

~Other Speakers S-Z: Classic Christian Writings:

In the twelfth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we have the record of a most remarkable prayer, remarkable because of what was asked for and remarkable because of the results of the asking. King Herod had killed James, the brother of John. This greatly "pleased the Jews"; so he proceeded further to arrest the leader of the whole Apostolic company, the Apostle Peter, with the intention of killing him also.

But the arrest was during Passover Week, the Holy Week of the Jews, and while the Jews were perfectly willing to have Peter assassinated, eager to have him assassinated, they were not willing to have their Holy Week desecrated by his violent death. So Peter was cast into prison to be kept until the Passover Week was over, and then to be executed. The Passover Week was nearly over. It was the last night of the Passover Week, and early the next morning Peter was to be taken out and beheaded. Â...

What did the Christians do? They held a prayer meeting to pray Peter out of prison. And their attempt to pray Peter out of prison was entirely successful.

In Acts 12:5 we read how they did it: "Prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him." If you have the Revised Version you will notice that it reads differently, that it reads in this way: "Prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him." The word "earnestly" comes far nearer giving the force of the original than the words "without ceasing," but even earnestly does not give the full force of the Greek word used.

The Greek word is "ektenos," and it means literally "stretched-out-edly." You see how King James' translators came to translate it "without ceasing."

They thought of the prayer as sketched out a long time, unceasing prayer. But that is not the thought. The Greek word is never used in that sense anywhere in the New Testament, and I do not know of a place in Greek literature outside of the Bible where it is so used. The word is a pictorial word, as so many words are. It represents the soul stretched out in the intensity of its earnestness toward God. Â...

It is the same word that is used in the comparative mood in Luke 22:44, where we read, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly [literally, more stretched-out-edly]; and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground." The thought is, as I have said, of the soul being stretched out toward God in intense earnestness of desire.

Probably the most accurate translation that could be given in a single word would be "intensely," "Prayer was made intensely of the church unto God for him." In fact, the word "intensely" is from the same root, only it has a different prefix. In the 1911 Bible the passage is translated "instant and earnest prayer was made of the church unto God for him," which is not a bad paraphrase though it is not a translation. And "intensely earnest prayer was made of the church unto God for him," would be an even better rendering.

Some Prayers Not Heard

It is the intensely earnest prayer to which God pays attention, and which He answers. This thought comes out again and again in the Bible. We find it even in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 29:13, "Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart." We here discover the reason why so many of our prayers are unheard of God. There is so little heart in them, so little intensity of desire for the thing asked, that there is no reason why God should pay attention to them.

Suppose I should ask all of you if you prayed this morning? Doubtless almost every one of you would reply, "Yes, I did." Then suppose I should ask you again, "For what did you pray this morning?" I fear that some of you would hesitate and ponder and then have to say, "Really, I forget for what I did pray this morning." Well, then, God will forget to answer.

But if I should ask some of you if you prayed this morning you would say, "yes." Then if I asked you for what you prayed you could tell me at once, for you always pray for the same thing. You have just a little rote of prayer that you go through each morning or each night. You fall on your knees, go through your little prayer automatically, scarcely thinking of what you are saying, in fact oftentimes you do not think of what you are saying but are thinking of a dozen other things while you are repeating your prayer. Such prayer is profanity, taking the name of God in vain. Â...

But if I should ask some of you what you prayed for this morning you could tell me, for as you were in prayer the Spirit of God came upon you and with a great heartache of intensity of desire you cried to God for that thing that you must have. Well, God will hear your prayer and give you what you asked.

If we are to pray with power we must pray with intense earnestness, throw our whole soul into the prayer. This thought comes out again and again in the Bible. For example, we find it in Romans 15:30, "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me."

The word translated "strive together" in this verse is "sunagonizo." "Agonizo" means to "contend" or "strive" or "wrestle" or "fight." And this verse could be properly translated, "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye wrestle together with me in your prayers to God for me."

We hear a great deal in these days about "the rest of faith," by which men usually mean that we should take things very calmly in our Christian life, and when we pray we should simply come into God's presence like a little child and quietly and trustfully ask Him for the thing desired and count it ours, and go away very calmly and reckon the thing ours.

Now there is a truth in that, a great truth, but it is only one side of the truth, and a truth usually has two sides. And the other side of the truth is this, that there is not only "the rest of faith" but there is also the "fight of faith," and my Bible has more to say about "the fight of faith," than it does about "the rest of faith."

Hellish Intervention

The thought of wrestling or fighting in prayer is not the thought that we have to wrestle with God to make God willing to grant our prayers. No, "our wrestling is... against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12), against the Devil and all his mighty forces, and there is no place where the Devil so resists us as when we pray. Sometimes when we pray it seems as if all the forces of hell swept in between us and God. What shall we do? Give up? No! A thousand times, No! Fight the thing through on your knees, wrestle in your prayer to God and win. ...

It is the prayer in which we actually wrestle in the power of the Holy Spirit that wins out with God. The word which is the root of the word translated "strive together," is *agone*, from which our word *agony* comes. In fact in Luke 22:44, to which I have already referred, this is the very word that is translated *agony*, "And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground." Oh, that we might have more agonizing prayer.

Turn now to Colossians 4:12,13, and you will find the same thought again, put in other words, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you [The Revised Version translates instead of 'laboring fervently for you,' 'striving for you,' the same word as we saw in Romans 15:30] in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record; that he hath a great zeal for you.

The words translated "great zeal" in this version are translated in the Revised Version, "much labour," which is an accurate translation, and the word translated "labour" is a very strong word, it means intense toil, or painful labour. Do you know what it means to toil in prayer; to labour with painful toil in prayer? Oh, how easily most of us take our praying, how little heart we put into it, and how little it takes out of us, and how little it counts with God.

The mighty men of God, who throughout the centuries have wrought great things by prayer, are the men who have had much painful toil in prayer. Take for example David Brainerd, that physically feeble but spiritually mighty man of God. Trembling for years on the verge of consumption, from which he ultimately died at an early age, David Brainerd felt led of God to labour among the North American Indians in the early days, in the primeval forests of Northern Pennsylvania, and sometimes of a winter night he would go out into the forest and kneel in the cold snow when it was a foot deep and so labour with God in prayer that he would be wringing wet with perspiration even out in the cold winter night hours. And God heard David Brainerd and sent such a mighty revival among the North American Indians as had never been heard of before, as indeed had never been dreamed of. ...

How To Get Intensity In Prayer

But a very practical question arises at this point. How can we get this intense earnestness in prayer? The Bible answers the question very plainly and simply. There are two ways of having earnestness in prayer, a right way and a wrong way. The wrong way is to work it up in the energy of the flesh. . . .

But there is a right way to obtain real, heart-stirring, heart-wringing, and God-moving earnestness in prayer. What the right way is the Bible tells us. It tells us in Romans 8:26,27: "And in like manner the Spirit also helpeth our infinity; for we know not how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered; and He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because He maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

That is the right way—look to the Spirit to create the earnestness. The earnestness that counts with God is not the earnestness that you or I work up. It is the earnestness that the Holy Spirit creates in our hearts. Have you never gone to God in prayer and there was no earnestness in your prayer at all, it was just words, words, words, a mere matter of form, there seemed to be no real prayer in your heart?

What shall we do at such a time as that? Stop praying and wait until we feel more like praying? No. If there is ever a time when one needs to pray it is when he does not feel like praying. What shall we do? Be silent and look up to God to send His Holy Spirit, according to His promise, to move your heart to prayer and to awaken and create real earnestness in your heart in prayer: and He will send Him and you will pray with intense earnestness, very likely "with groanings which cannot be uttered."

I wish to testify right here that some of the times of deepest earnestness that I have ever known in prayer have been when at the outset I seemed to have no prayer in my heart at all, and all attempt to pray was mere words, words, empty form. And then I have looked up to God to send His Spirit according to His promise to teach me to pray, and I waited and the Spirit of God has come upon me in mighty power and I have cried to God, sometimes with groanings which could not be uttered.

I shall never forget a night in Chicago. After the general prayer meetings for a worldwide revival had been going on for some time, the man who was most closely associated with me in the conduct of the meetings came over to my house one night after the meeting was over and said, "Brother Torrey, what do you say to our having a time alone with God every Saturday night after the other meetings are over? I do not mean," he continued, "that we will actually promise to come together every Saturday night; but let us have it tonight any way."

Oh, such a night of prayer as we had that night. I shall never forget that, but it was not that night that I am especially thinking of now. After we had been meeting some weeks he suggested that we invite in a few others, which we did; and every Saturday night after the general prayer meeting was closed at ten o'clock we few would gather, in some secluded place where we would not disturb others, to pray together. There were never more than a dozen persons present, usually about six or seven.

One night when we met to pray, before kneeling in prayer we told one another the things we desired especially to ask of God that night, and then we knelt to pray and a long silence followed. No one prayed. And one of the little company looked up and said, "I cannot pray. There seems to be something resisting me." Then another raised his head and said, "Neither can I pray. Something seems to be resisting me." We went around the whole circle and each one had the same story.

What did we do? Break up the prayer meeting? No. If we ever felt the need of prayer it was then, and quietly we all bowed before God and looked to Him to send His Holy Spirit to enable us to pray to victory. And soon the Spirit of God came upon one and another and I have seldom heard such praying as I heard that night.

And then the Spirit of God came upon me and led me out in such a prayer as I had never dreamed of praying. I was led to ask God that He would send me around the world preaching the Gospel, and give me to see thousands saved in China, in Japan, in Australia, in New Zealand, in Tasmania, in India, in England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France and Switzerland. And when I finished praying that night I knew I was going, and I knew what I would see as well as I knew afterward when the actual report came of the mighty things that God had wrought. That prayer meeting sent me around the world preaching the Gospel.

Oh, that is how we must pray if we would get what we ask in prayer, pray with the intense earnestness that the Holy Ghost alone can inspire.

Earnestness In Prayer By R. A. Torrey

From The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power by R. A. Torrey.