The Meaning and Purpose of Prayer

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LIVING STREAM MINISTRY

THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF PRAYER

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ISBN: 978-0-7363-6381-5

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PREFACE

This book is composed of messages given by Brother Witness Lee concerning prayer. According to the notes of Brother K. H. Weigh, the first message was given in Hong Kong on September 2, 1956. The dates when the remaining messages were given are not known, but it can be inferred that they were given in Hong Kong at approximately the same time as the first message. These messages were initially published in *The Ministry of the Word* in 1957 and were also previously published in a book in Chinese and English.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEANING OF PRAYER

Scripture Reading: Psa. 27:1, 4, 8; 42:1-2, 5, 11

In this chapter we will fellowship concerning the kind of prayer that seeks God and is according to the anointing.

NATURAL CONCEPTS DIFFERING FROM THE DIVINE REVELATION

Our natural views concerning spiritual matters differ from God's views. For example, God's view of faith is different from our concept of faith. We have natural concepts concerning every spiritual matter. Because we are narrow and even in darkness, our concepts are often far removed from the divine revelation. Hence, we need the divine revelation in every spiritual matter so that we may see God's view.

When we receive revelation from God in a spiritual matter, we discover how ignorant and contrary our views are. Our natural views have caused us to suffer much loss, hindered us from receiving God's grace, and wasted God's time. The sorrow and grief that result from our natural concepts are greater than the sorrow and grief of committing a great sin. Our concepts are our biggest problem before God. It is not too difficult for God to deliver us from sin, but it is not easy for Him to deliver us from our concepts, especially from our concepts concerning spiritual things.

Our person is hidden in our concepts. When the Lord told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed, and be raised on the third day, Peter rebuked Him, saying, "God be merciful to You, Lord! This shall by no means happen to You!" (Matt. 16:21-22). Then the Lord turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men" (v. 23). Jesus then said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (v. 24). This portion of the Word shows that human opinions are often the manifestation of the self. Our experience also confirms that our self often hides in our

opinions. Our self is often hidden in our opinions and expressed through our opinions. Likewise, in spiritual matters our concepts are often full of the self.

This is a common problem with prayer. There are children of God who have been saved for many years but have not been delivered from the self. They still have their own concepts, are full of natural views, and lack spiritual revelation regarding prayer. They do not know the meaning of prayer.

Some believers think that prayer is simply to talk to God or to cry out to Him. This meaning is not bad, but prayer is not merely talking to God or crying out to Him. If God would open our eyes to see His view of prayer, we would realize that we do not understand prayer. Some believers have prayed for more than ten years before discovering, by revelation, that they did not know the meaning of prayer, nor did they know how to pray. Their thought concerning prayer differed from what is revealed in God's Word.

THE MEANING OF PRAYER

Therefore, I have a heavy burden to speak to the saints concerning the meaning of prayer.

To Absorb God

First, prayer is to absorb God; prayer causes man to obtain God. God is reality; hence, He is contactable and obtainable. The God whom we worship is not doctrine, theory, philosophy, or ideology, nor is He an empty character or a vain idol. The God whom we worship is Spirit; He is a real spiritual entity. He is as real as air, water, and sound. Just as air, water, and sound are in the universe, so also God, who is Spirit, is in the universe. We can worship Him, and we can also contact, absorb, and obtain Him.

We can obtain God through prayer. In order to obtain water, we must drink; in order to obtain air, we must breathe; and in order to obtain sound, we must listen. If we want to obtain God, we must pray. Hence, the first meaning of prayer is to obtain God. Regrettably, many believers pray often and for long periods of time, but they do not seem to obtain much of the element of God, because they do not understand the meaning of prayer. They have not seen that prayer is to contact God and obtain Him.

Ironing is an example. Clothes that are placed under an electric iron absorb heat from the iron and, as a result, get hot. A sister in Taipei was ironing her clothes one night and forgot to unplug the iron when she finished. As a result, the ironing board absorbed heat from the iron and caught on fire. This illustration of absorbing heat through contact with an electric iron explains the meaning of prayer. To pray is to contact God and to absorb Him in that contact. Thus, the importance of prayer does not depend on how much we say to God or on how much we cry out to Him but on how much we contact Him. The more we contact God, the more we will absorb Him, and the more we absorb Him, the more we will enjoy God and salvation.

Our enjoyment of God's salvation depends on our absorbing God. Let me say a word here to clear up our inaccurate concepts concerning God and His salvation. Psalm 27:1 says, "Jehovah is my light and my salvation." This verse does not say that God shines on us but that He is our light, nor does it say that God saves us but that He is our salvation. There are two different statements here. By shining on us and saving us, God is accomplishing something for us. But by being our light and our salvation, God Himself is what we need. When we have God, we have light and salvation. Without God we have neither light nor salvation.

We often say that God has given us His life, but strictly speaking, God has not given us His life; He has given us Himself as life. The New Testament does not say that God has given His life to us; rather, it says, "Christ our life" (Col. 3:4). This means that God is our life. Apart from God, we have nothing. He does not give us some of His light, salvation, power, or grace; rather, what He gives is just Himself. He is light, salvation, power, and grace. Hence, light, salvation, power, and grace are inseparable from Him. For example, electricity is the electric light in a lamp, the electric heat in an iron, and the electric power in a fan. Electricity is light to meet one need, heat to meet another need, and power to meet yet another need. Similarly, light is God, salvation is God, power is God, and grace is God. Every spiritual need that we have is God Himself. God has not given us anything besides Himself. Hence, if we lose God, we lose everything; that is, we have nothing.

Those who knew God in the Old Testament age experienced Him in this way, and those in the New Testament age also experience God in this way. David received revelation from his experience to see that God was his light and his salvation. Based on this he said, "One thing I have asked from

Jehovah; / That do I seek: / To dwell in the house of Jehovah / All the days of my life, / To behold the beauty of Jehovah" (Psa. 27:4). David was eager to contact and absorb God daily and hourly. David contacted and absorbed God by beholding Him. When he contacted God, he was enlightened within, and when he absorbed God, he received salvation within. David obtained God as his light and salvation by beholding God. This is a great key and a great secret to experiencing God.

The saints often say, "I am too weak!" We should not be surprised that we are weak, for we can never be strong. In order to make us strong, God will not give us strength, but He will give us Himself. Electric power will not make a fan more powerful; rather, the fan must be in contact with electricity in order to have power. When the fan is in contact with electricity, the fan is empowered. Whenever the fan is disconnected from electricity, it becomes powerless. The power of the fan is with the electricity. Once the fan is in contact with, connected to, electricity, the fan is powerful. Hence, it is inaccurate to think that by pursuing the Lord, we can grow until we are strong. Our strength depends on God; we can be strong only by contacting Him.

We can contact God through prayer. A brother once told me that he was very weak and did not know why he could not rise up. After a few encounters with him, I asked whether he prayed. He said that besides praying before his meals, he did not pray much. I was then clear that his weakness was the result of not contacting God or, rather, of not contacting God adequately. An iron that is plugged into an electric socket needs at least two to three minutes to become warm and much longer to become hot. If it is unplugged for one minute, the iron will no longer be hot. If an unplugged iron could speak, it would complain that it is weak and useless. An unplugged iron is not hot, because it is disconnected from electricity; it is not in continual contact with electricity. Similarly, if a person does not pray, he does not contact God and therefore cannot be strong.

Although this brother thought that my response was correct, he did not know how to pray and did not have much to say when he prayed. I told him that prayer does not require speaking. When we visit a friend who is not in a good mood, we may not have much to say, but it is sufficient to be with him, see him, and accompany him. He may have been heavy-hearted and depressed before our visit. But after sitting with us for a while and sensing our

sympathy and understanding, he will be relieved within, and his burden will disappear. Such is the result of having good contact.

God is Spirit; hence, our contacting and absorbing Him do not depend on our words. Some people utter many words when they pray, but their words are like sounding brass or clanging cymbals; they do not have much value before God. We may not say anything when we come to God, but our whole being, including our heart, should face God. While we look to God, we may sigh and confess that we are incompetent, weak, unable to rise, unpresentable, and thirsty and that we lack words for the gospel and are not inclined to fellowship with the saints. We should lay our inner condition before God and even tell Him that we are short in every matter. No matter what our inner condition is, we should bring it to God. There is a hymn that says, "Just as I am" (*Hymns,* #1048). This means that we should come to God just as we are without trying to improve or change our condition. Our attitude when we come to God should be to come just as we are.

Many believers have the natural concept that before they can pray and draw near to God, they must wait until their condition improves or until their inner feeling is strong. This concept is not according to the meaning of prayer. To pray is to come to God just as we are. The closer we are to our true condition the better. We do not need to wait for anything, change anything, or prepare anything. Even if we are weak, confused, sad, and speechless, we can still come to God.

A sister who has stumbled and is a complete mess can come to the Lord as she is. Perhaps she is so low that she cannot utter any words; she can still come like this to God. Perhaps she has not prayed for half a year and is embarrassed to meet God. She does not need to wait or to improve her condition; she should just bring her embarrassment to God.

God is everything to us. The expectation to be strong and have words for prayer without contacting God is vain. God does not want us to have such expectations. He is not concerned about whether we are bad, weak, or wrong. Our condition does not bother Him. He is concerned only about our seeing and contacting Him. As long as we come to Him, He has a way because He is the way. If we are weak, He is power. If we are not presentable, He is presentable. If we are unable to rise up, He is rising up. If we lack leading, He is the leading. If we do not have words, He is the Word. He is everything. We

do not have to wait or improve ourselves. The more we come to God according to our condition, the better.

We usually groom ourselves before we meet others, and we pretend while we are with them. Sometimes we will not allow others to see us until we have finished grooming. A brother who has had an outburst of anger will not welcome any visitors, because his anger has not subsided, and he cannot pretend. A sister who is not neatly dressed will not want to see anyone. Although we should be neatly dressed, dressing neatly may be a form of pretense. We do not need to pretend when we come to God. A brother who just lost his temper should bring that temper to God. Even if his spirit is low and he cannot rise up to pray, he should still come to God. We do not need to pretend, and God does not want us to pretend. To tidy oneself up before contacting God is not the principle of prayer. Prayer does not require self-improvement. The more that we are in our true condition when we pray, the better. Our condition is our condition. To change ourselves is human work. We do not need to change in order to contact God. Our need is God and to let Him change us.

In Luke 15:11-21 after the younger son had squandered his estate by living dissolutely and spending all he had, he did not improve himself before returning to his father's house. He did not have anything that would enable him to improve himself, nor did he know that this would not deter his father. The younger son did not change himself; rather, he returned to his father in his true, unchanged condition and let his father change him. His father said, "Bring out quickly the best robe and put it on him...And bring the fattened calf; slaughter it, and let us eat and be merry" (vv. 22-23). The father changed his son's robe and his food, that is, his son's outer condition and inner condition. Previously, the younger son wore rags, but he now had the best robe. Previously, he ate carob pods, but he now ate the fattened calf. The father brought about these changes, not the son. This is the principle of prayer. To pray is to come to God just as we are in our true condition, without changing or improving ourselves. Our coming to God in this way is not an ordinary crying out; it is our meeting and contacting God. When we contact Him, we absorb Him.

A believer needs to learn to spend a considerable amount of time in God's presence daily. It is preferable to spend half an hour to one hour, although we should not make rules, because rule making is futile. Eating is an example.

We need to eat three meals a day, and the days that we are busy are not an exception. If we do not eat, we will become weak physically, and we will lose our health. This also applies spiritually. We have to spend time daily in God's presence. To compromise we can spend half an hour in His presence. To spend less than half an hour is too short. It is best to spend one hour in God's presence daily. This does not mean that we have to spend one hour in God's presence in one sitting. We can split the hour into twenty minutes in the morning, ten minutes twice during the day, and twenty minutes at night. This adds up to one hour.

If we would contact God, wait on Him, linger in His presence, behold Him, and absorb Him daily, He will cause our condition to change. We do not need to ask Him for many things, such as power, strength, victory, zeal, or the ability to rise up. We only need to touch Him every day, and after some time He will become our everything. If we need warmth, He will be our warmth. If we need light, He will be our light. If we need power, He will be our power. If we need comfort, He will be our comfort. If we need support, He will be our support, and if we need leading, He will be our leading. He is whatever we need.

If we would spend some time to pray every day in order to absorb God, the salvation of His countenance will become the salvation of our countenance (Psa. 42:5, 11). Perhaps a sister is very sorrowful and can only sigh in grief and sorrow during the twenty minutes that she spends in God's presence. However, after twenty minutes her countenance will change, and she will become joyful. Our countenance manifests the salvation that comes forth from God's countenance. Because we spend time face to face with God, the salvation of His countenance becomes the salvation of our countenance.

The first meaning of prayer is to absorb God. When we pray, we should behold His glorious face and linger in His presence to worship, praise, give thanks to Him, and muse upon Him. We should think of His works and His person and not look at our condition or our environment. By looking to God, waiting on Him, and musing upon Him, we can absorb Him into us.

To Express God

The first meaning of prayer is to absorb God, and the second meaning is to express God. These meanings are related. To express God means to let Him

speak, that is, to let God be expressed. Prayer is not our speaking or expressing ourselves. Prayer is our letting God speak and express Himself.

In Genesis 18 Abraham prayed for Lot and also for Sodom (vv. 23-32). However, the end of that chapter says, "Jehovah went away as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham" (v. 33). Although it was Abraham who prayed, it was Jehovah who spoke. It was Jehovah who finished speaking and who expressed His intention.

Whenever we pray, we should let God speak and let Him finish speaking. In the New Testament Martha had much to say. When Martha's brother, Lazarus, died and the Lord came, Martha did not let the Lord speak first. As soon as she saw the Lord, she said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). The Lord said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes into Me, even if he should die, shall live...Do you believe this?" (vv. 25-26). Martha replied, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 27). What Martha said did not correspond with what the Lord revealed to her. Because she kept speaking, the Lord's words could not get into her. Everything she said was an expression of herself. That was not real prayer; it was man's natural crying out. Real prayer is our coming to God and letting God speak and express Himself instead of speaking our own words and expressing ourselves. We are often like Martha in our prayer. Our only care is to express ourselves, not to let God express Himself.

This does not mean that we should not say anything when we pray. We should speak when we pray; however, the question is, What do we say? In our prayer we should say what God is saying within us. God speaks within us, and to pray is to repeat what He has spoken back to Him. This is the principle of Psalm 27:8: "When You say, Seek My face, / To You my heart says, Your face, O Jehovah, will I seek." Such prayer is according to God's speaking within us. Therefore, the words we utter in prayer are an expression of the speaking within us. Without is man's speaking, but within is God's speaking. Once God speaks within, we speak without. Prayer is not our asking for something through speaking; it is our expressing what God has spoken within us. Hence, our prayer becomes God's expression. This is real prayer.

For example, we hear that the church needs to pray for a certain special meeting or for the revival of the church. Just as we begin to pray, we sense a word from the Lord telling us something concerning our inner condition and

our situation. We should stop praying and forget about the revival of the church or the special meeting and follow the inner sense; we should speak the words that the Lord has spoken. If we sense the Lord's rebuke, saying, "You are full of the flesh," we should say, "Lord, I am full of the flesh." If we sense that the Lord is saying, "You are full of the self," we should immediately say, "Lord, I am full of the self."

There are times when we let God speak, and we pray forth our inner sense. However, only a portion of our prayer is according to the inner expression, because we add many of our own cries. This is our being tempted to beseech God for something. God may give us the sense that we are full of the flesh and the self, but we often add many things when we pray according to this sense. For example, we may pray, "Lord, cause me not to have the flesh any longer and not to be in the self." The problem is that such a prayer is our own crying out; it is not an expression of the speaking from within. Sometimes instead of touching the inner sense, we ask God to do things according to what we think. Such prayers are vain.

In Psalm 27:4 David said that he desired to behold the beauty of Jehovah and "inquire in His temple." David did not say "cry out" or "beseech" but "inquire." To inquire is to ask God. Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18 is a good example of inquiring. When God told Abraham that He would judge the sinful city of Sodom, Abraham said, "Will You indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed destroy...it?" (vv. 23-24). We would have said, "God, You must save Sodom. There are fifty righteous men in that city; hence, You must save them." Abraham did not pray in this way; rather, he inquired about what God would do if there were fifty righteous men in the city, and what He would do if forty-five were righteous, and God told Abraham what He would do. When Abraham inquired about ten righteous men, God said, "I will not destroy it, because of the ten" (vv. 28-32). By this, Abraham understood God's intention.

Although it was Abraham who continued to inquire in that prayer, it was mainly God speaking, not Abraham. Hence, at the end of the chapter the Bible says, "Jehovah went away as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham" (v. 33). The best and most valuable prayer is not one in which we speak but one in which God speaks. The best and most valuable prayer is not one in which we cry out or beseech but one in which we inquire and let God speak. To cry out is to tell God the things of man, but to beseech is to beg for the

things of God. The best prayer is to inquire. To inquire is to let God speak so that the words spoken are God's speaking within man, God's expressions. This is the best prayer.

In conclusion, to pray means to absorb God and to express Him. Every prayer should touch God and let Him pass through us and be expressed. When we pray in this way, we will be anointed by God and be mingled more with Him. Then we will know that God is our everything. We will also see that He is always with us and is our supply in every need.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BEST PRAYER

John 15:7 says, "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." This verse presents three crucial points. First, we must abide in the Lord. To abide in the Lord is to have fellowship with the Lord. Second, the Lord's words must abide in us. When we abide in the Lord and are in constant fellowship with Him, He speaks within us. Third, we ask the Lord according to our heart's desire. Such asking, or praying, comes from the Lord's speaking within us. If we are in fellowship with the Lord, He will speak within us. When the Lord speaks, we have the words with which to ask Him, that is, to pray to Him.

PRAYING TO GOD AS A FRIEND

God Humbling Himself to Befriend Man

The Bible says that Abraham was the friend of God. In Genesis 18 the God of heaven came to earth in order to befriend Abraham. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament say that Abraham was a friend of God (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; James 2:23). Our impression of God is that He is too great and that we are so low. Although we cannot describe His greatness in words, we can say that we are low to the uttermost. We were made from dust, became evil and corrupt by the fall, and were dead in our offenses and sins (Eph. 2:1). There is nothing that qualifies us to commune with God. Because of this fact, we have the natural and inaccurate concept that since God is so great and we are so low, it must not be easy to converse with Him, draw near to Him, pray to Him, or even cry out to Him.

Very few people have a thorough and accurate concept regarding prayer. Very few know that we can pray to God just as we speak with other human beings. Since most people have the concept that God is so great and man is so small, that God is high above and man is far below, they think that we must be solemn and reverent when coming to God. They also think that we must implore God for His care and mercy so that our requests may be granted and our desires fulfilled. This is the concept of most people, and I was not an exception.

When I was newly saved, I would always tidy myself up, lower my hands properly, walk slowly to a chair, kneel down sincerely, and respectfully bow my head before solemnly praying to God. Although nothing was wrong with this, it was a natural form of worship; it was prayer out of my natural feeling. Praying in this way is the result of not knowing God, misunderstanding Him, and not having divine revelation. God never intended for us to pray in this way.

New Testament believers are more blessed and more intimate with God than the Old Testament believers. However, even the forefathers in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, did not regard themselves as small human beings who had to prostrate themselves when they prayed and dared not lift up their face to look at the great and high God sitting in the heavens. In Genesis 18 God wanted Abraham to pray to Him, so He came to be Abraham's friend. God did not lift Abraham up to the heavenly sanctuary of glory; instead, He humbled Himself and went to the lowly tent in which Abraham dwelt. God did not flaunt His prestige, majesty, or power. Abraham served cakes, a calf, curds, and milk, and God ate (vv. 1-8). God came to Abraham as an ordinary visitor. After He ate, the first thing He asked Abraham was, "Where is Sarah your wife?" (v. 9). Sarah did not come out but hid in the back. God said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and then Sarah your wife shall have a son" (v. 10). When Sarah heard this, she laughed within herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (v. 12). God, knowing that Sarah laughed, asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v. 13). Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," but God said, "No, but you did laugh" (v. 15). This situation was altogether like that of a person visiting in a friend's home.

God Telling Man the Things on His Heart in Fellowship

After God finished speaking, He rose up to leave, and Abraham walked with Him to send Him away (v. 16). Suppose a brother visits me in my home, and after our conversation he rises to leave, and I rise in order to walk with him. Although he walks out of the door, I do not want to leave him, so I walk farther with him until we reach the main street. This is how Abraham was with God. God rose to leave Abraham's tent, but Abraham walked with God in order to send Him off. It was in such a sending off that Abraham "sent" God's

words out. We should not think that God has nothing to do or that He has nothing to say. God has many things to do and to say, but He needs us to walk with Him, to send Him off, so that He can tell us what He wants to do.

Many of us have had such an experience. Suppose Brother A is troubled in his heart concerning a matter and goes to seek help from Brother B. Even though Brother B receives him, Brother A may not be able to speak about what is on his heart, because it is not easy to talk about matters that trouble the heart. After talking for a while, Brother A may rise to leave even though he still has something on his heart. If Brother B bids Brother A farewell, then Brother A will keep the matter that is on his heart. If Brother B is very close to Brother A and sees that Brother A is still troubled about something, he will walk with Brother A, not wanting to leave him. Brother A may say, "Please do not trouble yourself to walk any farther," but Brother B will say, "I will walk just a few more steps." It is at this time that Brother A will feel comfortable to bring up what is on his heart. We often cannot immediately disclose the matters on our heart. It is not until we rise to leave and our friend sends us off that we can disclose the things on our heart.

God had two purposes for appearing to Abraham. One purpose was to tell Abraham that he would beget Isaac according to the time of life. This was related to Abraham. The other purpose was to tell Abraham that He would destroy Sodom. This was related to Abraham's nephew Lot. God told Abraham the matter that was related to him near his tent. God was to give Abraham a son. It was easy for God to tell Abraham this because it was something that God would do for Abraham. However, this was only part of God's purpose in visiting Abraham. It was not easy for God to tell Abraham the second purpose, for God had to find someone on the earth who would pray for Lot to be saved. This is what God wanted Abraham to do; hence, it was not easy for God to bring up this matter. Before God can do something in a brother, He must first find someone to pray for that brother. This is a major principle of God's work.

Before God saves, edifies, or works in someone, He must find a person to pray for the things that He is about to do. Without our prayer, God cannot work. God visited Abraham so that Abraham would intercede for Lot to be saved. It is possible to say that God was asking Abraham to do something; hence, it was not easy for God to bring it up. It is easy to tell a person what we will do for him, but it is not easy to ask someone to do something for us. God

wanted Abraham to do something, but in order to see if Abraham was willing, He did not bring it up quickly. If I want to ask a brother to help me, I would first talk with him to see how his heart is toward me. Only if he cares for me would I feel comfortable asking him to help me. This was the case when God spoke with Abraham. It was when Abraham walked with God to send God off and lingered in God's presence that God said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (v. 17). God spoke with Abraham as if He was speaking with a friend.

Here is an example. A brother's child was disobedient and often made his parents angry. One day this brother came to my home to fellowship with me. I asked, "Brother, what is it that you want to fellowship about?" He said, "Nothing much," and sipped his tea. He then talked about other matters and stood up to leave. It seemed that he wished to say something but found it difficult to bring up, so I walked with him to send him off. It was then that he said, "It is not easy to raise children." I responded, "No, children are not easy to handle." He then said, "My child has been in a lot of trouble at home for several days now." I then understood that he wanted me to help his child. When he walked into my home, he did not say, "Brother, please come see my child." Rather, he told me what was on his heart after he saw that I cared for him like a close friend. I immediately asked, "May I come see him tomorrow afternoon?" He said, "Nothing would be better." When I touched his heart, he told me what he wanted me to do.

God went to Abraham so that Abraham would pray for Lot. Genesis 19:29 says that when God destroyed Sodom, He remembered Abraham and rescued Lot. God's purpose was for Abraham to pray for Lot, but instead of being like a master commanding a servant, He was like a person needing a friend's help. God did not say, "Abraham, I want to destroy Sodom; hence, you must pray for Lot." That would have been a master commanding his servant, not a conversation between close friends. Instead, God stood in front of Abraham that day as Abraham's friend. He and Abraham stood and talked as friends about the things on His heart. He said, "The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah, how great it is; and their sin, how very heavy it is! I shall go down and see whether they have done altogether according to its outcry" (18:20-21). Abraham immediately understood that God wanted him to pray for Lot, who dwelt in Sodom. God seemed to be speaking in a riddle; it was as if He had said something yet said nothing. Abraham was very wise and did not say,

"God, Lot is still there; will You destroy him also?" Neither God nor Abraham mentioned Lot's name, but Lot was their goal.

Prayer Being to Express God's Heart

Let us look at how Abraham prayed that day. He asked God, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed destroy...it?" (v. 24). God said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place for their sake" (v. 26). Abraham immediately subtracted five, saying, "Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five?" and God said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there" (v. 28). Then Abraham knew that there were not even forty-five righteous in the city. He therefore said, "Suppose forty are found there?" and God said, "I will not do it, because of the forty" (v. 29). Abraham was even clearer that there were not forty and subtracted another ten, saying, "Suppose thirty are found there?" and God said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there" (v. 30). Abraham knew again that there were not even thirty and said, "Suppose twenty are found there?" and God said, "I will not destroy it, because of the twenty" (v. 31). Then Abraham knew that there must not have been twenty and immediately said, "Suppose ten are found there?" and God said, "I will not destroy it, because of the ten" (v. 32). Then Abraham knew that the righteous ones whom God would not destroy must have been the family of his nephew Lot. Hence, he spoke no more. This is what makes prayer marvelous. God speaks the things on His heart, and we pray for them as His friends, but neither God nor we explicitly state the object of our concern. Both God and Abraham were concerned about Lot, yet neither mentioned Lot. This was the sweetness of that conversation between intimate friends.

The best prayers are prayers to God as a friend. Such prayers are not uttered by men who are far below a very high God. Such prayers are spoken by men to a God who is on their level. Some may condemn this and say that it is heresy to uplift man to the same level as God. However, in the matter of God communing with man, of His wanting man to pray, God likes to be on the same level as man. Thus, real prayers are made by men who stand on the same level as God and consult with God. This is not man uplifting himself but God humbling Himself. It is not our going to God's palace but God coming to our tent. Every real prayer is God condescending Himself in order to draw near to us, humbling Himself to come to us, and placing Himself on the same

level that we are on so that we may be at ease to speak with Him. This is real prayer.

TWO LESSONS ON PRAYER

Learning to Absorb God

If we want to learn lessons on prayer, we must first learn to absorb God. We should not regard God as being so high while we are so low. This is not according to God's revelation. If we know God, we will be able to say, "God, under the blood of Your Son I can come to Your throne of grace to meet You and to behold Your beauty, face to face." We need to open our spirit and absorb Him. We should not say much, nor should we pour out our miseries. We should offer God some praise. We may say, "You are so glorious, sweet, and humble. You came to be with me. I worship You and thank You from my heart." To commend, praise, worship, and thank God in such a way is like the first part of Abraham's fellowship with God. Abraham invited God in, set a meal before God, stood by without saying much, and watched God eat and enjoy the meal. This is the best prayer.

The best prayer is not one in which we tell God many matters. The Lord Jesus said, "Do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, With what shall we be clothed? For all these things the Gentiles are anxiously seeking. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matt. 6:31-32). Hence, we do not need to tell God our distresses and miseries, for He already knows them; they are not a problem to Him. We also do not need to tell Him our condition. To do so does not require learning and is a natural prayer, not prayer according to revelation.

A prayer of revelation is one in which we do not consider our failures or weaknesses. Rather, in spite of how distressed or burdened we may be, we set our eyes on God and turn our heart to Him. Instead of caring about our condition, we enter into God's presence to contact God by looking to Him, beholding Him, praising Him, giving thanks to Him, worshipping Him, and absorbing Him. This is a sweet lesson. If we would learn this lesson, we will enjoy God's riches and taste His sweetness. If we would spend a little time to enter into God's presence and absorb Him every day, we will receive light and power; we will be peaceful, bright, strong, and empowered.

An electric iron that is not connected to electricity has no way to heat up. But once it is connected, it will get hot. Hence, we should not say that we are weak and unable to rise up or that we cannot overcome and live a holy life. Even if we are cold, weak, defeated, and unable to rise up, if we would come to God, contact Him, draw near to Him, behold Him, praise Him, thank Him, and take time to linger in His presence, He will touch our spirit. Strength, power to rise up, and victory are in God. No method or message can make us overcome. Victory is God, and overcoming power is God. When we contact God daily, we are "electrified" within, become "hot," and possess His riches. If we need leading, He is our leading. If we need light, He is our light. If we need comfort, He is our comfort. If we need power, He is our power. He is everything that we need. We must learn this precious lesson.

My greatest fear when I stand at the podium is that I would not be connected to God. Sometimes I do not need to spend much time to prepare a message; however, I do need to spend a long time to contact God in His presence, that is, to be connected to the "electricity." My greatest fear is to be disconnected from God while giving a message. That would be miserable.

As Christians, we are miserable, weak, and unable to rise up when we are disconnected from God. When we are disconnected from God, we are through. God is everything to us, so we should spend some time and effort to contact Him every day. The first lesson on prayer is to contact God and absorb God.

Learning to Express God

When we learn the first lesson, we will learn the second lesson spontaneously. When we touch and contact God, He will surely speak, that is, express His mind, within us. When Abraham contacted God, walked with God in sending Him off, and lingered in His presence, God said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (Gen. 18:17). This was God speaking, expressing Himself. Hence, Abraham was able to pray to God according to God's speaking, and Abraham's prayer was God's expression. Every phrase of his prayer was God's expression. At the end of Genesis 18 the Holy Spirit did not say that Jehovah left after Abraham finished praying but that "Jehovah went away as soon as He had finished speaking with Abraham" (v. 33). This sweet sentence shows that it was Abraham who prayed, but it was Jehovah who spoke. When Jehovah finished speaking, Abraham finished praying. Therefore, Abraham's prayer was the expression of God's speaking. Real

prayer is God's expression. If we really contact, touch, and absorb God, He will speak within us. Whenever He speaks, it is time for us to pray. This is how we pray according to His speaking.

It is regrettable that some saints have neither learned to contact God nor to let God speak and express His desire when they pray. There is no need for the elders to pray in tears when the church encounters problems, saying, "Lord, look at this problem. Please remember that we are weak and foolish; we do not have much spiritual weight, nor do we know how to administrate the church. Lord, have mercy on us and solve this problem for us." Such desperate prayers cannot be maintained. This is the condition of most prayers: they neither contact nor express God. Some sisters cry in prayer before the Lord whenever their husband has problems, their children are sick, or a family member is in an accident. They utter many words, but it is merely their speaking; they do not give the Lord a chance to speak. Even if the Lord were to say a few words, they would misunderstand His words. Most people pray in this way. Many pray, but few touch the Lord, contact Him, wait before Him, let Him speak, or let Him express Himself. Such prayers in which God does not express Himself are abnormal.

In a normal prayer God speaks to us. Prayer should not be to take care of the problems that are on our heart but to contact God. To pray is to go to God, meet Him, draw near to Him, behold Him, commune with Him, and absorb Him. For example, an elder who is bearing a problem of the church on his heart should touch and absorb God. Instead of mentioning the problem of the church, he should let God speak. God may ask the elder concerning his flesh. The elder has the problem of the church on his heart, but God asks concerning his flesh. Then the elder will immediately sense that he is a fleshly person. God may say, "The church has a problem because of your flesh." Then he can confess, "Yes, Lord. The problem is not with the church but with me. Lord, have mercy on me; save me." Such a prayer is real. When we touch God and let Him speak, our prayer expresses God.

Here is another example. Suppose that a sister's husband has a problem and that her child was in an accident, but she does not mention these matters to the Lord. Instead, she touches and absorbs Him. When the Lord touches her, He will speak. He might ask concerning her attitude toward her husband and toward her child. Immediately, she will have a sense and say, "Lord, I have failed my husband and neglected my child because of my disposition and

my temper." The Lord may ask whether she has been broken or whether she has learned the lesson. She can then confess, "Lord, I have not yet been broken, nor have I learned the lesson. My disposition and my temper have not been dealt with by You." Even though the sister did not pray for her husband or child, God will bless her husband and child. This is according to the Lord's word that "all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). This is genuine and normal prayer.

Our problem is that we often go to God in prayer, but we do not let Him speak to us. We must understand that the best prayer is not one in which we speak to God but one in which God speaks to us. The more we touch God in our prayer, the more He will speak to us. What matters is not how much we speak to God, but how much God speaks to us. What matters is how much we let God appear to us, speak to us, touch us, and point out our inner condition. We should drop all our burdens, forget our requests, and pay attention only to what God is touching in us. Then we should pray only according to that point. Whatever God asks for is what we say. Then our prayer will be His speaking, His expression. The most genuine and valuable prayer is one in which God expresses His prayer through man.

To pray by letting God speak and express Himself is to pray according to the Lord's word in John 15:7. When we abide in the Lord, have fellowship with Him, and let Him speak within us, what we ask will be according to His words. Such prayer is not out of our self, nor is it initiated by us; rather, it is out of the Lord, and He is its source. We are not uttering our own words but the words that the Lord has spoken within us. Such prayer is not the expression of our will but the Lord's will, and it is not our asking apart from the Lord. Such prayer is our praying to the Lord by abiding in Him and being mingled with Him. Such prayer is the issue of our mingling with the Lord. This is the best prayer!

CHAPTER THREE

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

Scripture Reading: Isa. 62:6-7; 45:11; Ezek. 22:30; Dan. 9:2-4; 1 Sam. 12:23; Exo. 2:23-25; 3:7-8

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

BEING TO CO-WORK WITH GOD

In the previous chapters we said that prayer is for man to absorb God and for man to express God. Every prayer that touches God has these two aspects. On the one hand, we absorb God by contacting Him. On the other hand, by contacting and absorbing God, we let Him express Himself within us; that is, we utter genuine prayers. In this chapter we will continue to consider prayer. Real prayers include more than the aspects of absorbing God and expressing Him. Absorbing and expressing God in prayer are actually our preparation for prayer that enables us to fulfill God's purpose in prayer. Hence, we will now consider how God's purpose is fulfilled in prayer.

A person who knows how to pray is a man of prayer who co-works with God. We may say that the purpose of prayer is to co-work with God. Our prayer is not only to absorb God and express Him but also to co-work with God, that is, to work together with Him. For example, suppose I am standing at the podium with a brother who translates, and while I give the message, he translates. When we coordinate in this way, we are co-working, working together. If I do not speak, he cannot translate, and if he does not translate, I have no way to give the message. The two of us echo each other by working on the same thing together. This is co-working, coordinating. This example helps us understand the meaning of co-working and coordinating.

Sometimes, the brother who translates can coordinate with me very well, and he is completely one with me. When I sway a little, he sways in the same way while he translates. He repeats my gestures. When I raise my voice, he raises his voice. When I speak slowly, he speaks slowly. When I am serious, he is also serious. He is just like me. The two of us are like one man; hence, others see perfect coordination and co-working. This is the way that we should coordinate and co-work with God in prayer.

We often think that the purpose of prayer is to ask God to work, to do things. However, the purpose of prayer is for us to work, to do things, with God, that is, to co-work with God.

The verses in the Scripture Reading show a principle. If man does not pray, God will not work; if no one prays, God has no work to do. At any given time God must find some people or a person to co-work with Him to pray for what He intends to do on earth. If no one prays, God does not have a co-worker, and He cannot work. For example, if I do not have a translator to translate my Mandarin into Cantonese when I give a message in Hong Kong, then I do not have a co-worker, and therefore I cannot give a message. I must wait until a translator becomes my co-worker before I can give a message. Conversely, if I do not give a message, the translator has nothing to translate. In God's work those who pray function not only as a translator but also as a speaker. For example, the translator will translate as much as I speak, and he will say what I say. Likewise, in an effective prayer, God accomplishes what we pray for, and He accomplishes as much as we pray for. Our prayer can be compared to giving a message, and God's work can be compared to translating. The extent to which we pray is the extent to which God works. Those whom we touch in prayer are those on whom God works, what we pray for is what God does, and how we pray is how God fulfills. This is a great principle of prayer.

For this reason prayer is a dignified matter in the sight of God. God needs our prayer to lead His work. The extent of our prayer is the extent of His work, and what we pray about is what God does. It seems that our prayer leads God's work and that His work follows our prayer. If we are lacking in God's work, we are lacking in prayer. If we do not see God saving people, we are not praying for people to be saved. If we do not see God moving in the church, we are not praying for His move. God does not work when man does not pray. The extent of God's work depends on the extent of our prayer. When we pray a little, God can only work a little. If God is not working much, it is because man is not praying much. We should never think that God's work precedes our prayer. Our prayer takes the lead, and God's work follows. The key lies with us. If we pray, God will work, but if we do not pray, He will not work.

Since prayer is so important, real prayer must contact, absorb, and express God. Otherwise, it is not real prayer, and it will not move God to work. Prayer that does not touch or express God is man's expression, not God's expression. Such prayer is out of the self, not out of God. As a result, man may pray, but

God will not work. Although man wants God to work, He will not; hence, such prayer is of no avail. If we want God's work to follow our prayer and to fulfill the extent of our prayer, then our prayer must touch, absorb, and express God. This is the way for our prayer to be God's expression. In such prayer God is praying in us. This is our co-working with God, that is, our working together with God. Then the extent of our prayer is the extent to which God will work. Hence, in real prayer God follows man. Prayer that does not cause God to follow is not real prayer and is not of much value.

EXAMPLES IN THE BIBLE

In Isaiah 62:6-7 Jehovah said, "Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, / I have appointed watchmen; / All day and all night / They will never keep silent. / You who remind Jehovah, / Do not be dumb; / And do not give Him quiet / Until He establishes / And until He makes Jerusalem / A praise in the earth." According to these verses, in order for God to make Jerusalem a praise, He first needs to appoint watchmen to remind Him of this matter all day and all night. Had the watchmen prayed ceaselessly, they could have caused Jehovah to work ceaselessly. Here is a principle: without man's prayer, God cannot work. If we pray ceaselessly, we make God work ceaselessly. God wants to work, but He needs us to pray, to co-work, and to coordinate with Him.

Verse 11 of chapter 45 says, "Thus says Jehovah, / The Holy One of Israel and the One who formed him, / Ask Me about the things to come concerning My sons, / And concerning the work of My hands, command Me." How amazing it is that we can command God concerning His work, as if we are the master and He is the servant! Usually the command of the master comes first, and the work of the servant follows. The master commands the servant, and the servant obeys. Without the master's command the servant has nothing to do. Similarly, in prayer our position is active, and God's position is passive. Good prayers are prayers that command God. Such prayers are up to the standard. God will do what we want Him to do, and He will do it according to the desire in us that expresses Him.

This is a great spiritual principle: our prayer comes first, takes the lead, and God's work follows. Our prayer takes the initiative, and God's work fulfills. Prayer is crucial. The purpose of prayer is to co-work with God, that is, to coordinate with God's work such that it initiates what He fulfills. We pray, and God fulfills. Our praying is our ordering God, our commanding Him, and

His fulfilling is His carrying out our order, His obeying our command. The extent to which we command is the extent to which He works.

In Ezekiel 22:30 Jehovah said, "I sought a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the breach before Me for the sake of the land so that I would not destroy it, but I found no one." This indicates that God wanted to save the children of Israel from their desolation, but He had no way to act because He did not find among them one who would pray for this matter. This can be compared to having a translator but no speaker. Without a speaker the translator cannot work even if many saints are in the meeting hall. God wanted to save the children of Israel, but He did not find anyone among them who would stand in the breach before Him, that is, stand to pray on their behalf. God can work only when someone among His children prays. He cannot work if no one prays. This shows that God's work depends on our prayer.

We should never think that our prayers are the source of God's desire to do something. We have the wrong concept that until we implore God to bless the church, He has no such desire. In actuality, God knows the condition of the church and wants to bless the church, but He cannot, because no one prays; no one co-works with Him to be a pioneer. He will not begin to work until at least one person rises up and prays, cries out, as a pioneer, a leader, in God's work. God has many things that He wants to do, but we must pray.

Daniel 9:2-4 says, "I, Daniel, understood by means of the Scriptures the number of the years, which came as the word of Jehovah to Jeremiah the prophet, for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, that is, seventy years. So I set my face toward the Lord God to seek Him in prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. And I prayed to Jehovah my God and confessed." Daniel understood God's will for Jerusalem from the Scriptures and prayed for God's will according to the Scriptures. Daniel knew how to pray because he knew how to draw near to God, to contact God, to absorb God, and to let God express Himself. Daniel's preciousness was not related to his prophesying but to his ability to pray. He could prophesy because he knew how to pray. His prayers touched, contacted, absorbed, and expressed God. Hence, his prayers were his co-working with God.

Daniel was God's co-worker on earth. He was considerate of God's heart and contacted God. He lived in God and let God live in him. Daniel was a

person in union with God. As a result, Daniel could co-work with God, coordinate with God, and be God's expression when there was a great turn of events on earth. Daniel understood from God's Word that the desolation of the children of Israel would last seventy years, and that at the conclusion of the seventy years God would bring the children of Israel from the land of their captivity to the land of Israel for them to rebuild Jerusalem. He knew God's intention and prayed for it with fasting. He knew God was about to move on earth, so he became God's expression in order to coordinate with God through prayer. The extent to which Daniel prayed was the extent to which God worked. God did what Daniel prayed for. The return of the children of Israel to Jerusalem was God's fulfilling of Daniel's prayer. The children of Israel's return from captivity was the issue of Daniel's prayer. Hence, Daniel's prayer co-worked with God, opened a way for God's work, caused God to work, and led God's work.

The prophet Samuel knew that God's work on earth requires the coordination of man's prayer. Therefore, Samuel told the children of Israel, "As for me, far be it from me that I would sin against Jehovah by ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23). Samuel seemed to say that the children of Israel did not want God and that only he was left to live for God. Samuel was a Nazarite who had always lived in God's presence and understood God's heart. Hence, he was God's co-worker on earth. Had he not prayed for the children of Israel, God would not have had a way to work among them. If Samuel had not prayed, he would have hindered God's work, which would have been a sin, an offense against God.

After reading Exodus, some people think that God did not like the Israelites when they were in Egypt but that when the Israelites could no longer bear the oppression of the Egyptians, they entreated God and softened His heart; as a result, He had mercy on them and delivered them from Egypt. This, however, is not according to the record in the Bible. Exodus 3:7 says that God knew "their sorrows." This means that God knew the sorrows of the children of Israel and wanted to deliver them, but He had not delivered them, because until Exodus 2:23-25 they had not entreated Him concerning their deliverance. Their entreating and praying was to initiate God's deliverance. God wanted to deliver them, but He needed them to entreat Him and pray. Therefore, their praying opened the way for God's work. God could deliver them when they prayed.

THE COORDINATION OF PRAYER BEING THE BASIS OF GOD'S WORK

The above examples in the Bible show that the opening of God's work on earth depends on our prayer. God's work matches our prayer, and His work is as extensive as our prayer. God wants to do many things, but He cannot do anything if we do not pray. A person who knew God said once that God's work is like a train, and our prayers are like tracks; wherever the tracks have been laid, there the train can go. Hence, our prayers pave the way for God's work. Strictly speaking, however, our prayers not only pave the way for God but are also a part of God's work. Our prayers are our coordination with God's work. If we do not pray, God has no co-worker to coordinate with Him, and thus, He can do nothing.

The basic principle in God's work is that man must be mingled with God. Man cannot do the work of God by himself, nor can God work by Himself. God must be mingled with man in order to work through man. In God's work, man prays and God fulfills. Without man's prayer, God has no way to fulfill, and without God fulfilling, man prays in vain. When our prayer and God's fulfilling coordinate as one, God's work is accomplished on earth. For example, we believe that in Hong Kong God will save many souls and will raise up many to take the way of the cross, be overcomers, and maintain His testimony. He will also raise up some for His work and some as elders to lead His church and to shepherd His flock. The workers and elders will be rich in life, clear concerning the truth, broad in their view, and skilled. They will be weighty in spiritual matters, and they will be wise and competent in handling practical affairs. Indeed, God wants to raise up such ones to administrate the church in Hong Kong. But He must wait until someone rises up and prays for these matters before He can do them.

Hong Kong is the best place to preach the gospel because a concentrated population of two to three million people resides here. The instability in the world situation makes people restless and ready for the gospel. Transportation and the social facilities in Hong Kong are convenient. Hence, it is easy to preach the gospel. Furthermore, now is the best time to preach the gospel. We should not be surprised if two thousand are saved in a year. When I came to Hong Kong several years ago, the brothers showed me a piece of land that was a vegetable farm. At that time there were a few cottages around

the land. There are now five-story buildings surrounding the land. Just as Hong Kong has changed physically, the church in Hong Kong can have a spiritual change. I believe that God wants the church in Hong Kong to have such a change, but the question is whether someone will rise up and pray for this change. The change that we desire is to see thousands saved instead of ten, and this change is possible. This is also what God desires. The question is whether someone will rise up and pray for this. Is there anyone who would go to God and remind Him concerning this?

God wants the church in Hong Kong to be strong, full of His presence and His light, and transparent like the New Jerusalem. God also wants to raise up strong elders and deacons in the church in Hong Kong whose speaking from the Bible would be full of light and transparency. This is the condition that God desires for the church in Hong Kong. However, the question still remains: is there anyone who would rise up and pray for this matter so that God's intention would be fulfilled?

If some saints in the church in Hong Kong would touch and contact God, absorb Him, live in Him, let Him be expressed from within them, and pray at set times daily, God would fulfill their prayer. If they would pray, "God, we want many to be saved in the gospel this year," God would fulfill that. If they would pray, "God, we want the church in Hong Kong to be transparent and bright and full of Your presence. We want the testimony and service of the church to be strong," God would do such a work. However, this coordination cannot be gained through sloppy prayers. We must first touch God, absorb Him, and let Him be expressed from within us. Then our prayer will be able to bring in God's work.

The ones whom such saints bring up in prayer will not escape God's hand. The saints may feel that a young brother should spend his whole being and his life for God's work. Although they will not say much to the brother, they will mention his name in their prayer, and as a result, he will not escape God's hand. Day after day God's hand will be like the cords of a man and bands of love on that young brother, leading him to consecrate himself on the altar to God and to be gained by God (cf. Hosea 11:4). Then the brother will gradually become a strong oracle, a good minister of the word for God, and a pillar to uphold the testimony and service of the church. This is the result of the prayer of a group of saints.

A good number of saints pray often on my behalf. I deeply believe that the fruit of the work is the result of their prayer; God fulfills and answers their prayers. I also believe that as a result of their prayer, God's hand has been upholding and supporting me and has prevented me from being overcome by weakness or going astray. The varied mercy and grace of God that are manifested in me are the result of the prayers of the saints.

Those who love God must see that the purpose of prayer is to touch God, coordinate with Him, and be His co-worker. We become God's co-workers who coordinate with Him by touching Him, absorbing Him, and letting Him be expressed. Then God will take notice of whatever we bring up, He will provide what we request, and the extent of our prayer will be the extent of His work. This applies to God's work in the church, on the people around us, and in the saints.

If we do not pray for our condition, God will not work in us. For example, a sister may be full of the flesh, but if she does not pray concerning this, God will not do anything. It is not until she draws near to God in fellowship and absorbs God, and He touches her in order to manifest her flesh through her environment that she will pray concerning being fleshly. Then God can begin to work in her. From then on, He will deal with her flesh and deliver her. Thus, we need to see that we are God's co-workers to coordinate with Him in matters concerning others and ourselves. In such matters God will work according to our prayer.

As those who are learning to pray, we must exercise until we can touch God, express Him, and coordinate with Him as His co-workers. Then our prayers will become prophecies that He will fulfill. God will fulfill whatever we ask, and He will work according to our prayers. How glorious to be such persons on earth, that is, to be persons who command God! Such persons are glorious and dignified.

God has put us in such a high position through His union with us. If we will learn to pray in such a way, we will be filled inwardly with God. We will be persons who contact God and have fellowship with Him. We will touch God, let Him gain us, and let Him be expressed in us. This is what it means to be a person of prayer, one who co-works with God and whose prayers are in coordination with God. This is the purpose of prayer and the position that prayer brings us into.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SECRET TO CONTACTING THE LORD

Scripture Reading: John 2:3-5; 4:15-21, 23-24; 6:26-27; 11:3, 5-6, 17, 21-28, 32-33, 35-40; 13:6-10; 21:2-6, 9-13, 15, 19

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTACTING THE LORD

Bible scholars know that the Gospel of John has a special style of writing. This book is very simple yet quite detailed. John wrote in this way in order to show how God contacts man. At the end of the Gospel, John says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose that not even the world itself could contain the books written" (21:25). John did not record everything that the Lord Jesus did; rather, he chose certain things to show to those who are far away from God how God came to contact man. In order to contact man, God became man's life. God entered into man to be man's life and to live in man. Furthermore, God wants man to contact Him. This contact is what we call fellowship. The Gospel of John does not contain expressions such as *contact* or *fellowship,* but it shows that God desires to contact man and fellowship with man. In the Gospel of John we see not only how God causes man to have life but also how God wants man to contact Him.

The Gospel of John focuses on these two points: God entering into us to be our life, and His desire for us to contact Him. The former concerns having life, and the latter concerns contacting God. Everyone who has believed into the Lord has settled the matter of life. In this chapter we will consider our contacting of God.

After we are saved, the most important thing is for us to contact God. Those who have learned some spiritual lessons know that the Christian life depends on the condition of our contact with God. If our contact and fellowship with God are proper, we will be proper Christians. If we do not know how to contact God and lack fellowship with Him, we cannot be proper Christians, no matter how much we try.

CONTACTING THE LORD

The matter of contacting the Lord involves specific principles. It is possible to have morning revival every day and to pray every day without contacting the Lord. Many of our prayers do not result in our contacting the Lord, and thus, they are not beneficial. Hence, we must learn the principles involved in contacting the Lord.

There are many cases in the Gospel of John that show how we should contact the Lord. We do not have the time to go over all the cases, but we will select some crucial cases and consider the main points related to them. If we truly want to contact the Lord, we need to see some principles in contacting Him in these cases.

Not Directing the Lord

In the first case the Lord changed water into wine in chapter 2. Verse 11 says, "This beginning of signs Jesus performed." The Greek word for *signs* is translated "miracles" in the Chinese Union Version. A sign is a symbol with spiritual significance. Hence, the miracles performed by the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John are, on the one hand, miracles and, on the other hand, signs. The Lord used specific, visible miracles to indicate invisible, spiritual matters. Therefore, the cases that we will enumerate indicate spiritual principles. If we can identify the key points and principles in these cases, we will see the secret to contacting the Lord.

The major principle in the first case is that we must not direct the Lord when we contact Him. All authority must be in His hands. Hence, both the timing and the way we do things must be determined and directed by Him, not by us. We cannot say, "Lord, do this," or "Lord, do that." If we say this, the Lord might say, "What do I have in this that concerns you?" (v. 4). If we contact Him in this way, we may be rejected and rebuffed by Him. This does not mean that the Lord does not want any contact with us or that He is not bearing responsibility for our matters. The Lord entered into us in order to contact us and to be responsible for our affairs, just as He was at the wedding in Cana.

Marriage is the center of human life, and a wedding feast represents the pleasure of human life. The Lord came to the earth and entered into us in order to become the center of our human life and the pleasure of our human life. He did not come to ignore us or to be unconcerned with our affairs. He

came to bear responsibility for our affairs. However, as a prerequisite, we must hand all authority over to Him and give Him full liberty.

When the wine ran out at the wedding feast in Cana, Mary, the mother of Jesus, said to the Lord, "They have no wine" (v. 3). She said this in order to prompt the Lord to do something. Although she charged the Lord to do something, she was rebuffed. The Lord said, "Woman, what do I have in this that concerns you? My hour has not yet come" (v. 4). Having learned some lessons before God, Mary, after she was rebuffed, said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do" (v. 5). She realized that it was the Lord who should decide, not she; that it was the Lord who should give counsel, not she; and that it was the Lord who had the final word, not she.

The fact that the wine ran out means that something central and crucial was missing at the wedding feast. Since the Lord was there, He was surely interested in the feast. He would not stand by without doing something. Nevertheless, Mary, the Lord's mother in the flesh, a person who represents us in our way of contacting the Lord, went to the Lord to propose that He do something. She did this with good intentions. In contacting the Lord, we must beware that our intentions should not go before His intentions.

Sometimes we feel that we have a need when we draw near to the Lord in the morning. If we have learned the lesson, we will know that we must not be too quick to bring this need to the Lord. If we know that we have a need, the Lord also must know; hence, instead of making a proposal, we should wait for Him in His presence. If we are too quick with our proposal, we may be rebuffed and feel that the Lord is not listening to our prayer. He may seem to reject us and say, "What do I have in this that concerns you?" But He is not rejecting us; He is only rejecting our proposal, our counsel. He knows our need better than we do, and He wants to take care of it more than we do. There is no need for us to make a proposal or to counsel the Lord. Those who can pray in the Lord's presence without making a proposal know how to pray. This is not an easy matter.

The feast must have been out of wine for a while, but the Lord did not seem to be doing anything. This was a test to Mary, and she said, "They have no wine," meaning that the Lord should do something. The Lord rebuffed her, saying, "Woman, what do I have in this that concerns you? My hour has not yet come" (v. 4). The Lord seemed to be saying, "You cannot direct Me,

counsel Me, or make proposals concerning My affairs. My hour has not yet come. I have My timing. I am not under your direction."

This is a very good lesson to learn. When we go to the Lord, we seldom give Him the chance to speak. We normally say, "Lord, do this; Lord, do that. Look at the condition of the church. Revive the brothers and sisters." The more we pray in this way, the drier we are within, and the less we touch the Lord's presence. The feeling of dryness and a lack of His presence are the Lord's way of saying, "What do I have in this that concerns you? My hour has not yet come. I will take interest in, be responsible for, and solve these matters, but I will decide when and how. I have My timing; I am not under your direction."

Chapter 11 provides another example of this principle. Martha in chapter 11 is similar to Mary in chapter 2. In chapter 2 the wine ran out, and in chapter 11 a person's life came to an end. The Lord did not do anything immediately when the wine ran out; instead, He waited before He changed the water into wine. Similarly, in chapter 11 the Lord did not do anything when Lazarus was about to die; instead, He waited a few days after he had died before going to raise him. The Lord did not listen to the words of Martha or Mary, both of whom wanted to direct the Lord with their opinions.

We must always remember that the first principle to learn in contacting the Lord is to stop our counsel and to let the Lord speak. On the one hand, we must learn to draw near to the Lord; on the other hand, when we draw near to Him, we must learn to not speak, that is, to not make proposals. It was necessary for water to be changed into wine, but the Lord knew about this need better than Mary. The church needs to be revived and the believers need to be transformed, but the Lord knows about these needs better than we. The lesson we must learn is to worship and honor Him as the Lord. We must listen to what He says and do what He wants. We must not make many proposals in our prayers. This is the first principle that we must learn in contacting the Lord in prayer.

Handing Our Sins Over

The Samaritan woman's contact with the Lord in chapter 4 illustrates a second principle. Here the Samaritan woman realized that she was thirsty and that the Lord had living water. Hence, she asked the Lord for living water. However, the Lord did not give her this living water immediately; instead, He

asked her a question. She asked the Lord for living water, and the Lord asked about her husband (vv. 15-16). By asking about her husband, the Lord touched her sinful life; her sins were related to her husband. Hence, by asking about her husband, the Lord asked her about her sins, pointing out her sins. The Lord seemed to say, "Do you want living water? You should hand your sins over. Do you want to be satisfied? You should give heed to your sins."

Here we see another principle. Knowing that the Lord can supply our need, we often go to the Lord and discover a need. When we see a need, we ask the Lord to meet that need. However, while we are asking, the Lord shows us our stains, faults, and failures; that is, He shows us matters that need to be dealt with. Many of us have had such an experience.

If a child asks me for something, I may ask him to hold out his hands to see whether they are clean. After he washes his hands, I may ask about his face. Sometimes he may need to wash several times before he is clean. This is often our situation when we go to the Lord in prayer. When we tell the Lord what we need, He tells us to go and call our "husband." We tell Him of our need, but He points out our problems. This is another principle in drawing near to the Lord.

We often experience this principle after being rebuffed by Him for trying to give Him counsel or to direct Him. The Lord does not want us to pray for many things or for other people; He wants to reveal our own condition to us. However, when we ask Him to supply our needs, He points out our problems one after another. We often experience these two things when we draw near to the Lord and contact Him. On the one hand, He causes us to see our needs; on the other hand, once we become thirsty and cry out to Him, He points out our problems, faults, stains, and sins. We need to confess the things that He points out, the "husband" He asks us to bring, so that we can receive His supply.

Focusing on Spiritual Matters More Than on Physical Matters

A third principle is seen in the case of the feeding of the five thousand in chapter 6. A great crowd contacted the Lord, and He performed a miracle in order to feed them. When the crowd returned the next day to be filled, the Lord said, "Work not for the food which perishes, but for the food which

abides unto eternal life" (v. 27). The Lord was teaching the crowd to seek the food that abides unto eternal life instead of physical food. This is another principle: the Lord does not want us to seek or to put our hope in physical things when we contact Him in prayer.

Some brothers spend half an hour in the morning praying for physical things. Likewise, some sisters pray for the physical affairs of their spouse and children. The Lord may initially feed and care for those who draw near to Him in prayer in this way, but the Lord will eventually regard such a person as one who comes only to eat and be filled. The Lord will say, "Do not pray for physical things; instead, learn to pray for the things of eternal life, for spiritual things." The Lord does not want us to always mention physical things when we contact Him; He already knows about these things. When we contact Him, we should focus on spiritual things, the things of life. This is to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. If we would focus on these things, the Lord will add the physical things to us (Matt. 6:31-33).

If we focus exclusively on physical things with the Lord, it will be difficult for us to touch His presence, and we will be rebuffed by Him in spirit. For example, it is very good that the saints spend time to draw near to the Lord in the morning, but whether they can touch the Lord during this time depends upon their focus. If we neglect spiritual matters and instead focus on physical things, it will be difficult to touch the Lord. Some believers who are students are anxious about their studies, and they pray concerning these in the morning. If they are encumbered by such matters when they draw near to the Lord, it will be difficult for them to touch His presence. Such seeking is not for eternal life or for spiritual things but for physical things. This is a matter of seeking to eat bread and to be filled.

Other saints focus on their sickness when they draw near to the Lord. They cannot get away from their sickness in either their thoughts or their prayers. They pray, "Lord, thank You for causing me to benefit from my sickness. When will You heal me? How much longer must I wait?" Such prayers are related to seeking to eat bread and to be filled. The Lord will answer such saints, saying, "Work not for healing; do not pray that much concerning your sickness. Instead, pray for spiritual things, for things related to the eternal life. Forget about your sickness! Forget about eating bread!" This is not easy to do.

Many saints pray only for physical things. Some young medical students, who are interns in a hospital, pray to the Lord in fear and trembling every morning, saying, “Lord, do not let me do anything wrong today. Keep me from making a wrong diagnosis or from prescribing the wrong medicine. Do not send me any difficult patients or give me any heavy burdens.” These prayers may seem good, but they are still related to eating bread and being filled. In response, the Lord will say, “Work not for being a good physician but for eternal life. When you draw near to Me, do not focus on these matters but seek spiritual matters.”

Some sisters cannot forget their household matters. They pray, “Lord, make the servants obedient and the children study diligently, and keep my family safe from accidents.” How many sisters do not pray concerning their family? These prayers are related to eating bread and being filled. The Lord would tell these sisters not to work for their household but to pray for spiritual things related to eternal life.

Some saints may say that this word is hard and wonder what they should pray for. If the sisters who are housewives do not pray for their family, what should they pray for? If physicians do not pray for their medical affairs, what should they pray for? We think that the brothers with businesses should pray for their business, that students should pray for their studies, and that the saints who are sick should pray for their sicknesses. But if we do not pray for such matters, what should we pray for?

If we want to draw near to the Lord and contact Him every day, we must learn the lesson of not focusing on physical matters. We must set them aside in order to seek the Lord Himself, spiritual things, things of life, and eternal things. The Lord knows about our business, family, studies, and health better than we. Our heavenly Father knows everything we need. These are the things that the Gentiles, who do not know God, seek. However, we should seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness and work for things that abide unto eternal life, not for things that perish (Matt. 6:31-33; cf. John 6:27). This is a major principle in contacting the Lord.

Human Opinions Frustrating the Power of the Lord from Bringing About a New Beginning

Another case reveals at least two major principles: human opinions frustrate the Lord's power, and the Lord can only begin when man comes to an end. Chapter 11 shows how human opinions frustrate the Lord's power. Martha and Mary sent word to the Lord, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" (v. 3). This was an expression of their opinion in order to get the Lord to come heal their brother Lazarus. But the Lord did not respond. He heard their cry, but He did not do anything. The Lord loved these three siblings, and He heard Martha and Mary's cry, but He remained in the place where He was for two days. He did not do anything until Lazarus died and was buried (vv. 5-6, 17). The first thing that Martha did when she saw the Lord was to complain that He was late. She said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 21). Although she complained because of the Lord's delay, the Lord taught her to not depend on her timing but on Himself. The Lord said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25). He meant that Lazarus's condition was not dependent upon whether He came early or late. Thus, even if Lazarus was dead, he could be resurrected because the Lord had come. The Lord Jesus is the resurrection. When we have Him, we have everything. The Lord's work is not dependent upon our timing.

This is a very good lesson, but Martha did not understand the Lord's words. The Lord said, "He who believes into Me, even if he should die, shall live; and everyone who lives and believes into Me shall by no means die forever. Do you believe this?" (vv. 25-26). Martha immediately said, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God" (v. 27). Martha did not believe the Lord's word; she believed something else. The Lord spoke a revelation, but Martha focused on her understanding. She did not hear the Lord's revelation because of her opinions. Martha was a person full of opinions.

Later, Martha went and called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher is here and is calling you" (v. 28). Again, this was according to Martha's opinion and not the Lord's request. The phrase *the Teacher is here* was correct, but the phrase *is calling you* was not. When Mary saw the Lord Jesus, she also said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 32). The Lord Jesus was moved with indignation in His spirit and was troubled when He saw Mary weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping (vv. 33, 35). The Lord did not weep because Lazarus was dead. The Lord wept because Martha and Mary did not know Him and because their spiritual condition was pitiful. The Lord wept because they were foolish spiritually.

A person who suffers pain under the discipline of the Lord yet remains foolish knows neither the Lord nor what the Lord wants. Such a person is filled with his own opinions and has much to say. His condition will grieve the Lord. The Jews saw the Lord weep and expressed different opinions. This moved the Lord with indignation again (v. 38). When the Lord went to the tomb and asked them to take away the stone that was laid against the cave, Martha still had more opinions. She said, "Lord, by now he smells, for it is the fourth day that he is there" (v. 39). She was an opinionated person.

Chapter 11 shows how human opinions frustrate the Lord's power. The Lord was not merely frustrated by the opinions of Martha, Mary, and the Jews; He was frustrated by the opinions of His disciples. Martha and Mary wanted the Lord to come when He was not ready. Later, when the Lord wanted to go, His disciples did not want Him to go (vv. 3-16). Human opinions frustrate the manifestation of the Lord's resurrection power. On the one hand, the Lord wanted to do something; He wanted to perform a miracle, to manifest His power in raising the dead. On the other hand, human opinions hindered every step that He took and caused problems. It seemed as though the Lord needed to overthrow every opinion before He could manifest His resurrection power. These human opinions were thorns and thistles on the Lord's way into resurrection. Martha, Mary, the Jews, and the disciples were full of opinions. The Lord had to remove the human opinions before He could enter into resurrection. Human opinions hinder our contact with the Lord.

When we draw near to the Lord in prayer, we must learn the lesson of stopping our opinions. Whether the wine has run out or a person has been dead for four days, we do not need to counsel the Lord. We should simply give it to the Lord and hear what He has to say. The Lord is everything. He gives life to the dead and calls the things not being as being (Rom. 4:17). He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). We do not need to say this or that; we should simply listen to Him. An opinion is a problem. Many who draw near to the Lord have a difficult time learning this lesson.

John 11 presents another principle: the Lord does not heal man; He resurrects man. Healing involves helping man's weaknesses, but the Lord will not do this. Instead of immediately healing Lazarus, the Lord waited for Lazarus to die in order to raise him, because the Lord only wants to raise man. Resurrection involves waiting until man comes to an end in order to give him a new beginning. For example, it is easy for a weak brother, who often fails, to

pray, “Lord, I am weak in this matter. I cannot overcome. I am a failure.” Such prayers seem very good, but they hinder the Lord. We may be weak, but we are not weak to the point of being hopeless. We may be a failure, but we have not failed to the uttermost. The Lord must wait until we are hopelessly weak, until we are an utter failure, and until we are completely dead before He can manifest His resurrection power in us.

Thus, we should let go of our weaknesses and failures when we draw near to the Lord. The Lord already knows our weaknesses and failures. There is nothing we can do if He wants to delay and to wait until we no longer have any hope because we are dead, buried, and stink. If He wants to wait, we cannot make Him hurry up. If He allows us to be defeated, even our imploring Him will not make us strong. Hence, we need to learn the lesson of dropping our problems when we pray. When we are truly hopeless and at an end, the Lord will come. This is resurrection, and this is salvation.

Letting the Lord Do as He Wills in Us

In chapter 13 the Lord washed His disciples’ feet. The principle involved in this case is that we need to let Him do what He wills in us when we draw near to Him. We should not be like Peter, who humbly said, “You shall by no means wash my feet forever.” Then, when the Lord said, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me,” Peter said, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head” (vv. 8-9). This is our condition. The Lord wants to work in us, but we initially will not let Him. Later, when we are willing, we want Him to do more than He intends. These are our human opinions.

When we draw near to the Lord, He wants to work in us, and He wants to remove certain things. Foot-washing is a sign of removing improper things in our being. We must learn to be obedient. If the Lord wants to wash our feet, we should let Him. If He does not wash our hands, we should submit. We should let the Lord wash whatever He wants to wash. We should not make any proposals or counsel Him. This is the fifth principle concerning our contacting the Lord. We must learn this lesson.

Knowing That the Lord Does Not Change

In chapter 21 the Lord manifested Himself to His disciples. This case shows that the Lord will draw near to us even when we fall into the world, that is,

when we are at our weakest point and forget to draw near to Him. The disciples returned to fishing in order to make a living, but they caught nothing. The Lord knew their need and asked, "You do not have any fish to eat, do you?" (v. 5). The Lord knew that the disciples went fishing in order to have food. They answered, "No" (v. 5). Then the Lord said, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (v. 6). They cast their net and caught a hundred and fifty-three large fish (v. 11). When they reached the land, they saw a fire of coals, and fish were lying on it and bread (v. 9).

After seeing the fish they caught that day and eating the fish that the Lord had prepared, the disciples must have considered how they had returned to their old occupation in the world in order to get food. The Lord performed a miracle by letting them catch a hundred and fifty-three large fish and by preparing fish for them to eat. After eating, the disciples must have had all kinds of feelings. It must have been most difficult for Peter, because he had not only gone back to the world but also had taken other disciples with him. After he had said, "I am going fishing," some of the disciples said, "We also are coming with you" (v. 3). This can be compared to a brother saying, "I am going to love the world," and other brothers saying, "We also are coming with you." The disciples went as a group to love the world; they fell into the world together. The Lord, however, did not abandon them. He continued to look after them. He let them catch fish, and He also fed them with fish and bread that He had prepared. After they ate, the Lord asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" (v. 15). With these words the Lord let His disciples know that He was not disappointed in them; He wanted them to continue to follow Him and to serve Him.

This is another major principle in our contact with the Lord. We should never think that we cannot draw near to the Lord when we are weak, love the world, and do not pray. We may not be able to draw near to the Lord, but the Lord can draw near to us. We may not be able to contact Him, but He will contact us. Concerning contacting the Lord, we are all failures. Peter went fishing, and we also "go fishing" like him. We fail, but the Lord never fails. When we draw near to Him, He contacts us, and even when we do not draw near to Him, He still comes to contact us. We are unreliable. We may contact the Lord today but not tomorrow, or we may contact Him this month but not next month. No matter what our condition is, the Lord remains the same. No matter how we change, the Lord never changes. Hence, in our contacting the

Lord, we must realize that the Lord never changes, no matter how much we may change. This is a principle.

We need to look to the speaking of the Holy Spirit and learn how to draw near to the Lord and contact Him. I would encourage the saints to spend time to consider the principles presented in these cases and to learn these lessons. The sweetest principle is that drawing near to the Lord is not in our hands; it is in the Lord's hands. We may not draw near to Him, but He will draw near to us. We may be far away from Him, but He will find us. Even when we are at our weakest point, He will draw near to us. When we are far away from Him, He will come to contact us. Even when we are cold and indifferent toward Him or have fallen into the world, He will still say, "Do you love Me? Follow Me!"

APPENDIX

THE PRAYERS OF JOB

The book of Job shows that initially Job spoke many things and did not give God the opportunity to speak. Job's many words darkened God's counsel and kept him in darkness (38:2).

It was not until Job finished speaking that God appeared to him. When Job saw the light of God's countenance and contacted God, his prayer changed. He no longer spoke his own words but the words that God had spoken (42:1-6). Previously, his prayers were out of himself and did not touch God; thus, his prayers expressed himself. At the end, his prayers were the issue of meeting and hearing God. Job's prayers expressed God.