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The Friendship of Prayer

Introduction

Being 72 years of age there are times in life when I recall people I have known through the years. My childhood friends Bobby McDonald and Jimmy Mullen were very good friends. When I came to Canada in 1966 brother Gordon Peat was exceedingly kind to me, a real friend whom I greatly esteem. Then along came Bob Houston, what friends we three were. Leaving Toronto where Gordon and Bob lived, I moved to Northern Ontario and another couple came into my life, Lawrence and Doreen Buchanan. It was they who really encouraged me greatly in the things of God. With some, that closeness of friendship is not as deep as it once was because our lives have drifted apart, and some have been released from this earthly sphere and now are in the glories of heaven.

What Is A Friend?

Sadly, as we travel through life we find ourselves having the experience of the Psalmist when he said: "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted . . . hath lifted up his heel against me" (Psa. 41:9). They appeared to be genuine until difficult times came, then we were left alone, and the question churning in our minds was, "What is a true friend?" Someone wrote the following poem which characterizes one who is a friend.

You were a friend to me for years
We shared our dreams, our joys and tears,
A friend to me you were indeed,
A friend who helped me when in need.

My faith in you was strong and sure
We had such trust as should endure,
No spats between us ever rose,
Our friends were like, and so our foes.

In reading the Scriptures it will often refer to friendship, using the word "friend" in fifty-two verses from Genesis to James. The word "friends" occurs in fifty verses, the word "companion" occurs in fifteen verses, and the word "companions" in twenty-one verses.

When our Lord was here He was spoken of as the "friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt. 11:19), and the wise man wrote of "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). Yet He who was the greatest Friend anyone could have, I find from the lips of our Lord one of the most pathos filled statements He ever made when He said: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Jn. 15:14). It is a statement which reminds me of two little children in a playground and of one going up to the other saying, "Will you be my friend?" Surely one of the greatest comforts of life must be to know that I, as an individual, can be a "Friend of God" (Jam. 2:23) and a friend of Christ (Jn. 15:14). Perhaps even greater is to know Him as the Beloved and with a heart appreciation say: "This is my Friend" (Song of Sol. 5:16).

Abraham has a very unique declaration made of him in the scriptures, declarations which no other Biblical individual has, for he is referred to as being a "friend of God" three times (2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jam. 2:23). It would seem to me that one of many reasons Abraham was called such was because, despite his failures of life, he was a man who, from the day of his conversion in Ur of the Chaldees, sought to live in fellowship with God. Two noticeable truths concerning Abraham are he built altars (Gen. 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9), and God communed with him and he with God. God brought him into His confidence when He said: "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?" (Gen. 18:17). Marvellous is the truth, God communed with Abraham and Abraham communed with God in earnest intercession (Gen. 18:23-33).

It is my understanding that there are 19 different words used for prayer in the Scriptures. What a blessedness it is to know the individual believer can enjoy a living friendship with the God of Heaven, one who hears and answers

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prayer. I want to consider some of the words the Spirit used regarding aspects of prayer in this and the “Front-Page” of future months.

Prayer

The Palmist wrote a beautiful expression in penning the words: “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear?” (Psa 94:9). It is a truth which radiates comfort to the believer, being one of the first characteristics of new life. When Dr. Luke was writing about the conversion of Saul he records God’s words to Ananias: “Behold, he prayeth” (Acts 9:11). Constantly we read of Paul praying for the saints (2 Cor. 13:7; Eph. 3:14; Phil. 1:9) and requesting their prayers for he and his associates (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1). Paul also exhorts the saints to: “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). How lovely to be a believer who can find at the end of life they are still able to pray, even when all abilities to travel and speak, to minister, to visit, are long gone. How beautiful it would be at the end of this earthly sojourn to enter the celestial portals saying: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59).

It was some forty years ago I learnt a little chorus from Child Evangelism. It was called, “Did you ever speak to God above?” in which it reminds us that prayer can be spoken out loud (Lk. 18:13), in silence (Lk. 18:11; 1 Sam. 1:13); on the mountain (Lk. 6:12); on the sea (Matt. 14:30); alone (Lk. 9:18); in public (Matt. 11:25; Jn. 11:41). It can even be an attitude without a word spoken, as when the Psalmist said: “I give myself unto prayer” (Psa. 109:4).

The Hebrew Word “Shaal”

The word “shaal” indicates perhaps the simplest form of prayer and means to simply ask, or make a request for something. At times it is used as an inquiry as in (Deut. 4:32; 32:7); sometimes it means to ask for counsel (Jud. 18:5); and sometimes it means to pray as in the expression: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psa. 122:6). In the New Testament part of that which is commonly called, “The Lord’s Prayer”, there is the asking the Lord to: “Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from the evil” (Lk. 11:4); or “Give us day by day our daily bread” (Lk. 11:3), or “Forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us” (Lk. 11:4).

Relationship Does Not Mean Familiarity

With friendship there is ever the possibility of over familiarity and this can happen regarding communing with Father. I am thinking of the occasion when the disciples heard the Lord praying and they asked him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk. 11:1). It would seem to me that they were not asking to learn how to pray, but having beheld his whole demeanour and attitude, His simplicity and childlike trusts, the comfortable communications He had with God, it was something they had never known and longed to enter into that rarefied air of heaven. In that prayer there is first of all, the awesomeness of God brought before their attention when the Lord said: “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Lk. 11:2). While the truth of relationship is viewed as a reality, yet there is the need to appreciate that God is not our “buddy,” neither is He our “daddy”. He is God, and to be held in the highest esteem and respect.

Prayer Does Not Mean Instantaneous Response

The Lord told the parable of the widow who prayed to the Judge to avenge her of her adversary. Because of her instance the Judge eventually did so, but there was the proving of her sincerity and she had to learn to wait for him to respond. This is a lesson we, in a world of instantaneousness, find hard to accept. God is not our servant who has to do as we say when we ask, that is, He does not always answer our prayers the moment we ask. The words of the Lord still stand true: “Ask, Seek, Knock” (Matt. 7:7). It means there has to be persistence. Furthermore, for prayer to be answered appropriately, there must be a knowledge of the will of God: “And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1 Jn. 5:15). Reality is, I have found that it always brings sorrow when God gives us what we ask for, although it is not according to His will. Like the children of Israel, we murmur intimating that God does not really love us or He

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would give what we desire, but at what a cost? (Num. 11:18-20, 31-33). I am thankful to God for the times He did not give me what I wanted, no matter how I reasoned with Him.

Illustration: Consider my only son when he was 10 years old coming and asking me for a 1500 cc Harley Davidson motorbike. Despite how he felt about it, it would never be an act of love for me to give such to him.

Love at times withholds for our good. The tragedy is how little we take advantage of this close friendship that we can have with God and Christ, and speak to them making known to He who sits on the throne of heaven, the governor and ruler of all our fears, our needs, our longings, our petitions.

One of the best-known hymns amongst believers is: "What a Friend We Have In Jesus". It was originally written by Joseph Scriven. His mother lived in Ireland when he was in Canada. It is a hymn which combines both the "closeness" of friendship and prayer. How often we have sung it's beautiful words.

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear,
What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer.
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful, Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge; Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer,
In His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou will find a solace there.

May God help us to know what it is to pray.

. . . Rowan Jennings