

PRAYER'S POSSIBILITIES

by Ray C. Stedman

In this series of studies we have been seeking to explore the mysteries of prayer and to correct some of the myths that abound about this subject.

Here is a helpful description of prayer, from the pen of C. S. Lewis. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, he is talking about the Trinity, the triune nature of God, and he says:

You may ask, "If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?" Well, there isn't any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life, and that may begin any time -- tonight, if you like. What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God -- that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying -- the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on -- the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kind of life -- what I call "Zoe" or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself.

Now, for our biblical lesson on this subject we are going to look at the eleventh chapter of Numbers, beginning with Verse 4. This story from the life of Moses took place during the forty-year wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, in their long march from Egypt to Canaan. The account has to do with the murmuring of the people over the conditions they met with in the wilderness. Verse 4:

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving; and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, "O that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." {Num 11:4-6 RSV}

Manna, as you know, means, "What is it?" Can you imagine eating "What is it?" three times a day for forty years? Verses 7 through 9 describes the manna, but let us skip down to Verse 10, where we read:

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, every man at the door of his tent; and the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. Moses said to the Lord, "Why hast thou dealt ill with thy servant? And why have I not found favor in thy sight, that thou dost lay the burden of all this people upon me? Did I bring them forth, that thou shouldst say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child, to the land which thou didst swear to give their fathers?' Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. If thou wilt deal thus with me, kill me at once, if I find favor in thy sight, that I may not see my wretchedness." {Num 11:10-15 RSV}

It is obvious that this prayer is filled with a great deal of self-pity, reproach, and petulance. It is clearly the expression of a man who feels he had been put upon. Here Moses is coming very close to rebuking and upbraiding God for ever giving him the job of taking care of these ungrateful people. I have chosen this prayer because I think it is one of the poorest prayers in the Bible, therefore it is a prayer that is very like ours.

Moses actually had an extremely rich prayer life. I could probably devote an entire year's messages to his prayers. Some of them are magnificent. They are uttered with an artless eloquence which gathers up majestic

thoughts about the greatness of God, which reflect man's faith and God's power to act, but this is surely not one of them. This is a very weak prayer, uttered at a time when Moses was out-of-sorts, when he felt that he had been taken advantage of. He wanted to quit -- he was willing to die to get out of his responsibilities -- so he lays it all before God, and says, "Why ever did you give me a job like this? Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? Why should I bear them on my heart? I didn't bring them into being."

I chose this prayer because we do not get this picture of Moses very often. Moses was a towering figure in the Old Testament, a mighty prophet and leader of the people. His magnificent stature as a statesman has affected the laws of nations for thousands of years, therefore we tend to think of him as high above all of us in his relationship to God. Moses spent forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai, alone in the presence of God. The mountain was wreathed with smoke, everyone trembled at even approaching this fearsome and awesome sight, yet this man went alone into the mountain top for forty days and nights and prayed and talked with God face to face. Not only once, but twice Moses did that, as the broken Law needed to be renewed. He went again into the mountain and came down with his face literally glowing with the light of the communion that he had had with God still dwelling upon him.

We are familiar with the stories of Moses exercising the mighty power of God -- stretching out his rod to roll back the waters of the Red Sea so that the people of Israel walked through on dry land, striking the rock and the waters flowed out in the midst of a howling desert to slake the thirst of the people, and raising his rod in victory over the enemies of Israel, turning the tide of battle. It is clear from many of these stories in the Bible that he was a mighty man of God, and we generally think of him in those terms.

But here in this prayer we get the other side of Moses. We see Moses the man, as he really was. In this and other accounts like this we get glimpses now and then of Moses as he lived his daily life, and the amazing thing is that, when we get close to him, we see that he is a surprisingly unimpressive figure in himself. We cannot read this prayer without seeing that Moses is no Charlton Heston. Here he is angry and upset and feeling sorry for himself. There is nothing heroic about him at all.

You remember when Moses first started out his career. He was raised as a prince in the house of Pharaoh, and learned from his mother something of his heritage as a leader of Israel and the prediction that he would be the deliverer of his people. When he was forty years old he started out to do this in his own confident strength, but he bungled it badly. He lost his temper, he slew an Egyptian and had to hide his body in the sand and flee from the wrath of Pharaoh. Evidently Moses was so shaken by that experience that he stayed in the desert for forty years, taking on a job herding sheep with his father-in-law. He made no effort to return to Egypt, to recoup his losses or to restore his leadership. One fatal failure and he was through; he was ready to quit. This is the spirit we see here, so, in himself, Moses was not very impressive.

Then there was the incident at the burning bush, when God finally called him back and commissioned him to go down to Egypt, but Moses was very reluctant to go. He had what we today would call a very poor self-image. He said to the Lord, "I can't do this. Why, I can't even speak; I stutter. I have no ability to stand before kings." He had long forgotten that he was once a member of the household of Pharaoh and was widely regarded as Pharaoh's son. But all that is gone now. He is so shaken in his own image of himself that he is most reluctant to go. Finally, the account tells us that the anger of God blazed against him because he was so stubborn he would not go, he would not yield.

You remember when the Israelites were going through the desert, Moses' authority was challenged by his own brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam. They asked him, "Why are you putting on airs like this? Who made you the leader? God speaks through us as much as he does through you. Why should you say anything?" Only the intervention of God himself restored Moses' authority at that time, because Moses did not defend himself.

A little later Korah and Dathan and their confederates challenged his authority and God had to intervene again. If you put these accounts together, therefore, you can see that Moses is, by natural temperament, an irresolute, shrinking personality, distrustful of self, easily discouraged, ready to resign and even die when the pressure is heavy. This is the human instrument used so mightily by God in the days of old.

As we look at this account, I want you to notice some things. Notice, for instance, that not everybody in Israel

began murmuring about the conditions. This began, as it always does, with a little handful of malcontents who verbalized how they felt and kept stirring everybody else up.

Verse 4: "The rabble that was among them had a strong craving." This is the way it always is. Every pastor is familiar with this. A mere handful of critical spirits in a congregation, talking about how they feel and murmuring against their conditions, can stir up discontent in a whole crowd of people. This is what was happening here.

I am always amazed at this account because I can't quite identify with the lust of these people for these kinds of food. Fish I can understand, but cucumbers -- twelve inches of indigestion! Melons I like, but leeks and onions and garlic? Those fragrant vegetables whose memory lingers with you! Why did they want them? Well, I don't know, except to say that the description here of the manna -- it seems to be rather like the breakfast food we call "Grape Nuts" -- would seem to indicate that you would get awfully tired of eating that and nothing else for forty years so you would long for almost anything else. Evidently that is what these people were feeling here as they are murmuring in the desert. But it is a small group of malcontents who are causing the problem. They stir up the people to come with this impossible request to Moses.

I do not envy Moses his work. He had to lead almost two million people through a howling wilderness, be responsible to settle all their quarrels, and answer all their complaints, handle all their difficulties, and supply all their needs, and bear the whole burden of this constantly coming upon him for forty years. This is a job I would have had no desire for, yet Moses did it. On this occasion, however, it got a little too much for him. He comes to God with this request, and in his petulant cry, says, "Lord, how can I supply meat for all these people?" I am sure your mind immediately runs, as mine does, to the New Testament, when the disciples came to Jesus and said, "There are these five thousand people here and we have no food for them. What can we do?" {cf, Matt 14:15-21}. Moses is facing a similar situation.

Well, God answered him, and it is wonderful to see how gracious and thorough is his answer. He answered first by relieving the pressure on Moses with a division of labor. Verse 16:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of the meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone." {Num 11:16-17 RSV}

It is rather remarkable that God chose in both the Old and New Testaments to use elders as the solution to the problem of an overburdened ministry. We find the same thing in the book of Acts. When the apostles were saddled with the task of leading a fast-growing church, which was increasing by leaps and bounds -- two thousand one day, three thousand another, five thousand a little later -- the solution of the Spirit was that they appoint elders to share the load with them. All through the New Testament we find that God's appointed way is to take men who are trustworthy, men of respect and honor, and put the spirit of leadership upon them and let them share the load, discovering the mind of God for the people. I am always impressed by the fact that God chose to do it this way and that he does understand the pressure that can come on a single individual who is charged with too much responsibility.

I believe that this is one of the great misunderstood concepts of the church today. I find that most churches do not think of elders as we see them functioning here and in the New Testament. Most churches think of elders as members of business executive boards who are simply charged with making decisions -- people come to them with problems and the elders decide what to do according to what they think best, just as a corporate board of executives would operate. But elders in the Bible were men who understood the people and who understood their problems. They intermingled with them and were involved with them, they ministered to them, and brought the intimate knowledge of that involvement with people and problems to the general gathering, so that, together, the elders might seek the mind of the Lord as to what the solution was. And the solutions came from God, not from men. That is eldership, and that is what God proposes to do here with Moses.

It is interesting to see how two of these elders function, because we are told a little bit later, in Verse 26:

Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested upon them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." {Num 11:26-27 RSV}

This young man is alarmed by this. He thinks Moses is going to be very upset that anybody else would have the temerity to do any prophesying.

And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, forbid them." {Num 11:28 RSV}

"We can't let this happen. We've got to maintain the hierarchy here."

But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake" Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" {Num 11:29 RSV}

What a gracious response, and how clearly Moses understood God's processes! In the New Testament this comes to full flower in the church when we learn that all God's people are equipped with gifts of the Spirit, for the Spirit is upon the whole congregation. All of us are expected to minister according to the gift that God has given to us. This incident here in the desert is an anticipation of this, when God began to show what his prescribed approach to ministry was.

What a lesson this is for us. How it must have helped Moses to know that he could share the responsibility and the burden with men of like precious faith who also had gifts of the Spirit and who were filled with the Spirit in order to function in this way.

That was the division of labor, but now God also goes on with answering Moses' prayer with a special miraculous provision of supply. Look at Verse 18:

And say to the people, "Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, 'Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.' Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall not eat one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wept before him, saying, 'why did we come forth out of Egypt?'" {Num 11:18-20 RSV}

What a commentary on the spirit of criticism and complaint among us! All this ends up being an insult to the presence and power of God, doesn't it? When we complain about where God has brought us and the conditions he has placed us in, we are exactly like these murmuring people of Israel. It awakens the anger of God that we should be so ungrateful, so unaware of who he is, so untrusting that he is in our midst and can solve our problems. We surely ought to at least give him an opportunity to display his wisdom, his might, and his power among us.

Then we read how God made this miraculous provision of supply. Verse 31:

And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and it brought quails from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. {Num 11:31 RSV}

That does not mean the quails were piled up that high. What it means is that they flew at that level, two cubits (about three or four feet) above the earth, so the Israelites could go out with clubs and knock them down to the ground and thus gain the meat they were so hungry for. And they did that. We are told:

And the people rose all that day, and all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quails; he who gathered least gathered ten homers; [a homer equals several bushels] and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. {Num 11:32 RSV}

They began to eat them, and, as God has said, they had so much quail they began to be disgusted with it. Now I understand that it is impossible to eat quail for more than a few days because quail meat is very rich. After a few meals of quail you get so you cannot stand the sight of one, but these people ate it until it almost ran out their nostrils, God had indeed supplied their need.

One of the great principles running all through Scripture is that this is the way God frequently teaches his people. Have you ever realized how dangerous it can be, sometimes, to have your prayers answered? God may actually give you what you want as he did these people, but it won't be long before you don't want what he has given.

Some years ago a high school boy said to me, "A few weeks ago I saw the most beautiful girl ever. I prayed to the Lord, 'If you would just let me meet that girl, and get to know her, and go with her, I'd be the happiest guy on earth.' Well, God answered my prayer. I met her, and started going with her, but now I'm praying, 'Lord, if you'd help me get rid of this girl, I'll be the happiest guy on earth!'" That is what sometimes happens. That is the way God teaches us how and what to pray for. Out of their ingratitude, out of their lack of understanding, and lack of trust, these people here in the desert prayed a wrong kind of prayer but God answered it so that they might learn from it. This is oftentimes reflected in our experience today.

Now there was not only this division of labor, and this provision of supply, but there was also a discriminating judgment that God exercised, for, in Verse 33, we are told:

While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord smote the people with a very great plague. {Num 11:33 RSV}

It is suggestive that the meat spoiled unknown to the Israelites. Some kind of botulism, perhaps, accounts for this plague among them. We are told:

Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah [which means "the graves of craving"] because there they buried the people who had the craving. {Num 11:34 RSV}

Now notice something: everybody did not die, or everybody who murmured and complained did not die. God particularly singled out the perpetrators of this discontent, for back in Verse 4 we are told, "the rabble that was among them had a strong craving," and here in this closing passage we read "there they buried the people who had the craving." So God punished the troublemakers among them and answered the prayer of Moses. God relieved Moses' terrible sense of burden, taught the people a great lesson on complaining and on his ability to supply, and, at the same time, judged with severity those who were causing trouble throughout the camp.

The remarkable thing about this is that even this self-pitying reproachful request of Moses was nevertheless answered. It is the poorest prayer he ever prayed, it is one of the weakest prayers in the Bible, far from a model of prayer, but, whatever else it was, this prayer was an attempt to draw upon divine resources. It recognized Moses' own personal insufficiency, and it had an awareness of the incredible resources of God, of his wisdom, and of the possibility of working out this problem; therefore God honored it and answered it. That is what prayer is, a reliance, not on us, but on God, which brings forth great possibilities.

Clearly the difference between Moses the man and Moses the mover of world events was the measure of the power of prayer, because it was the trust that Moses had that God was going to do and work through him that made possible what he achieved. In the New Testament we see what an amazing figure Moses has proven to be in history. He taught the people of Israel to understand something more of the greatness of their God than they had ever known before. He revealed God as the ruler of all history, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, the supplier of his people, the understander of people's needs. All through this account we have a marvelous picture of how God mightily used this human instrument to teach people of

his greatness and of his power.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews it says of Moses "he endured as seeing him who is invisible," {Heb 11:27}. That is what prayer does. Prayer is a verbalization of our awareness that God is there. We cannot see him, but he is with us in the events of our lives the ordinary everyday commonplace occurrences of our existence. That is what prayer is all about.

It has been my privilege to have known in my lifetime several of the spiritual giants of our day. I have had the privilege of getting close to some of these men, even living with them, and I have invariably found this same pattern -- men who were insignificant in their personal achievement but who had done mighty spiritual accomplishments by the power of God through their verbalization in prayer. I have always found ordinary men who nevertheless had an extraordinary God. That is what prayer is all about, isn't it?

That is where we are as well. We are no worse than Moses, and no better either. Many of us feel very much like he did:

- "How can I do these things you are asking me to do?"
- "How can I live in this situation?"
- "How can I make it through the days ahead?"
- "Why did you ever bring me to this place?"
- "How can I meet these needs?"

Our petulant cries are often expressed, or unexpressed, along these same terms. What a lesson this is that God in graciousness, nevertheless, answers and works out our problems, not that we may go on praying in such a reproachful way, but that we may learn how to pray and how to trust and grow in our prayer life -- and understand that, weak and inadequate as we may often be, our God is the kind of God who can pick up weak vessels like us and use us in mighty achievements. They may never be known on earth, but they will be widely known in heaven. "God has chosen the weak things of the earth," Paul says, "the obscure, the outcast, the poor, in order that he might set at naught the things that are of might," {cf, 1 Cor 1:27}.

That is God's way of working. It is far removed from the world's way of seeking to find impressive people in order to function, or even the worldly church that glorifies men and women and exalts them as glamorous stars who are able to function beyond ordinary people's abilities. That is not God's way. God loves ordinary people like you and me, and he is willing to use us right where we are.

That is what prayer is all about.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the truth that we have just been looking at. We confess we often feel like Moses. We feel like our problems are too big for us, our life is too demanding, our pressures are too great, our circumstances are too complex for us to work out, and we resent being asked to do so. Forgive us Lord. Grant to us that from this prayer of Moses and from the experiences of our own lives we too shall learn that you are a God of infinite resources, of incredible wisdom, of infinite patience and understanding, and that you work out these matters if we but trust. Help thou our unbelief. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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