

Keep Praying Until God Answers

When He Seems Not to Hear, Trust Him Still

By R. A. Torrey (1856–1928)

There are two passages in the Gospel of Luke which throw a flood of light upon the question, "What sort of praying is it that prevails with God and obtains what it seeks from Him?" and also upon the question, "Why is it that many prayers of God's own children come short of obtaining that which we seek of God?"

The first of these two passages you will find in Luke 11:5–10; our Lord Jesus Himself is the speaker:

"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves;

"For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?"

"And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.

"I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.

"And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

"For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

Keep on Praying Until You Get It!

The central lesson in this parable of our Lord is: When we pray, if we do not obtain the thing the first time, pray again; and if we do not obtain it the second time, pray a third time; and if we do not obtain it the hundredth time, go on praying until we do get it.

We should do much thinking before we ask anything of God and be clear that we ask according to His will. We should not rush heedlessly into God's presence and ask for the first thing that comes to mind without giving proper thought to the question of whether it is really what we ought to have. But when we have decided that we should pray for something, we should keep on praying until we get it.

The word translated importunity in verse 8 is a deeply significant word. Its primary meaning is "shamelessness"—that is, it sets forth the persistent determination in prayer to God that will not be put to shame by any apparent refusal on His part to grant the thing that we ask.

This is a very startling way that our Lord employs to set forth the necessity of "importunity" and persistence in prayer. It is as if the Lord would have us understand that God would have us draw nigh to Him with a resolute determination to obtain the things that we seek, a determination that will not be put to shame by any seeming refusal or delay on God's part.

The Syrophenician Woman

Our Heavenly Father delights in the holy boldness that will not take no for an answer. The reason why He delights in it is that it is an expression of great faith, and nothing pleases God more than faith.

We have an illustration of this holy boldness in the woman of Syrophenicia in Matthew 15:21– 28. She came to Jesus Christ for the healing of her daughter. She cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil."

But our Lord seemed to pay no attention to her: "He answered her not a word." His disciples besought Him, saying, "Send her away; for she crieth after us."

In spite of His apparent deafness to her appeal, she kept on crying. Then He turned to her with an apparently more positive rebuff: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and she was not of the house of Israel.

Then she worshipped Him and kept on calling to Him, saying, "Lord, help me."

Then came what almost appears to be a cruel rebuff: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs."

(The word He used for dogs was a peculiar word that meant a little pet dog, and was not at all as harsh as it seems, although it was an apparent refusal to hear her prayer. But, as we shall see, our Lord was simply putting her faith to the test that she might get an even larger blessing.)

Then she said, "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." She would not take no for an answer.

And then came one of the most wonderful words of commendation that ever fell from the lips of our Lord:

"Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

That sort of thing pleases God. He would have us have that faith in His lovingkindness and in Himself that, even when He seems not to hear, will trust Him still to hear.

God does not always give you the things you ask the first time you ask, but don't give up; keep on praying until you do get them.

We should not only pray, but we should PRAY THROUGH.

It is deeply significant that this parable to persist in prayer comes almost immediately after the request on the part of the disciples of our Lord: "Lord, teach us to pray." Then follows Luke's version of the so-called "Lord's Prayer," actually the disciples' prayer.

The Widow Would Not Let the Unjust Judge Rest

The same lesson is taught in a very striking way in the second passage in Luke to which I have already referred, Luke 18:1-8:

"And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

"Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:

"And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

"And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;

"Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

"And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.

"And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?"

"I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith [literally, "the faith"] on the earth?"

We find the central lesson of this parable in the words with which our Lord Jesus opens the parable, which are really the text of the whole parable: "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint." The clear meaning of the parable is that when we pray, we are to pray on and on until we get the thing we desire of God.

The exact force of the parable is that if even an unrighteous judge will yield to persistent prayer and grant the thing that he did not wish to grant, how much more will a loving God yield to the persistent cries of His children and give the things that He longs to give, but which it would not be wise to give, would not be for their own good, unless they were trained to that persevering faith that will not take no for an answer.

So we see again that God does not always give us at the first asking what we desire of Him in prayer.

God Wants to Train Us in Persistent Faith

Why is it that God does not give to us the things that we ask, the first time we ask? The answer is plain: He would do us the far greater good of training us in persistent faith.

The things we get by our other forms of effort than prayer do not always become ours the first time we make an effort to get them.

For our own good God compels us to be persistent in our effort; just so, God does not always give us what we ask the first time we pray. Just as He would train us to be strong men and women along the other lines of effort, so also He would train us to be and make us to be strong men and women of prayer by compelling us to pray hard for the best things. He compels us to "pray through."

Many today tell us we ought not pray for the same thing a second time. Sometimes they say the way to pray is to ask God for a thing and then "take it" by faith the first time we ask.

That is true oftentimes. When we find a thing definitely promised in the Word, we can rest upon that. When we have prayed, knowing that we have asked according to God's will, the prayer is heard, and we have received. Resting there, ask no more but claim the thing as ours.

But that is only one side of the truth. The other side is, there are times when it is not made clear the first time, nor the second time, nor the third time, that what we ask is according to His will and, therefore, the prayer is heard and the thing asked granted. In such a case we are to pray on and on and on.

While doubtless there are times when we are able through faith in the Word, or through the clear leading of the Holy Spirit, to claim a thing the first time we have asked of God, nevertheless, beyond a question there are other times when we must pray again and again and again for the same thing before we get our answer.

Those who claim that they have gotten beyond praying twice for the same thing have either gotten beyond our Master, or else they have not gotten up to Him. We are told distinctly regarding Him in Matthew 26:44, "And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words." The truth is, they have not yet gotten up to the Master, not that they have gotten beyond Him.

It Is Spiritual Laziness and Unbelief to Give Up Too Soon

There are many who, when they pray for a thing once or twice and do not get it, stop praying. They call it "submission to the will of God" to pray no longer when God does not grant their request at the first or second asking. They say, "Well, perhaps it is not God's will." They call that submission to the will of God.

But as a rule, this is not submission to His will, but spiritual laziness and lack of determination in that most all-important of all human lines of effort—prayer.

None of us ever think of calling it submission to the will of God when we give up after one or two efforts to obtain things by our lack of strength of character.

When the strong man of action starts out to accomplish a thing, if he does not accomplish it the first, or the second, or the hundredth time, he keeps hammering away until he does. Just so when the strong man of prayer starts to pray for a thing, he keeps on praying until he prays it through and obtains what he seeks.

How fond we are of calling bad things in our conduct by good names. We call our spiritual inertia and laziness and indifference "submission to the will of God."

We should be very careful about what we ask from God; but when we do begin to pray for a thing, we must never give up until we get it, or until God definitely makes it very clear that it is not His will to give it.

I am glad that the first time we ask, God does not always give us the things that we seek from Him. There is no more blessed training in prayer than that which comes through being compelled to ask again and again and again, even through a long period of years, before one obtains that which he seeks from God. Then when it does come, what a sense we have that God really is and that He really does answer prayer!

Two People Saved After Years of Prayer

I recall an experience of my own that was full of blessing to me and full of encouragement to my faith.

In my first pastorate there were two whom God put upon my heart and for whose salvation I prayed through my entire time there. But I left that field of labor without seeing either one converted. When I went to Germany for further study, then took a new pastorate in Minneapolis, I kept on praying every day for those two.

I went back to the place where I began my ministry to hold a series of meetings, still praying every day for their conversion. Then one night in that series of meetings when I gave out the invitation for all who would accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour, those two arose side by side. There was no special reason why they should be side by side, for they were not relatives. When I saw those two for whom I had prayed all those years standing up side by side to accept the Lord, what an overwhelming sense came over my soul that there is a God who hears prayer if we meet the conditions and follow His method of prevailing prayer!

Revivals Come Because of Persistent Prayer

We find right here why it is that many prayers fail to accomplish that which we seek from God. We pray and pray and pray, and are almost up to the verge of the attainment of that for which we are praying, and right then, when God is just about to answer the prayer, we stop and miss the blessing.

For example, in many churches and communities there are those who are praying for a revival. The revival does not come at once, it does not come for some time, but they keep on praying. They have nearly prayed through. They are right on the verge of attaining what they sought, and if they would pray a little longer, the revival would break upon them. But they get discouraged, throw up their hands and quit. They are just on the border of the blessing, but they do not cross into the Promised Land.

In January 1900 or 1901, the faculty of the Bible Institute of Chicago instituted a late prayer meeting Saturday nights from nine to ten o'clock, to pray for a worldwide revival.

After we had been praying for some time, a thing happened that I knew would happen. People came to me, or to my colleague who was most closely identified with me in the conduct of these meetings, and they would say, "Has the revival come?"

"No, not as far as we can see."

"When is it coming?"

"We don't know."

"How long are you going to pray?"

"Until it comes."

And come it did—a revival that began there in that prayer meeting room of the Bible Institute in Chicago, then broke out in far-away China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, India, and swept around the world, with most marvelous manifestations of God's saving power—not merely through Mr. Charles Alexander and myself, but through a multitude of others in India, Wales and elsewhere. In Wales, for example, under Evan Roberts and others, it resulted in one hundred thousand professed conversions in twelve months.

I believe that God is looking to us today to pray through again.

Saved After Fifteen Years of Daily Prayer

I prayed fifteen long years for the conversion of my oldest brother. When he seemed to be getting farther and farther away from any hope of conversion, I prayed on.

My first winter in Chicago, after fifteen years of praying, never missing a single day, one morning God said to me as I knelt, "I have heard your prayer. You need not pray anymore; your brother is going to be converted."

Within two weeks he was in my home, shut in with sickness which made it impossible for him to leave my home for two weeks. Then the day he left he accepted Christ over in the Bible Institute in Mr. Moody's office, where he and I went to talk and pray together.

I told this incident when holding meetings in a certain city. An elderly woman came at the close of the meeting and said, "I have been praying for the conversion of my brother, who is sixty-three years old, for many years; but a short time ago I gave up and stopped praying." She added, "I am going to begin my prayers again." Within two weeks of that time she came and said, "I have heard from my brother, and he has accepted Christ."

Oh, men and women, pray through; pray through; pray through! Do not just begin to pray and pray a little while and throw up your hands and quit; but pray and pray and pray until God bends the heavens and comes down!

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