

The Bridge of Prayer

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Somewhere I have read a simple little prayer-poem that takes this great truth of the text and flings it out in a figure for the imagination to seize. It is attributed to Gilbert Thomas and called "The Unseen Bridge":

There is a bridge, whereof the span
Is rooted in the heart of man,
And reaches, without pile or rod,
Unto the Great White Throne of God.
Its traffic is in human sighs
Fervently wafted to the skies;
'Tis the one pathway from despair;
And it is called the Bridge of Prayer.

A bridge, come to think of it, is a thing quite wonderful. It may be a crude affair, made of wire and thin boards, swinging its one-way pedestrian traffic across a stream in the southern mountains. Or it may be a majestic structure of concrete and steel, carrying hundreds of vehicles and scores of trains every hour across a San Francisco Bay. In either case it is a combination of romance and utility fit to set one's blood atingling.

Some years ago death came to Sir William Arrol, an Englishman who was famous as "the prince of bridge-builders." When the news reached Tasmania, half way round the world, it set fire to the fancy of that charming preacher and essayist, F. W. Boreham. He sat down and wrote an essay which he called "The Building of the Bridge." Commenting on the career of Arrol, he remarks: "Since reading the tale of his audacious undertakings and bewildering achievements, it has dawned upon me that bridge-building is the only profession worth while. It is a lovely thing to see life's deep ravings--its raging torrents, its yawning abysses, its perilous chasms--and to fling across them bridges by which a little child can cross in safety." And he adds, "When I come to think of it, it really seems to me that we are sent into this world of ours for no other purpose than to build bridges."

Well, surely one of the bridges which every man should build in his own life--and will build if Christ is his Savior and Lord--is the bridge of Prayer. What a span it is--leading from the heart of man to the heart of God and from the heart of

man to the hearts of his fellow men! And what traffic passes over it--not only the "human sighs" that our poem talks about, but the manifold longings, hopes, fears, supplications, and thanksgivings, that are endlessly woven into the life of the praying man or woman!

I.

The bridge of Prayer! Let's try to trace out, first of all, the suggestiveness of this figure of speech.

For one thing, it is understood, even by a child, that bridges do not just happen: they have to be built. I first visited San Rafael on the north. Then, fifteen years ago, they began building towers and winding cables for a suspension span across those treacherous waters. When the Golden Gate Bridge was finished, it had a main span running 4200 feet without a support and clearing the water at a height of 220 feet, which is the equivalent of a twenty story building. But into that stupendous achievement went incalculable pains and patience. Into it went \$35,000,000. Into it went five years of labor.

So it is with prayer. As Moffatt translates our text, it reads: "The prayers of the righteous have a powerful effect." True, but no man discovers over night just how wonderful or how various and far-reaching is the ministry of prayer. That is something he learns. When the disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," they were given an answer that took the form of what we call "The Lord's Prayer." But that did not mean that they had mastered the art of praying. In fact, the sixty-six words of that peerless prayer contains insights and challenges and possibilities which a whole lifetime of praying will not exhaust.

Hudson Taylor, mighty man of prayer, was once asked if he ever prayed without conscious joy. "Often," he replied. "Sometimes I pray on with my heart feeling like wood." Then he added, "Often, too, the most wonderful answers have come when prayer has been a real effort of faith, without any joy whatever." But, mind you, Hudson Taylor could not have given you that answer at the close of the first day of his Christian life. He learned it in the rugged school of experience. All his days he was building the bridge of prayer.

Exploring further the suggestiveness of this figure of prayer as a bridge, let's observe that, normally, a bridge is made for two-way traffic. So, in truth, is prayer. In one direction the movement of prayer is from our heart to God. It is a movement of confession, of petition, of intercession, of longing, of eagerness and of faith. One fears that sometimes this is the only traffic lane that some people see or use on the

bridge of prayer. Actually, of course, the other lane is from one point of view more important. There the direction in which the traffic moves is from God's heart to ours. It is a movement of wooing, of guidance, of love revealed, and grace imparted, and strength renewed. One is the active, talking, requesting side of prayer, the other is the responsive, listening, receiving side.

II.

Having looked at the suggestiveness of the poet's figure let me turn now to a discussion of the serviceableness of prayer. I should like to take our text, together with its setting, and let it cast its light on the larger meanings which we may thus find in the figure.

Consider, for one thing, how prayer is a bridge over our emotional difficulties. Step back to chapter 4 and feel the sting of the questions James puts to some of these members of the Christian community in the first century.

As we have it in "Moffatt," the apostle asks: "Where do conflicts, where do wrangles come from, in your midst? Is it not from these passions of yours that war among your members?" Then comes the rebuke: "You crave and miss what you want: you envy and covet, but you cannot acquire: you wrangle and fight." Then comes the implied cure for this miserable state of things: "You miss what you want because you do not ask God for it" (James 4:1-3).

A judge who handled, for the most part, cases of domestic trouble is reported to have said that the greatest cause of divorce is "emotional adolescence." The phrase describes people who never grew up emotionally, never got beyond the juvenile stage of "I-want-what-I-want-when-I-want-it." They never learned the higher satisfaction of surrendering to something or someone beyond themselves. If they would take Jesus Christ seriously, if they would go to praying wholeheartedly, the snarled and tangled condition within themselves would be straightened out. "You miss what you want because you do not ask God for it," says James. This does not mean that prayer is a magical way to gratify your selfish desires. Upon the contrary, it means that prayer will shift you over to a new focus in your desires: now you will want what God wants more than you wanted what self was after. And these redeemed desires God will fulfill. Then, instead of your having a civil war on the battle field of your personal emotions, there will be peace.

Again, think how prayer becomes a bridge over our physical

ills. Three verses removed from our text James says: "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up" (James 5: 13-15).

I think there are two kinds of people who need help in interpreting this aspect of prayer--the skeptically minded and the spiritually minded. The skeptically minded toss it off as a piece of nonsense. All the healing that they know anything about is what nature provides and what doctors and medicines may be able to add to nature's provision. Such people should be told, quite bluntly, that they could stand a little more intelligence and a little more sincerity. Listen to Alexis Carrel, the distinguished physician and philosopher: "As a physician, I have seen men, after all other therapy had failed, lifted out of disease and melancholy by the serene effort of prayer. It is the only power in the world that seems to overcome the so-called 'laws of nature'; the occasions on which prayer has done this have been termed 'miracles.'"

On the other hand, many spiritually minded people need help as they seek to gather from these words of the Apostle James all the fine values that there are. What are some of these values?

1) It is always proper to pray about our physical ills and weaknesses: "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray." The simplicity of our faith and the implications of our relationship to God as children to their father, should lead us to turn, with complete naturalness, to our Heavenly Guardian when illness settles upon us.

2) If special intercession is desired in behalf of the sick one, it is his responsibility to make his condition known to the spiritual leaders of the church: "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him." They are not instructed to call for the sick, but the sick are encouraged to call for them.

3) Whether the anointing "with oil" is medicinal, as some believe, or symbolic of the Holy Spirit, as others hold, it is **that** he will be raised up by a special ministry of the healing Spirit of God. In my view, that "prayer of faith" is a particular gift from God which anyone may experience on occasions and which some have had more or less continuously.

Not all are healed this way. Frankly, not many are healed this way. Why? Partly because we do not follow James' in-

structions! But only partly! The other reason, I am convinced, is that God has other ways of healing people. He does heal through surgeons, physicians, and nurses; He does heal through mental suggestion; He does heal through climate; He does heal through spiritual adjustment and purification; He does heal through the natural recuperative powers which He has given to the human body. And in all of these processes and ministries prayer is a vital factor: it is a bridge to health. A friend of mine, whose career was almost ended at the very beginning of it, testifies: "I do not believe in healing by the direct touch of the Spirit of God--I know it. For I was suddenly touched in a dark moment, and from that time I've known health and life."

Consider, finally, how prayer is a bridge over our spiritual problems. Think of the spiritual troubles where the root lies in our own hearts: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (James 5:16). Here the healing, presumably, is of the heart rather than of the body. Observe sharply that it results not from placing blame on someone else, but taking blame upon oneself. "Confess your faults!" You say you can't? Then pray until you can--and do!

"I have a house inside of me,
A house that people never see.
It has a door through which none pass,
And windows, but they're not of glass.

"I meet my heavenly Father there,
For He stoops down to hear my prayer,
To heal my wounds and cure my care,
And make me strong to do and dare.

"Then after I am made quite strong,
And things are right that were all
wrong,
I go outside where I belong,
And sing a new and happy song.

"You have a house inside of you,
Where you can fight your battles
through,
And God will tell you what to do,
And make your heart both strong and
true."

Those lines, which appeared anonymously on a church bulletin sent from China, hit home to every man who wants to use the bridge of prayer leading over to spiritual health.

And then think of the spiritual failures and disasters and needs where the cause lies in the evil or indifferent hearts of other people. They are people who need Jesus Christ, but they have not as yet begun to seek Him. They are people you want to reach with the transforming message of the Gospel, but they seem always to elude your touch. Never forget that prayer is a bridge to their hearts. Keep building, come what may. Keep driving the wedge of prayer into the wayward soul. And as you do, take this as your divine encouragement: "Let him know (the praying Christian) that he which converteth (by the power of prayer) the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (v. 20).

Dr. P. W. Philpott, beloved servant of God, was converted at eighteen. Immediately he set about to lead his little Scotch mother to Christ. He succeeded in short order. Then he tackled a schoolmate of his. No success at all! There began a ministry of intercessory prayer for that friend that was due to last for more than half a century. After fifty six years had gone by, Dr. Philpott was preaching in a tabernacle in Detroit. One day he learned that his boyhood friend had attended one of his services, but that he was now a confirmed member of a certain cult and not at all approachable about his relation to Christ. Philpott prayed on. A year and a half later he received a letter from his friend. It read in part: "Philpott, I have never forgotten those days back in Dresden (Ontario) when you tried to lead me to Christ. Since I saw you in Detroit I have entirely given up spiritism. More than that, I have received Christ as my Savior."

A few days later Dr. Philpott received a letter from the man's wife telling him that her husband dropped dead in the barn on his farm near Port Huron. Whatever other influences were at work on that man's life across the long years, certainly prayer was one of them--building a bridge to his lonely, hungry heart over which, at last, Jesus Christ could move in and save him.

The bridge of prayer! Are you keeping yours in good condition!