

THE GOLDEN KEY OF PRAYER

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A SERMON
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*“Call unto me, and I will answer you, and show you great
and mighty things, which you know not.”*
Jeremiah 33:3.

SOME of the most learned works in the world smell of midnight oil; but the most spiritual and most comforting books and sayings of men usually have a savor about them of prison damp. I might quote many instances, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim* may suffice instead of a hundred others, and this good text of ours, all moldy and cold with the prison in which Jeremiah lay, has nevertheless a brightness and a beauty about it, which it might never have had if it had not come as a cheering word to the prisoner of the Lord, shut up in the court of the prison house.

God's people have always, in their worst condition found out the best of their God. He is good at all times, but He seems to be at His best when they are at their worst. “How could you bear your long imprisonment so well?” said one to the Landgrave of Hesse, who had been shut up for his attachment to the principles of the Reformation. He replied, “The divine consolations of martyrs were with me.”

Doubtless there is a consolation more deep, more strong than any other which God keeps for those who, being His faithful witnesses, have to endure exceedingly great tribulation from the enmity of man. There is a glorious aurora for the frigid zone, and stars glisten in northern skies with unusual splendor. Rutherford had a quaint saying that when he was cast into the cellars of affliction, he remembered that the great king always kept his wine there, and he began to seek at once for the wine bottles, and to drink of the “wines on the lees well refined.”

They who dive in the sea of affliction bring up rare pearls. You know, my companions in affliction, that it is so. You whose bones have been ready to come through the skin, through long lying upon the weary couch, you who have seen your earthly goods carried away from you, and have been reduced well-nigh to penury, you who have gone to the grave yet seven times, till you have feared that your last earthly friend would be borne away by un pitying Death, you have proved that He is a faithful God, and that as your tribulations abound, so your consolations also abound by Christ Jesus.

My prayer is, in taking this text this morning, that some other prisoners of the Lord may have its joyous promise spoken home to them, that you who are shut up and cannot come forth by reason of present heaviness of spirit, may hear Him say, as with a soft whisper in your ears, and in your hearts, “Call upon me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you know not.”

The text naturally splits itself up into three distinct particles of truth. Upon these let us speak as we are enabled by God the Holy Spirit. *First*, prayer commanded—“Call unto me,” *secondly*, an answer promised—“And I will answer you,” *thirdly*, faith encouraged—“And show you great and mighty things which you know not.”

I. The first head is PRAYER COMMANDED.

We are not merely counseled and recommended to pray, but bidden to pray. This is great condescension. A hospital is built, it is considered sufficient that free admission shall be given to the sick when they seek it, but no order in council is made that a man *must* enter its gates. A soup kitchen is well provided for in the depth of winter. Notice is promulgated that those who are poor may receive food on application, but no one thinks of passing an act of Parliament compelling the poor to come and

wait at the door to take the charity. It is thought to be enough to proffer it without issuing any sort of mandate that men *shall* accept it.

Yet so strange is *the infatuation of man* on the one hand, which makes him need a command to be merciful to his own soul, and so marvelous is the condescension of our gracious God on the other, that He issues a command of love without which not a man of Adam born would partake of the Gospel feast, but would rather starve than come. In the matter of prayer, it is even so.

God's own people need, or else they would not receive it, a command to pray. How is this? Because, dear friends, we are very subject to *fits of worldliness*, if indeed that is not our usual state. We do not forget to eat, we do not forget to take the shop shutters down, we do not forget to be diligent in business, we do not forget to go to our beds to rest, but we often forget to wrestle with God in prayer, and to spend, as we ought to spend, long periods in consecrated fellowship with our Father and our God.

With too many professors, the ledger is so bulky that you cannot move it, and the Bible, representing their devotion, is so small that you might almost put it in your waistcoat pocket. Hours for the world! Moments for Christ! The world has the best, and our prayer-closet the parings of our time. We give our strength and freshness to the ways of mammon, and our fatigue and languor to the ways of God. Hence, it is that we need to be commanded to attend to that very act which it ought to be our greatest happiness, as it is our highest privilege to perform, viz. to meet with our God. "Call upon me," says He, for He knows that we are apt to forget to call upon God. "What mean you, oh, sleeper? Arise and call upon your God," is an exhortation which is needed by us as well as by Jonah in the storm.

He understands what *heavy hearts* we have sometimes, when under a sense of sin. Satan says to us, "Why should you pray? How can you hope to prevail? In vain you say, I will arise, and go to my Father, for you are not worthy to be one of His hired servants. How can you see the king's face after you have played the traitor against Him? How will you dare to approach the altar when you have yourself defiled it, and when the sacrifice which you would bring there is a poor polluted one?"

O brethren, it is well for us that we are commanded to pray, or else in times of heaviness we might give it up. If God command me, unfit as I may be, I will creep to the footstool of grace, and since He says, "Pray without ceasing," though my words fail me and my heart itself will wander, yet I will still stammer out the wishes of my hungering soul and say, "O God, at least teach me to pray, and help me to prevail with You."

Are we not commanded to pray also because of our *frequent unbelief*? Unbelief whispers, "What profit is there if you should seek the Lord upon such-and-such a matter?" This is a case quite out of the list of those things wherein God has interposed, and, therefore, (says the devil), if you were in any other position you might rest upon the mighty arm of God, but here your prayer will not avail you. Either it is too trivial a matter, or it is too connected with temporals, or else it is a matter in which you have sinned too much, or else it is too high, too hard, too complicated a piece of business, you have no right to take that before God! So suggests the foul fiend of hell.

Therefore, there stands written as an everyday precept suitable to every case into which a Christian can be cast, "Call unto me—call unto me." "Are you sick? Would you be healed? Cry unto Me, for I am the Great Physician. Does providence trouble you? Are you fearful that you shall not provide things honest in the sight of man? Call unto me! Do your children vex you? Do you feel that which is sharper than an adder's tooth—a thankless child? Call unto me. Are your griefs little yet painful, like small points and pricks of thorns? Call unto me! Is your burden heavy as though it would make your back break beneath its load? Call unto me!" "Cast your burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain you: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

In the valley—on the mountain—on the barren rock—in the briny sea, submerged, anon, beneath the billows, and lifted up by and by upon the crest of the waves—in the furnace when the coals are glowing—in the gates of death when the jaws of hell would shut themselves upon you—cease you not, for the commandment forevermore addresses you with, "Call unto me." Still prayer is mighty and must prevail with God to bring you your deliverance. These are some of the reasons why the privilege of

supplication is also in Holy Scripture spoken of as a duty, there are many more, but these will suffice this morning.

We must not leave our first part till we have made another remark. We ought to be very glad that God has given us this command *in His Word* that it may be sure and abiding. You may turn to fifty passages where the same precept is uttered. I do not often read in Scripture, “You shall not kill,” “You shall not covet.” Twice the law is given, but I often read gospel precepts, for if the law be given twice, the Gospel is given seventy times seven. For every precept which I cannot keep by reason of my being weak through the flesh, I find a thousand precepts, which it is sweet and pleasant for me to keep, by reason of the power of the Holy Spirit which dwells in the children of God, and this command to pray is insisted upon again and again.

It may be a seasonable exercise for some of you to find out how often in Scripture you are told to pray. You will be surprised to find how many times such words as these are given, “Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you.”—“You people, pour out your heart before him.” “Seek you the LORD while he may be found; call you upon him while he is near.” “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”—“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.”—“Pray without ceasing.”—“Come boldly unto the throne of grace.” “Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.” “Continue in prayer.” I need not multiply where I could not possibly exhaust.

I pick two or three out of this great bag of pearls. Come, Christian, you ought never to question whether you have a right to pray, you should never ask, “May I be permitted to come into His presence?” When you have so many commands (and God’s commands are all promises, and all enablings), you may come boldly unto the throne of heavenly grace, by the new and living way through the rent veil.

But there are times when God not only commands His people to pray in the Bible, but He also commands them to pray directly *by the motions of His Holy Spirit*. You who know the inner life comprehend me at once. You feel suddenly, possibly in the midst of business, the pressing thought that you *must* retire to pray. It may be, you do not at first take particular notice of the inclination, but it comes again, and again, and again—“Retire and pray!” I find that in the matter of prayer, I am myself very much like a water-wheel which runs well when there is plenty of water, but which turns with very little force when the brook is growing shallow, or, like the ship which flies over the waves, putting out all her canvas when the wind is favorable, but which has to tack about most laboriously when there is but little of the favoring breeze.

Now it strikes me that whenever our Lord gives you the special inclination to pray, that you should double your diligence. You ought always to pray and not to faint, yet when He gives you the special longing after prayer, and you feel a peculiar aptness and enjoyment in it, you have, over and above the command which is constantly binding, another command which should compel you to cheerful obedience.

At such times I think we may stand in the position of David to whom the Lord said, “When you hear a sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, then shall you bestir yourself.” That going in the tops of the mulberry trees may have been the footfalls of angels hastening to help David, and then David was to smite the Philistines, and when God’s mercies are coming, their footfalls are our desires to pray, and our desires to pray should be at once an indication that the set time to favor Zion is come.

Sow plentifully now, for you can sow in hope, plough joyously now, for your harvest is sure. Wrestle now, Jacob, for you are about to be made a prevailing prince, and your name shall be called Israel. Now is your time, spiritual merchantmen, the market is high, trade much, your profit shall be large. See to it that you use right well the golden hour, and reap your harvest while the sun shines.

When we enjoy visitations from on high, we should be peculiarly constant in prayer, and if some other duty less pressing should have the go—by for a season, it will not be amiss and we shall be no

loser, for when God bids us specially pray by the monitions of His Spirit, then should we bestir ourselves in prayer.

II. Let us now take the second head—AN ANSWER PROMISED.

We ought not to tolerate for a minute the ghastly and grievous thought that God will not answer prayer. *His nature*, as manifested in Christ Jesus, demands it. He has revealed Himself in the Gospel as a God of love, full of grace and truth, and how can He refuse to help those of His creatures who humbly in His own appointed way seek His face and favor?

When the Athenian senate, upon one occasion, found it most convenient to meet together in the open air, as they were sitting in their deliberations, a sparrow, pursued by a hawk, flew in the direction of the senate. Hard pressed by the bird of prey, it sought shelter in the bosom of one of the senators. He, being a man of rough and vulgar mold, took the bird from his bosom, dashed it on the ground, and so killed it. Whereupon, the whole senate rose in uproar, and without one single dissenting voice, condemned him to die, as being unworthy of a seat in the senate with them, or to be called an Athenian, if he did not render succor to a creature that confided in him.

Can we suppose that the God of heaven, whose nature is love, could tear out of His bosom the poor fluttering dove that flies from the eagle of justice into the bosom of His mercy? Will He give the invitation to us to seek His face, and when we, as He knows, with so much trepidation of fear, yet summon courage enough to fly into His bosom, will He then be unjust and ungracious enough to forget to hear our cry and to answer us? Let us not think so hardly of the God of heaven.

Let us recollect next, *His past character* as well as His nature. I mean the character which He has won for Himself by His past deeds of grace. Consider, my brethren, that one stupendous display of bounty—if I were to mention a thousand I could not give a better illustration of the character of God than that one deed—“He that spared not his own Son, but freely delivered him up for us all”—and it is not my inference only, but the inspired conclusion of an apostle—“How shall he not with him also freely give us all things?”

If the Lord did not refuse to listen to my voice when I was a guilty sinner and an enemy, how can He disregard my cry now that I am justified and saved? How is it that He heard the voice of my misery when my heart knew it not, and would not seek relief, if after all He will not hear me now that I am His child, His friend? The streaming wounds of Jesus are the sure guarantees for answered prayer. George Herbert represents in that quaint poem of his, “*The Bag*,” the Savior saying—

*“If you have anything to send or write
(I have no bag, but here is room)
Unto My Father’s hands and sight,
(Believe me) it shall safely come.
That I shall mind what you impart.*

*Look, you may put it very near My heart,
Or if hereafter any of friends
Will use Me in this kind, the door
Shall still be open; what he sends
I will present and somewhat more
Not to his hurt.”*

Surely, George Herbert’s thought was that the atonement was in itself a guarantee that prayer must be heard, that the great gash made near the Savior’s heart, which let the light into the very depths of the heart of Deity, was a proof that He who sits in heaven would hear the cry of His people.

You misread Calvary if you think that prayer is useless. But, beloved, we have *the Lord’s own promise* for it, and He is a God who cannot lie—“Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will answer you.” Has He not said, “Whatever you shall ask in prayer, believe that you shall have it and you shall

have it.” We cannot pray, indeed, unless we believe this doctrine, “For he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him,” and if we have any question at all about whether our prayer will be heard, we are comparable to him that wavers, “For he who wavers is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed; let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.”

Furthermore, it is not necessary, still it may strengthen the point, if we add that *our own experience* leads us to believe that God will answer prayer. I must not speak for you, but I may speak for myself. If there be anything I know, anything that I am quite assured of beyond all question, it is that praying breath is never spent in vain. If no other man here can say it, I dare to say it, and I know that I can prove it. My own conversion is the result of prayer, long, affectionate, earnest, persistent. Parents prayed for me, God heard their cries, and here I am to preach the Gospel.

Since then I have adventured upon some things that were far beyond my capacity as I thought, but I have never failed, because I have cast myself upon the Lord. You know as a church that I have not scrupled to indulge large ideas of what we might do for God, and we have accomplished all that we purposed. I have sought God’s aid, and assistance, and help, in all my manifold undertakings, and though I cannot tell here the story of my private life in God’s work, yet if it were written, it would be a standing proof that there is a God that answers prayer.

He has heard *my* prayers, not now and then, nor once or twice, but so many times, that it has grown into a habit with me to spread my case before God with the absolute certainty that whatsoever I ask of God, He will give it to me. It is not now a “Perhaps” or a possibility. I know that my Lord answers me, and I dare not doubt, it were indeed folly if I did. As I am sure that a certain amount of leverage will lift a weight, so I know that a certain amount of prayer will get anything from God.

As the rain cloud brings the shower, so prayer brings the blessing. As spring scatters flowers, so supplication ensures mercies. In all labor there is profit, but most of all in the work of intercession, I am sure of this, for I have reaped it. As I put trust in the queen’s money, and have never failed yet to buy what I want when I produce the cash, so put I trust in God’s promises, and mean to do so till I find that He shall once tell me that they are base coin, and will not do to trade with in heaven’s market.

But why should *I* speak? O brothers and sisters, you all know in your own selves that God hears prayer, if you do not, then where is your Christianity? Where is your religion? You will need to learn what are the first elements of truth, for all saints, young or old, set it down as certain that He does hear prayer.

Still remember that prayer is always to be offered in submission to God’s will, that when we say, God hears prayer, we do not intend by that, that He always gives us literally what we ask for. We do mean, however, this, that He gives us what is best for us, and that if He does not give us the mercy we ask for in silver, He bestows it upon us in gold. If He does not take away the thorn in the flesh, yet He says, “My grace is sufficient for you,” and that comes to the same in the end.

Lord Bolingbroke said to the Countess of Huntingdon, “I cannot understand, your ladyship, how you can make out earnest prayer to be consistent with submission to the divine will.” “My lord,” she said, “that is a matter of no difficulty. If I were a courtier of some generous king, and he gave me permission to ask any favor I pleased of him, I should be sure to put it thus, ‘Will your majesty be graciously pleased to grant me such-and-such a favor, but at the same time though I very much desire it, if it would in any way detract from your majesty’s honor, or if in your majesty’s judgment it should seem better that I did not have this favor, I shall be quite as content to go without it as to receive it.’ So you see I might earnestly offer a petition, and yet I might submissively leave it in the king’s hands.”

So with God. We never offer up prayer without inserting that clause, either in spirit or in words, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will; not my will, but yours be done.” We can only pray without an “if” when we are quite sure that our will must be God’s will, because God’s will is fully our will. A much-slandered poet has well said—

*“Man, regard thy prayers as a purpose of love to thy soul;
Esteem the providence that led to them as an index of God’s good will;
So shalt thou pray aright, and thy words shall meet with acceptance.
Also, in pleading for others, be thankful for the fullness of thy prayer;
For if thou art ready to ask, the Lord is more ready to bestow.
The salt preserveth the sea, and the saints uphold the earth;
Their prayers are the thousand pillars that prop the canopy of nature.
Verily, an hour without prayer, from some terrestrial mind,
Were a curse in the calendar of time, a spot of the blackness of darkness.
Perchance the terrible day, when the world must rock into ruins,
Will be one unwhitened by prayer—shall He find faith on the earth?
For there is an economy of mercy, as of wisdom, and power, and means;
Neither is one blessing granted, unbesought from the treasury of good:
And the charitable heart of the Being, to depend upon whom is happiness,
Never withholdeth a bounty, so long as his subject prayeth;
Yea, ask what thou wilt, to the second throne in heaven,
It is thine, for whom it was appointed; there is no limit unto prayer:
But and if thou cease to ask, tremble, thou self-suspended creature,
For thy strength is cut off as was Samson’s: and the hour of thy doom is come.”*

III. I come to our third point, which I think is full of encouragement to all those who exercise the hallowed art of prayer, ENCOURAGEMENT TO FAITH, “I will show you great and mighty things which you know not.”

Let us just remark that this was originally spoken to a prophet in prison, and, therefore, it applies in the first place to *every teacher*, and, indeed, as every teacher must be a learner, it has a bearing upon *every learner* in divine truth. The best way by which a prophet and teacher and learner can know the reserved truths, the higher and more mysterious truths of God, is by waiting upon God in prayer. I noticed very specifically yesterday in reading the Book of the Prophet Daniel, how Daniel found out Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. The soothsayers, the magicians, the astrologers of the Chaldees, brought out their curious books and their strange-looking instruments, and began to mutter their *abracadabra* and all sorts of mysterious incantations, but they all failed.

What did Daniel do? He set himself to prayer, and knowing that the prayer of a united body of men has more prevalence than the prayer of one, we find that Daniel called together his brethren, and bade them unite with him in earnest prayer that God would be pleased, in His infinite mercy to open up the vision. “Then Daniel went to his house and made the thing known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, that they would desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret, that Daniel and his fellows should not perish with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.”

And in the case of John, who was the Daniel of the New Testament, you remember he saw a book in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne—a book sealed with seven seals which none was found worthy to open or to look upon. What did John do? The book was by and by opened by the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, who had prevailed to open the book, but it is written first before the book was opened, “I wept much.” Yes, and the tears of John which were his liquid prayers, were, as far as he was concerned, the sacred keys by which the folded book was opened.

Brethren in the ministry, you who are teachers in the Sabbath school, and all of you who are learners in the college of Christ Jesus, I pray you remember that prayer is your best means of study, like Daniel you shall understand the dream, and the interpretation thereof, when you have sought unto God, and like John you shall see the seven seals of precious truth unloosed, after you have wept much. “Yea, if you cry after knowledge, and lift up your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hid treasures; then shall you understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.”

Stones are not broken except by an earnest use of the hammer, and the stone-breaker usually goes down on his knees. Use the hammer of diligence, and let the knee of prayer be exercised, too, and there is not a stony doctrine in Revelation which is useful for you to understand, which will not fly into shivers under the exercise of prayer and faith.

“Bene orasse est bene studuisse” was a wise sentence of Luther, which has been so often quoted, that we hardly venture but to hint at it. “To have prayed well is to have studied well.” You may force your way through anything with the leverage of prayers. Thoughts and reasoning may be like the steel wedges which may open a way into the truth, but prayer is the lever, the pry which forces open the iron chest of sacred mystery, that we may get at the treasure that is hidden therein for those who can force their way to reach it. The kingdom of heaven still suffers violence, and the violent takes it by force. Take care that you work always with the mighty implement of prayer, and nothing can stand against you.

We must not, however, stop there. We have applied the text to only one case, it is applicable to a hundred. We single out another. *The saint may expect to discover deeper experience* and to know more of the higher spiritual life, by being much in prayer. There are different translations of my text. One version renders it, “I will show you great and fortified things which you know not.” Another reads it, “Great and reserved things, which you know not.” Now, all the developments of spiritual life are not alike easy of attainment. There are the common frames and feelings of repentance, and faith, and joy, and hope, which are enjoyed by the entire family; but there is an upper realm of rapture, of communion, and conscious union with Christ, which is far from being the common dwelling place of believers.

All believers see Christ, but all believers do not put their fingers into the prints of the nails, nor thrust their hand into His side. We have not all the high privilege of John to lean upon Jesus’ bosom, or of Paul to be caught up into the third heaven. In the ark of salvation, we find a lower, second, and third story, all are in the ark, but all are not in the same story. Most Christians, as to the river of experience, are only up to their ankles, some others have waded till the stream is up to their knees, a few find it breast high, and but a few—oh! how few!—find it a river to swim in, the bottom of which they cannot touch.

My brethren, there are heights in experiential knowledge of the things of God which the eagle’s eye of acumen and philosophical thought have never seen, and there are secret paths which the lion’s whelp of reason and judgment have not as yet learned to travel. God alone can bear us there, but the chariot in which He takes us up, and the fiery steeds with which that chariot is dragged, are prevailing prayers.

Prevailing prayer is victorious over the God of mercy “By his strength he had power with God: yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel, and there He spoke with us.” Prevailing prayer takes the Christian to Carmel, and enables him to cover heaven with clouds of blessing, and earth with floods of mercy. Prevailing prayer bears the Christian aloft to Pisgah, and shows him the inheritance reserved; ay, and it elevates him to Tabor and transfigures him, till in the likeness of his Lord, as he is, so are we also in this world.

If you would reach to something higher than ordinary groveling experience, look to the Rock that is higher than you, and look with the eye of faith through the windows of persistent prayer. To grow in experience then, there must be much prayer.

You must have patience with me while I apply this text to two or three more cases. It is certainly true of *the sufferer under trial*, if he waits upon God in prayer much he shall receive greater deliverances than he has ever dreamed of—“great and mighty things which you know not.” Here is Jeremiah’s testimony—“You drew near in the day that I called upon you: you said, Fear not. O Lord, You have pleaded the causes of my soul, you have redeemed my life.”

And David’s is the same—“I called upon the LORD in distress: the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place . . . I will praise you: for you have heard me, and have become my salvation.” And yet again—“Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way that they might go to a city of habitation.”

“My husband is dead,” said the poor woman, “and my creditor is come to take my two sons as bondsmen.” She hoped that Elijah would possibly say, “What are your debts? I will pay them.” Instead of that, he multiplies her oil till it is written, “Go you and pay your debts, and”—what was the “and”?—“live you and your children upon the rest.”

So often it will happen that God will not only help His people through the miry places of the way, so that they may just stand on the other side of the slough, but He will bring them safely far on the journey. That was a remarkable miracle, when in the midst of the storm, Jesus Christ came walking upon the sea, the disciples received Him into the ship, and not only was the sea calm, but it is recorded, “Immediately the ship was at the land where they went.” That was a mercy over and above what they asked.

I sometimes hear you pray and make use of a quotation which is not in the Bible—“He is able to do exceeding abundantly above what we *can* ask or even think.” It is not so written in the Bible. I do not know what we can ask or what we can think. But it is said, “He is able to do exceeding abundantly above what we ask or even think.” Let us then, dear friends, when we are in great trial, only say, “Now I am in prison; like Jeremiah, I will pray as he did, for I have God’s command to do it; and I will look out as he did, expecting that He will show me reserved mercies which I know nothing of at present.” He will not merely bring His people through the battle, covering their heads in it, but He will bring them forth with banners waving, to divide the spoil with the mighty, and to claim their portion with the strong. Expect great things of a God who gives such great promises as these.

Again, *here is encouragement for the worker*. Most of you are doing something for Christ, I am happy to be able to say this, knowing that I do not flatter you. My dear friends, wait upon God much in prayer, and you have the promise that He will do greater things for you than you know of. We know not how much capacity for usefulness there may be in us.

That ass’s jawbone lying there upon the earth, what can it do? Nobody knows what it can do. It gets into Samson’s hands, what can it *not* do? No one knows what it cannot do now that a Samson wields it. And you, friend, have often thought yourself to be as contemptible as that bone, and you have said, “What can I do?” Ay, but when Christ, by His Spirit grips you, what can you not do? Truly you may adopt Paul’s language and say, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” However, do not depend upon prayer without effort.

In a certain school, there was one girl who knew the Lord, a very gracious, simple-hearted, trustful child. As usual, grace developed itself in the child according to the child’s position. Her lessons were always best said of any in the class. Another girl said to her, “How is it that your lessons are always so well said?” “I pray God to help me,” she said, “to learn my lesson.” “Well,” thought the other, “then I will do the same.”

The next morning when she stood up in the class she knew nothing, and when she was in disgrace she complained to the other, “Why I prayed God to help me learn my lesson and I do not know anything of it. What is the use of prayer?” “But did you sit down and try to learn it?” “Oh, no,” she said, “I never looked at the book.” “Ah, then,” said the other, “I asked God to help me to learn my lesson, but I then sat down to it studiously, and I kept at it till I knew it well, and I learned it easily, because my earnest desire, which I had expressed to God was, help me to be diligent in endeavoring to do my duty.”

So is it with some who come up to prayer meetings and pray, and then they fold their arms and go away hoping that God’s work will go on.

Like the Negro woman singing, “Fly abroad, you mighty Gospel,” but not putting a penny in the plate, so that her friend touched her and said, “But how can it fly if you don’t give it wings to fly with?” There be many who appear to be very mighty in prayer, wondrous in supplications, but then they require God to do what they can do themselves, and, therefore, God does nothing at all for them. “I shall leave my camel untied,” said an Arab once to Mohammed, “and trust to providence.” “Tie it up tight,” said Mohammed, “and then trust to providence.”

So you who say, “I shall pray and trust my church, or my class, or my work to God’s goodness,” may rather hear the voice of experience and wisdom which say, “Do your best, work as if all rested upon

your toil, as if your own arm would bring your salvation,” “and when you have done all, cast yourself on him, without whom it is in vain to rise up early and to sit up late, and to eat the bread of carefulness, and if He speed you give Him the praise.”

I shall not detain you many minutes longer, but I want you to notice that this promise ought to prove useful for the comforting of those who are intercessors for others. You who are calling upon God to save your children, to bless your neighbors, to remember your husbands or your wives in mercy, may take comfort from this, “I will show you great and mighty things, which you know not.”

A celebrated minister in the last century, one Mr. Bailey, was the child of a godly mother. This mother had almost ceased to pray for her husband, who was a man of a most ungodly stamp, and a bitter persecutor. The mother prayed for her boy, and while he was yet eleven or twelve years of age, eternal mercy met with him. So sweetly instructed was the child in the things of the kingdom of God, that the mother requested him—and for some time he always did so—to conduct family prayer in the house.

Morning and evening this little one laid open the Bible, and though the father would not deign to stop for the family prayer, yet on one occasion, he was rather curious to know “What sort of an out the boy would make of it,” so he stopped on the other side of the door, and God blessed the prayer of his own child under thirteen years of age to his conversion. The mother might well have read my text with streaming eyes, and said, “Yes, Lord, You have shown me great and mighty things which I knew not, You have not only saved my boy, but through my boy You have brought my husband to Your truth.”

You cannot guess how greatly God will bless you. Only go and stand at His door, you cannot tell what is in reserve for you. If you do not beg at all, you will get nothing, but if you beg He may not only give you, as it were, the bones and broken meat, but He may say to the servant at His table, “Take you that dainty meat, and set that before the poor man.” Ruth went to glean, she expected to get a few good ears, but Boaz said, “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and rebuke her not,” he said moreover to her, “At mealtime come here and eat of the bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.” Nay, she found a husband where she only expected to find a handful of barley.

So in prayer for others, God may give us such mercies that we shall be astounded at them, since we expected but little. Hear what is said of Job, and learn its lesson, “And the Lord said, My servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that you have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like My servant Job. . . And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.”

Now, this word to close with. Some of you are seekers for your own conversion. God has quickened you to solemn prayer about your own souls. You are not content to go to hell, you want heaven, you want washing in the precious blood, you want eternal life. Dear friends, I pray you take this text—God Himself speaks it to you—“Call unto me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you know not.” At once take God at His Word. Get home, go into your chamber and shut the door, and try Him.

Young man, I say, try the Lord. Young woman, prove Him, see whether He be true or not. If God be true, you cannot seek mercy at His hands through Jesus Christ and get a negative reply. He must, for His own promise and character bind him to it, open mercy’s gate to you who knock with all your heart. God help you, believing in Christ Jesus, to cry aloud unto God, and His answer of peace is already on the way to meet you. You shall hear Him say, “Your sins, which are many are all forgiven.”

The Lord bless you for His love’s sake. Amen.

[NOTE—In a former sermon, while denouncing the error of the “Non-confession of sin by believers,” we wrongly imputed that gross heresy to the Plymouth Brethren. We have since learned that the persons to whom we alluded have been expelled from that body, and we therefore desire to exonerate the community from a fault of which they are not guilty. We are sorry to have made this charge, as it is far from our wish to speak evil of any, but we were not aware of the expulsion of the guilty persons.]

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.