A Call to Prayer: A spiritual stimulant for this critical hour
By J C Ryle

I have a question to offer you.

It is contained in three words,

**DO YOU PRAY?**

The question is one that none but you can answer. Whether you attend public worship or not, your minister knows. Whether you have family prayers or not your family knows. But whether you pray in private or not, is a matter between yourself and God.

I urge you to pay attention to my question. Do not say that my question is too personal. If your heart is right in the sight of God, there is nothing in it to make you afraid. Do not turn off my question by replying that you say your prayers. It is one thing to say your prayers and another to pray. Do not tell me that my question is unnecessary. Listen to me for a few minutes, and I will show you seven reasons for asking it...

**Prayer is absolutely necessary**

Prayer is absolutely necessary to our salvation. No one who professes to be a Christian can be saved without praying. I hold as strongly as anyone that salvation is God's free gift. I would speak to the greatest sinner who ever lived, even if he were old and dying, and say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, even now, and you will be saved." But I cannot find that the Bible teaches that anyone will be saved without asking to be. Although nobody will be saved by merit of his prayers, nobody will be saved without prayer.

It is not absolutely necessary for salvation that someone should read the Bible. He may never have learned to read, or be blind, and yet have Christ. A deaf man, or someone who lives where the gospel is not preached, may be saved without hearing the gospel publicly preached. But no one can be saved without praying.

There are certain things which everyone must do for himself. Everybody has to attend to the needs of his own body and his own mind. Nobody else can do your eating, drinking or sleeping for you. And if you want to know something, nobody else can do your learning for you. And it is the same with your spiritual needs. Nobody else can repent for you. Nobody else can come to Christ for you. And nobody else can do your praying for you. You yourself must pray.
We get to know people in this world by speaking with them. If we don't speak to them we don't get to know them. Similarly we cannot get to know God without praying to him, and if we do not know him we certainly shall not be saved by him.

One day, heaven will be thronged with "a multitude which no one could number" (Revelation 7:9). But all these people will sing with one heart and one voice. Their experience will have been the same. Each one will have believed in Christ. Each one will have been washed in his blood. Each one will have been born again. And each one will have prayed. Unless we pray on earth we shall never praise in heaven.

In short, then, to be prayerless is to be without God, without Christ, without grace, without hope and without heaven. It is to be on the road to hell. Prayer is one of the surest marks of a Christian.

The habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian. There is one respect in which all God's children on earth are alike. They all pray. The first sign of life in a new-born infant is that it breathes. In the same way the first act of the newborn Christian is to pray. Just as it is part of a child's nature to cry, so it is part of the Christian's nature to pray. He sees his need of mercy and grace. He feels his emptiness and weakness. Therefore he feels that he must pray.

I cannot find in the Bible even one of God's people who was not a person of prayer. It is characteristic of God's people that they "call on the Father (I Peter 1: 17) and they "call on the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Corinthians 1:2), whereas it is characteristic of the wicked that they "do not call on the Lord" (Psalm 14:4).

I have also read the lives of many outstanding Christians who have lived since the Bible was written. They have differed in all kinds of ways, but one thing they all have had in common: they have all been people of prayer.

I know quite well, of course, that a person may pray insincerely. The mere fact that someone prays proves nothing about their spiritual state, for they may simply be a hypocrite. But this I can say with certainty: not praying is a clear proof that one is not yet a true Christian. Clearly they do not really feel their sins, or love God, or feel their debt of gratitude to Christ, or long to be holy. However much they may talk about Christianity, they cannot be a true Christian if they do not pray.

Let me also say that the habit of heart-felt private prayer is one of the best evidences that the Holy Spirit has really worked in a person's life. A man may preach or write books or do all kinds of other things from quite wrong motives, but a man will seldom get alone by himself and pour out his soul to God in private unless he is sincere. God himself has taught us that this is the best proof of a real conversion, for when he told Ananias to go to see Saul in Damascus, the only evidence he mentioned that Saul had undergone a real change of heart was this: "He is praying!" (Acts 9: 11)
I know, of course, that many people come to faith slowly. They may go through many convictions, desires, feelings, resolves, hopes and fears. But all these things can come to nothing. A real heartfelt prayer, flowing from a broken and penitent spirit, is worth all these things put together. The first act when we have real faith will be to speak to God. Prayer is to faith what breath is to life. Just as we cannot live without breathing, so we cannot believe in Christ without praying.

**Prayer is the most neglected Christian duty**

No Christian duty is neglected as much as private prayer. I used to think that most people who call themselves Christians prayed. But I have come to a different conclusion now. I believe that the great majority who say they are Christians never pray at all. Prayer is a strictly private matter between God and us, which no-one else sees, and therefore there is a great temptation not to bother.

I believe that many never say a single word of prayer at all. They eat and drink, sleep and wake, live on God's earth and enjoy his mercies. They have bodies which must die, and they have the Day of Judgment and eternity ahead of them. Yet for all this they never speak to God. They live as though they were animals rather than men with never dying souls.

I believe that for many more, prayer is nothing more than a form of words. Some use set patterns of words without any sincere feeling for the things they say. Even when the pattern is a good one (like the Lord's Prayer) many rush through it without really thinking about it. We may be sure that God does not call this praying, even if men do. Prayer involves much more than words spoken with our lips. It involves our hearts, or it is not real prayer. No doubt Saul of Tarsus had said many long prayers before the Lord met him on the way to Damascus. But it was only when his heart had been broken that the Lord said, "He is praying!"

If you find all this very surprising, consider the following facts:

- It is not natural to pray. The natural desire of our hearts is to get away from God. We do not naturally love him, but fear him. And by nature we have no sense of sin, or feeling of our spiritual needs, or faith in things we cannot see. We do not naturally desire to be holy. For these reasons, men do not naturally pray.
- It is not popular to pray. All kinds of worldly activities are popular among men. But prayer is not popular, and many would do almost anything rather than admit publicly that they were in the habit of praying. In the light of these facts I believe that few people pray.

Consider also the lives that many people lead. When we see men plunging into sin, can we believe that they are praying constantly against sin? When we see men wholly
taken up with the things of the world, can we think that they are regularly asking God for grace to serve him? How can they be, when they show no interest in him at all? Praying and sinning will never live together in the same heart. Prayer will choke sin, or sin will choke prayer. When I remember this and then look at men's lives, I believe that few people pray.

Consider also the deaths that many people die. Many dying people seem to be complete strangers to God. They lack the ability to speak to him. They give the distinct impression they have never really talked to him before. What I have seen for myself of dying people convinces me that few people pray.

we have great encouragement to pray.

We have more encouragement to prayer than we have to any other Christian duty. God has done everything necessary to make prayer easy if only we will attempt it. He has provided for every difficulty, so that there is no excuse for us if we do not pray.

There is a way by which anyone — however sinful and unworthy — may draw near to God the Father. Jesus Christ has opened that way by his sacrifice for us on the cross. God's holiness and justice need not frighten sinners away. Rather, let them cry to God in the name of Jesus. Let them plead the fact that his blood has made atonement for sin, and they will find God willing and ready to hear. The name of Jesus unfailingly ensures that God will hear our prayers. In his name we may draw near to God with boldness and pray with confidence. And God has promised to hear. Is this not a great encouragement to pray?

There is an advocate and intercessor always waiting to present the prayers of those who will make use of him. He presents our prayers before the throne of God. Our prayers are feeble in themselves, but when presented by the Lord Jesus they are effective. And his ear is always open to the cry of all those who want mercy and grace. Is this not a great encouragement to pray?

There is the Holy Spirit who is always ready to help us in prayer, for this is one part of his office (Romans 8:26). He is the "Spirit of grace and supplication" (Zechariah 12:10). We have only to seek his assistance.

There are great and precious promises to those who pray. Read Matthew 7:7,8 and 21:22; John 14:13,14; Luke 11:5-13 and 18:1-8. Think over these passages, for they contain the greatest possible encouragements to pray.

There are wonderful examples in Scripture of the power of prayer. Prayer opened the Red Sea; it brought water from the rock; it made the sun stand still. Things which were impossible by any other means were done by prayer.
What greater encouragements could you look for than these things? Or what greater folly could there be than to neglect prayer in spite of all this encouragement?

Prayer is the secret of holiness

Diligence in prayer is the secret of eminent holiness. Without doubt there is a great deal of difference between the achievements of true Christians. How much more progress some make than others! Some who are truly converted seem to remain spiritual babies all their lives. From one year to another they do not seem to grow. They are troubled by the same besetting sins; they still need the milk of the Word rather than strong meat; their spiritual interests remain narrow and confined to their own little circle. But there are others who are always growing - always advancing in the Christian life. They grow in faith; they grow in good works; they attempt great things and do great things. When they fail, they try again; when they fall, they soon rise again. They think of themselves as poor and unprofitable servants, yet they are the people whose lives commend the Christian faith to others.

Now, how can we explain this difference among the Lord's people? Why are some so much holier than others? I believe the difference in nineteen cases out of twenty arises from different habits about private prayer. I believe that those who are not eminently holy pray only a little, while those who are eminently holy pray a great deal. I believe that once someone is converted to God, whether or not he becomes eminently holy depends chiefly on his diligence in the use of those means which God has appointed. And the main means by which believers have advanced in holiness is the habit of diligent private prayer. Read the lives of great servants of God and you will see that this is true. No Christian became a great Christian without becoming a person of prayer. If you wish to grow as a Christian, you must learn the value of private prayer.

The neglect of prayer causes backsliding

Neglect of prayer is one great cause of backsliding. It is possible to go backwards in the Christian life, after making a good start. The Galatian Christians progressed well for a time, and then turned aside after false teachers. Peter loudly proclaimed his love for the Lord, but in a time of trial denied him. And to be a backslider is miserable. It is one of the worst things that can happen to a man. I know that real grace in a man cannot be destroyed. I know that true union with Christ cannot be broken. But I believe that a man may fall away so far that he loses sight of his Christian standing and despairs of his own salvation. And this is the nearest thing to hell. A wounded conscience, a mind sick of itself, a memory full of self reproach, a heart pierced through with the Lord's arrows, a spirit broken with a load of inward accusation - all this is a taste of hell. Consider the solemn words,

The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways. | Proverbs 14:14|
Now, what is the cause of most backsliding? I believe it is generally caused by neglect of private prayer. It is my considered opinion, and I repeat it, that backsliding generally begins with neglect of private prayer.

Prayerlessness in daily life and decision-making has led many Christians into a condition of spiritual paralysis, or to the point where God has allowed them to fall badly into sin.

We may be sure that men fall in private long before they fall in public. Like Peter, they first neglect the Lord's warning to watch and pray, and then, like Peter, their strength is gone and when temptation comes they fall into sin. The world then takes notice of their fall, and scoffs. But the world does not recognize the real reason, which is prayerlessness.

If you are a Christian, you who are reading this, I hope you never become a backslider. But if you wish to avoid this, be careful about your praying. Prayer obtains happiness and contentment.

Prayer is one of the surest ways of obtaining happiness and contentment. This world is a world of sorrow. Ever since sin entered it, it has been impossible for anyone completely to escape sorrows of one kind or another. Now the best way to cope with this is by taking everything to God in prayer. In the Old Testament we read,

Cast your burden on the Lord, and he shall sustain you.
| Psalm 55:22 |

In the New Testament we read,

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
| Philippians 4:6,7 |

This has been the practice of God's people in all ages. When Jacob was in great fear of his brother Esau, he prayed (Genesis 32:22-32). When Paul and Silas were thrown into prison at Philippi, they prayed (Acts 16:23-25). The only way to be truly happy in a world like this is always to be casting our cares on God. When Christians fail to do this, and try instead to bear their own burdens, they become unhappy.
If only we will go to him, the Lord Jesus is always waiting to hear and help us. He knows all about the trials and sorrows of this world, for he lived in it for more than thirty years. And he can make us truly happy — whatever our outward condition — if we trust and call on him. Prayer can lighten the heaviest cross. Prayer can bring light into our darkness. Prayer can bring comfort in the greatest sorrow and loneliness. I want everyone who reads this to be a really happy Christian. But if you are to be happy there is no more important duty for you to attend to than that of prayer.

Conclusion

Let me close with some advice to various classes of reader. Let me speak to those who do not pray.

Prayerless friend, I must warn you of your danger. If you die as you are, you will be lost. You are completely without excuse, for you cannot give even one good reason why you should live without prayer. Do not say that you do not know how to pray. Prayer is simply speaking to God. You need no education to pray - only the desire to do so. The tiniest infant can cry when he is hungry. If you are conscious of your need you will soon find something to say to God. Do not say you have no place in which to pray. Anyone can find an adequate place if he really wants to. Do not say you have no time to pray. You have plenty of time, if only you are prepared to use it aright. Daniel had to deal with the affairs of a great empire, but he still prayed three times a day (Daniel 6:10). Do not say you cannot pray till you have been born again and have faith. If you lack these things you must cry out to God for them. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Do not put it off. Salvation is very near you today. Do not miss it because you will not ask.

Let me speak to those who desire to be saved but do not know what to do.

I advise you to go right now to the Lord Jesus Christ, in the nearest private place you can find, and beg him in prayer to save you. Tell him that you have heard that he receives sinners, and has said, "Me one who comes to me I will by no means cast out." Tell him you are a lost sinner, and that you come to him on the strength of his own invitation. Tell him that you are entirely in his hands: that unless he saves you there is no hope for you at all. Ask him to deliver you from the guilt, the power and the consequences of your sins. Ask him to forgive you, to give you a new heart, to put his Holy Spirit in you. Ask him to enable you to become his disciple and servant from this day and for ever. Do all this today if you have any concern about your soul.

Remember that he is willing to save you, for you are a sinner and he came into the world to save sinners (Luke 5:32, 1 Timothy 1:15). Do not stay away because you feel unworthy. The more ill you are, the more you need a doctor. You would not stay away from the doctor because you were too ill. Don't worry about the kind of language you use. Jesus will understand you. And don't despair because you do not
seem to get an immediate answer. He is listening. Keep on praying, and the answer will come. If you desire to be saved, remember what I have told you and act upon it, and you will certainly be saved.

Finally, let me speak to those who do pray.

Let nothing at all discourage you. You may often feel great discouragement. Your times of prayer may be times of conflict. But this is quite common, for the devil hates to see you pray. So you must go on. Let me then offer you some words of brotherly advice about your prayers.

Remember the importance of reverence and humility in prayer. Think of who God is, and who you are.

Remember the need you have of the Holy Spirit's help in prayer, and be careful not to let your praying become a mere formality.

Remember how important it is to pray regularly. You might see prayer as one of the most important activities of each day and time for prayer must be built into your daily routine.

Remember the importance of persevering in prayer. You will often be tempted to neglect your prayers, or to cut them very short. This always comes from the devil, no matter how plausible the reasons for doing so might seem. Be earnest in prayer. It is "fervent" prayer which avails much (James 5:16).

Remember the importance of praying with faith. We believe that if we ask according to God's will our prayers will be answered (Mark 11:24). You must expect answers to prayers.

Consider the importance of boldness in your prayers. I not mean an improper familiarity, but arguing with God on basis of his own Word and promise.

Remember the importance of asking God for much. How often is it true of believers that they do not have because you do not ask (James 4:2).

Be specific in prayer. Confess your specific sins; pray your specific weaknesses; tell God your specific needs.

Remember the importance of praying for others. Beware letting your prayers become narrow and self-centred.

Be thankful in prayer. We have much to be thankful for, I dare not call any prayer a true prayer if thankfulness has part in it.
Finally, let me remind you of the need for watching over your prayers. True Christian experience begins in prayer; it flourishes in prayer; and it decays with the neglect of prayer. Prayer is a kind of spiritual pulse — by it you may know when you are spiritually healthy. Be watchful over your prayer and I shall be very surprised if anything goes very seriously wrong with your spiritual progress.