

# PRAYER MUST HAVE PRIORITY

by, ARMIN GESSWEIN

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## Prayer Must Have Priority

*Armin Gesswein*

On the whole prayer is low again in the land. This is both in our personal lives as ministers and in the corporate prayer meetings of our churches. This is a strange wonder when we consider how late and how crucial is the hour, and when we consider how earnestly God calls us to prayer from almost every page of the Bible.

The result: little or no revival! We preacher simply are not giving revival priority. Oh yes, we would like to have revival among other things. But revival is not given that way. It must have priority. Lord, give us a great new inner must for revival, holy and deep, from Your throne!

We need a new power and authority to get our people to pray. We need a new prayer life ourselves. Ours must be the decision of Acts 6:4... *"We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and the ministry of the Word."* Revival will not have priority until prayer has priority.

Today there is much activity without accomplishment. The words *finish, realize, accomplish* were watchwords with Jesus. In John 4:34 He says: *"My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work."* (Scholars tell us *finish* means *accomplish*). See the other references in John where Jesus uses this word: 5:36, 27:4, 19:28. But today we suffer from the barrenness of business, the tyranny of things, and from what one would call the abomination of desolation! One saint has called it *scatteration*.

What is the result in our churches? A Laodicean Christianity: lethargy, laziness, lukewarmness, absenteeism. In evangelism there is a sense of frustration and weariness. There is glacial leisureliness in an age of crisis! Christians act as if there were plenty of time, and as if the situation was not serious. We are in a sobering crisis, with no way out but Christ! The only answer for an apocalyptic age is a Christianity that is Apostolic.

If we are to have revival, everyone knows it must begin in our churches. Ichabod must go. And if it is to begin in our churches, we also know that it must begin in our prayer meetings. If it is to begin in our prayer meetings, it must begin with the ministers. Prayer must be number one again with us. It must have priority. We need a fresh and adequate revelation of prayer. Bible light must scatter certain shadowy views, and even delusions, about this. From the Bible I would like to present at least seven reasons why prayer is number one.

### **Prayer is Number One with God Himself**

Recently I was thinking: "Why pray? Why is a man a praying creature? Whence this prayer arrangement and method?" I had thought of it as starting in man because he is the creature in need. But now I see that it really has its origin in God. It is not only in the nature of man to pray, but in the very nature of God. The burden for prayer is not only in man but in God.

### **Jesus Christ Made Prayer Number One**

This becomes very clear when we see Jesus Christ, God's Son, Who is the expressed image of His person. With Christ we see at once that prayer was and is number one. When

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on earth, He did everything by prayer. It was His method, for as the Son He did nothing of Himself, but was constantly dependent on His Father.

All His great steps, His mighty works, His majestic words, were in the nature of answered prayer. He began His Messianic ministry at the Jordan, praying. He finished His work on the cross, praying. He died as He lives. His was a life of prayer. He rose early to pray. He went to mountains and quiet resorts to pray. He practiced what He taught concerning prayer. It was as He was praying that one of His disciples said, "*Lord, teach us to pray.*"

We have no portrait of Christ, except on the Shroud. We come nearest to a portrait when we picture Him in prayer. To picture Him at all is to picture Him praying. He prayed everything into being, as God's Priest and Intercessor – and then walked into it openly in His ministry.

His major ministry was two-fold: that of Prophet and Priest. But the priestly was number one. Then as Prophet, He worked out what as Priest He prayed through. With Christ prayer was the great work. It was there that He was creative in the highest sense. Luke pictures Christ in prayer seven times, beyond the other scenes given also by the other Gospels. If these are studied, we see how every great step or new cycle in His ministry was the result of new intercession.

We might expect a holy curtain of silence to be drawn over His wonderful prayer life. But on the contrary, even effort is made by the Gospel writers to open up its great scenes. The more high and holy they are, as in Gethsemane and in John 17, the more fully the scenes are given. The Gospel writers found here Christ's greatest secret, no doubt also learned it as their own, and then by inspiration passed it on for us so we too might have this secret in our ministry.

Then we turn to the book of Acts, chapter one, we see Christ putting this number one emphasis into the disciples, even more than in the days of His flesh. Prayer increases now, both for Him and for them. It is to be stronger than ever, even for Him as the Risen One. We stand with wonder and worship as we see Him ascend to Heaven. To do what? To live forever as Intercessor and Advocate.

He seems to have shut them up in a new way to the closet of the Upper Room, and then Himself to have ascended at once so that He could forever closet Himself in the Upper Room of God's great universe to do His one supreme work. Yes, He is burdened to spend all His time at this one thing: *He ever lives to make intercession for us.* (Hebrews 7:25).

As King, He is still Priest – more than ever before. He is now a "Priest forever after the order of Melchisedec" (Hebrews chapter 7 & 8). He runs the world by prayer. He reigns royally and forever in prayer. Oh, what a truth! Lord, teach us to pray! (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 20:6). Prayer is Christ's universal and eternal method. He makes it plain too, that prayer has its origin in God more than man.

### **Prayer is Number One With the Holy Spirit**

Prayer is likewise number one with the Holy Spirit. Like Christ, He ever lives to make intercession. He "*makes intercession with groaning which cannot be uttered.*" (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit is a praying Spirit. In fact, God only blesses that which comes from Himself. And the Spirit, the Administrator of the Godhead, brings forth Christ's own praying

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in us. Actually, only the praying that is in the Spirit is really effective and is answered. In the Spirit prayer becomes intercessory.

Anyone filled with the Spirit of God will be an intercessor. In fact, as we see from the Bible examples, beginning with John the Baptist and Jesus, and even before that, with Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary the mother of Jesus, old Simeon and Anna, one must be full of prayer to be filled with the Spirit. The more godly, the more Christ-like, the more full of the Spirit we become, the more prayerful our lives will be on earth. The life of the Spirit is a life of prayer. We know prayer is not everything. But we don't seem to know in our generation is that "everything is by prayer" (Phil. 4:6, 7).

Fletcher of Madelev was a man who knew this. It was said of him that he would have been a saint in any denomination. One of his sayings was: "*Do I greet you praying?*" The ministry of the Holy Spirit, like than of Christ, is essentially a ministry of prayer, and only the works wrought by Him will abide in the fires of judgment. How we need to learn this in a day of frustration, fears, and failures; of powerless because of prayerlessness.

### **Prayer is the Number One Purpose and Use of God's Word**

This is also a revelation to me. Preaching is not the strongest and greatest use of the Word of God. The Bible has many uses, but prayer is its number one design, and its highest. The Bible is the real and great prayer book.

Behold Jesus using this sword in His great forty days of temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4; Luke 4). Before He ever said "*It is written*", in His open ministry, He first used the Scripture in the secret combat of prayer. It was His real place of warfare against Satan. There He overcame with the Word of God. His open conquest followed as the result of this secret conflict. Prayer was number one.

It really is something for ministers to learn that the first use of the Word is not for texts and sermons, but for prayer. An old Methodist brother said to me early in my ministry: "*Young man, learn to plead the promises of God.*" This taught me the real secret of intercession. I have prayed differently ever since. Rather than lift my longings, desires and aspirations to God in prayer, I learned to remind God of His own promises.

This gave me faith. Is not this the very heart of being in the Lord's remembrance – to remind God of His own Word? (Isaiah 62:6). Prayer should take the size and shape of God's promises. We see this number one use of God's Word also in the book of Acts. In chapter 4, they have a prayer meeting in which the pleading of God's Word gives body and power to their praying. The ancient Scriptures they plead shape up to the point of a sword, enabling them to prevail. They have now learned what could be called the prayer-method of getting things done. The rest of the chapter four and five follow as a creation of that prayer meeting.

All through Acts, the Christians are either on their knees or on their feet. Knee-action and foot-work, in that order. Like Jesus and with Him, they pray their next steps and chapter into being. All is by intercession. All stands in the nature of answered prayer. There is a high Upper Room lever all the way through those twenty-eight chapters. That level of prayer is the level of power. It is one and the same level. To rob their power, the devil need only break up their praying. Power and prayer always go together; but of the two, prayer is number one. Intercession is God's own mighty method.

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Right here let us beware of the delusion, "God will do it anyway, whether I pray as I should or not." Nothing is closer to reason at times; and nothing is further from Scripture. God does nothing but that reveals His secrets to His servants and prophets (Amos 3:7). But God's prophets must first be priests, like Abraham, of whom God says: "*Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do...?*" (Genesis 18:17). God works by His priests. God does everything by intercession – His own or us, and in us – in His redemptive plan. God's mighty works and wonders are all by prayer. The priesthood is primary. It has priority.

God will not do apart from intercession what He has promised to do by it, and we must diligently search the Scriptures to find out what that is. Look where we will in the Bible, and the answer is the same: prayer is not everything, but with God everything is by prayer (see Phil. 4:6, 7).

### **Prayer is Number One in the Life of Faith**

Prayer has been called the voice of faith. Faith is also the voice of prayer. Faith and prayer must be one; and of the two, prayer is number one. The promises of God are all shaped for prayer. They are there by the hundreds over the face of Scripture, like manna over the face of the ground – exceeding great and precious promises. The promises of God, all yea and amen in Christ, give size and shape and success to our prayers. With D.L. Moody we learn: "*Tarry at a promise and God will meet you there.*" The answers come by way of the promise and should be its fulfillment. The promise is already the answer to the prayer. Thus the promises of God not only inspire our prayers but assure the answers.

With David we learn to pray truly when we plead: "*Do as Thou has said.*" (2 Sam. 7:25). In this way we are also working with God by letting Him fill our prayers with His own words. When we plead His promises, God is praying His own prayers through us. Thus again, prayer is out from God; and it is number one also for faith.

### **Prayer is Number One in the Battle Against Satan**

Actually, it is the only way we can stand against the devil or any demonic power, whether is a meeting or elsewhere. It is in prayer that the Word becomes a sword of the Spirit against spiritual forces and wickedness and opposition of Satan. This is where the real warfare takes place. This is the point where the Church becomes militant, the kind of Church which Christ wants. The prayer meeting is the real test of a New Testament Church.

Ephesians 6:10 and following verses make three things clear: a) The real warfare is spiritual, against Satan and his hosts; b) The Word of God is pointed as a Sword. Not first in preaching, but in prayer; c) Where satanic power or opposition is concerned, nothing will touch or overthrow it but Holy Ghost wielding of the Word in intercession.

Preaching will not do it unless praying has first done it. Preaching will not go through beyond prayer. We can only preach through to the point where we have prayed through first. We must prevail with God in prayer and then we prevail in preaching. Many a preacher has hit a wall and the devil has all but thrown his words back in his mouth.

How can the wall be removed? Not by more preaching. Either the preacher must stop and pray or his people have to pray. Either or both are often embarrassing because the average audience is not trained in the Spirit, we don't even more against Satan, don't take ground for God.

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So far we have seen from every angle how the prayer ministry is the chief ministry in the Spirit. Only that which is done in the Spirit will last. Much of our activity today will never even last a generation, let alone through the fires of judgment (see 1 Cor. 3). The works that are wrought in the Spirit are always works that stand as miraculous answers to prayer. Like Joshua of Old Testament we are in an enemy's territory, which though given us of God, we must nevertheless take in battle. The victories won by prayer, by prayer must still be held; the foe retreats, but only when prayer he is compelled.

I noticed recently in Luke 9:1 and following that Jesus gave His twelve evangelists both power and authority for their city-wide crusade, and that this was first of all to be exercised over all demons. What a statement! Demons first! In moving a community for God we fight not only sin, but also Satan. How is he overcome? By prayer. Nothing else moves him. Yes, Jesus said over all demons. This ministry was theirs before Pentecost.

With all our evangelism today, even after Pentecost and its added light, we move very few communities like they did already before Pentecost! We go from house to house and do so little praying. They went not from house to house, with coffees and teas. These evangelists stayed in one house and spent most of the time praying. Then when they come forth with a message and a ministry, it really hit the devil, the world and the flesh; and registered a general revival victory for Christ in that community. In fact, it was as powerful a ministry as if Christ Himself was there.

God, give us evangelism today!

So powerful was the ministry that those cities would have to face it again in judgment. A lot of the wood, hay, and stubble - shows and glamour and sideshows - which we use in evangelism today, will not bring anyone to judgment except ourselves! We need great power and miracle and wonder and above all, great praying and intercession in our evangelism. We need the Holy Ghost! We are resorting to a lot of substitutes, because we lack the real article. We need some strong prophets again backed up by some real priests; some Finney's with Brother Nash's and Abel Cary's to travel and team up with them.

### Prayer is the Number One Ministry of the Church

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said... *"I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"*. When Jesus went about building His Church, what did He build? E turn over to Acts 1:14 and find the answer. There we stand with wide-eyed wonder as the door is opened to the Upper Room, and we discover: *"These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplications with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren"*. If you were to ask me, "What's the most important discovery from the Bible in the last few years, I would say it is this: **When Jesus went about building His Church, He built a prayer meeting.** This is to me not only a revelation, but it calls for a revolution as far as the ministry goes.

When we look at the poor, puny, sickly little prayer meetings, so weak that you can spell "weekly" prayer meeting either way (weekly or weakly), we know that this generation of little prayer has not caught Christ's idea of the Church. At best, even where we have a fair prayer meeting, we have the idea that the church company is one thing and the prayer meeting crowd is another. But where do we get that in the Bible? There the praying company is the church company; they are not two, but one and the same company. The church is indeed the prayer meeting. Not one member was missing in the prayer meeting.

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Yet we are constantly perpetuating an arrangement which we have no divine sanction for! And we preachers seem to have so little power and authority from Christ to change the picture.

What a revelation of the Church we see in Acts! We don't wait for chapter two and Pentecost to see the shape and form of the Church. There it is already in chapter one, quite complete as to its form, in the Upper Room. In fact, I would like to say two things here:

1. The prayer meeting is the very framework of the Church. The lines of her building are the very lines of the prayer meeting. They are the lines of an organism of the Spirit, of power, of liberty, of fellowship, of increase, of advance, of revival, evangelism and missions.

2. The prayer meeting is the very form that Christ gives to the Church He builds. His Church is already quite complete as to form in Acts 1:14. There we see for the first time what Jesus really had in mind when He said He would build His Church. I often say "Was it to be like that, dear Lord?"

Prayer is not by any means all; but it is number one. And how will we get number two, or three, until we have number one? Why don't we have a church or churches like in Acts? We need to build, with Christ, at chapter one first, the Upper Room. Pastors, let us seek the Lord for His wisdom and power and authority in this...

### In Summary

I would say that our trouble today is that we do not see prayer as a ministry. In the Bible, the secret ministry of prayer is the secret of ministry. There prayer is the highest of all ministries. Today we seem to evaluate differently... The Bible is a biography of men of God who were all mighty in prayer and who changed the face of the earth because they constantly sought the face of God. Prayer to them was not a side ministry. It was not a preliminary to an otherwise busy round. To them, it was the ministry in the ministry. It was their main work and warfare. They did not just "pray about" the work. Prayer was their big work. It was their number one ministry.