying for those in our midst who have cancer, but we could die long before they die. Are you ready? Are you ready to meet the Lord? Oh, be encouraged to bend your knees and to ask for grace to pray in your prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to pray. I close this message with a poem of William Gadsby:

The sinner born of God, to God will pour his prayer,  
In sighs or groans or words expressed or in a falling tear,  
The feelings of his heart ascend to the Most High,  
And though the Lord a while forbear, His needs He will supply.  
A form of words may please a sinner dead in sin,  
But quickened sinners want to pray as prompted from within,  
The Holy Ghost indites all real and vital prayer,  
And prayer indited by the Lord, the Lord will surely hear.

Amen.

Psalter 398:All stanzas