

## THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER IN PREACHING

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*Prayer is not an elective but the principal element in the kaleidoscope of spiritual characteristics that mark a preacher. These traits unite into a powerful spiritual force. They build a spokesman for God. Jesus, the finest model, and other effective spokesmen for God have been mighty in prayer coupled with the virtues of godliness and dependence on God. The composite that centers in prayer is conspicuous in God's long line of proclaimers in the OT, NT, and church history even to the present day. Some books on essentials for preaching slight prayer, but others acknowledge its invaluable role. Preachers who follow the biblical model take prayer very seriously. In sermon preparation, they steep themselves in prayer.*

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The preacher who follows the biblical way finds prayer to be a superb weapon. Prayer, blending in composite harmony with other spiritual priorities, is evident in biblical preaching throughout history as an essential quality for the proclaimer through whom God displays His power.

## THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER FOR SPIRITUALITY

If the preacher is to deliver God's message with power, prayer must permeate his life and furnish a life-long environment for the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23). His spiritual example causes others to take his message seriously. As a follower of God, his spiritual credibility forcefully attracts others to follow himself, because as a trail-blazer, he practices single-minded devotion to God. He humbly renders all glory to God and submits to His Word. He demonstrates honesty and discipline of the tongue, time, mind, and body, along with fervent resourcefulness. As he calls others to obedience, God uses his trail-blazing leadership to mark the way. All desirable spiritual qualities, particularly godliness and dependence on God, are basic ingredients

in the experience of a praying preacher.

### *Godliness*

A noble man of God, a man of prayer, is passionate in pursuing God and His values (Ps 42:1, 2). He runs hard after God in a life shaped by the godliness he recommends for others. He is deeply serious about God's principle of following righteousness and wants God to show him His salvation (Ps 50:23). God's light shines ever more brightly in him, compelling his hearers to seek the beauties of God.

*The preacher's greatest example is Jesus.* From boyhood, the heart of the Savior was fixed on "the things of My Father" (Luke 2:49). His passion as He entered public ministry was "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). Taking His resolute stand for God against the devil, He experienced severe testing and made godly value choices based on the Word of God (Matt 4:1-11). Near the end of His life, He celebrated it as having been godly: "I have glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou has given Me to do" (John 17:4).

*A further example is Paul.* He had been crucified with Christ (Gal 2:20). In light of this, he lived in godliness that consistently reflected his death with Christ. His empowering secret was, "not I but Christ lives in me." Paul was an example of Christ in godly values and service (1 Cor 11:1). He did not take the easy way, but faced the hardships entailed in a godly pursuit (1 Cor 4:8 ff.; 2 Cor 6:3-10).

*A modern example.* Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) had power in heralding God's Word at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia, and Trinity Church, Boston. Piety was of utmost importance in his sermon preparation.

Nothing but fire kindles fire. To know in one's whole nature what it is to live by Christ; to be His, not our own; to be so occupied with gratitude for what He did for us and for what He continually is to us that His will and His glory shall be

the sole desires of our life . . . that is the first necessity of the preacher. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Godliness does not stand alone. It includes dependence, its inseparable companion.

*Dependence on The Power of God*

Jesus covered His territory like a flame, preaching God's Word in the Spirit's power (Luke 4:14). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me," He said, "because He anointed Me to preach the Gospel . . ." (Luke 4:18). Through the Spirit's enablement He proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. "The Father abiding in Me does His works," He acknowledged (John 14:10). If Jesus the man depended on divine power, how much more do other preachers need to do the same.

Paul relied on the Spirit (Rom 15:19). He thus counselled other believers (Gal 5:16-18). To the Corinthians he spoke "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:1-5). God was his sufficiency (2 Cor 3:5, 6; 4:7). In preaching, he took to heart the principle of Christ, "Without Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5).<sup>2</sup>

Prayer with its composite of spiritual virtues is indispensable in biblical preaching. It saturates the preacher and godly preaching, fulfills the preacher's dependence on God, and is authentically biblical.

## THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER IN SERMONS OF THE BIBLE

In ministries during Bible times, prayer perpetually played a major role. Since biblical days, prayer remains as a top priority for preachers.

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<sup>1</sup>Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989) 47.

<sup>2</sup>"Nothing" defined by its context is the opposite of "fruit." The person abiding in Christ bears *some* fruit (John 15:2b) and can bear *more* fruit (John 15:2b) and *much* fruit (John 15:5, 8).

*Books That Slight Prayer's Importance*

It is puzzling that books on essentials of sermon preparation frequently do *not* discuss prayer. This is the more perplexing when these authors claim to teach the *biblical* pattern. Prayer is not prominent among their essentials. They discuss what they consider important, as though prayer has no vital part.<sup>3</sup> Neglect of prayer casts it in a minor role. A sense of fairness would give these writers the benefit of the doubt and questions whether they intended such an impression. Yet when little or nothing is said about prayer and much is made of human craft and polish, only one conclusion is possible.<sup>4</sup> Some books require a long search to find any idea, even brief, of private prayer's importance. The reader does not see it in chapter titles, sub-headings, or topical indices.<sup>5</sup> It may appear at the end or in

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<sup>3</sup>E.g. Don M. Wardlaw, *Preaching Biblically* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); John E. Baird, *Preparing for Platform and Pulpit* (New York: Abingdon, 1968). Wardlaw focuses on good things such as learning biblical structure, style, content, and imagery as crafted and managed by the preacher. Prayer and dependence on the Spirit are not integrated in any way to show the whole picture. Baird correctly refutes the logic that the Spirit prepares a man, so the man needs no study (8). Yet he offers no balance when emphasizing a one-sided picture, preparation by human skills alone.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. R. E. O. White, *A Guide to Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). He covers preaching as worship, values of biblical preaching, hermeneutics, technique, gathering and shaping materials, aids to style, zeal, etc. Prayer is given little place. "Of the preacher's private preparation for the pulpit little need be said. [Why?] Most men find they must have opportunity before every service for quiet prayer, recollection, and mental rehearsal . . ." (152). White surely must not have intended it, but the weight of details suggests dependence on what the *preacher* can do. More attention to what only *God* can do (cf. Acts 6:4) would give a better perspective.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. Dwight Stevenson and Charles Diehl, *Reaching People From the Pulpit. A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958). The book says it covers all topics essential to effective oral communication (81). Prayer is not in the table of contents, sub-headings, or index. There may be a vague reference in the statement that the preacher can help others because he has found a power not of himself to give him sobriety (81). An opportunity to include prayer comes in "Preparing the Man" (100-2), but the focus on full sleep, good health, full vigor, freedom from distractions, and bringing "all his powers to bear" (99) crowd prayer

a short discussion as an afterthought. Happily, some authors who at times write little about prayer grant it a crucial place in other books.<sup>6</sup> How can a writer ever give prayer so little attention if Scripture makes it of such urgent consequence in preparation to preach?

*Books That Emphasize Prayer's Importance*

Other books on preaching, or biographies of preachers, assign much space to prayer. They refer to it often,<sup>7</sup> or put it first,<sup>8</sup> or state strong convictions about its cruciality in preparing messages.<sup>9</sup> Some entire books are devoted to prayer's significance in preaching.<sup>10</sup>

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out. Among these excellent suggestions, one wonders why prayer was not added to balance the preacher's power with the power of God.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. two books by Andrew W. Blackwood. In *Preaching From the Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1941), he gives no arresting focus to the Holy Spirit, power, holiness, or prayer. A terse comment at the end of the Foreword says the Holy Spirit should be our teacher (9). The statement that the preaching in the apostolic church was in a spirit of prayer (18) is rather buried in other emphases. Prayer gets brief mention in the last paragraph of Chapter 11 (196), and brief words about prayer are elsewhere (207-8, 218, 222). More is made of prayer in *The Preparation of Sermons* (New York: Abingdon, 1948), e. g. 36, 208, and in the statement "the Scriptures and prayer go together as inseparably as the light and heat of the sun . . ." (45).

<sup>7</sup>E.g. Asa Cummings, *A Memoir of the Rev. Edward Payson* (New York: American Tract Society, 1830); Andrew Bonar, ed., *Memoirs of McCheyne* (Chicago: Moody, 1947).

<sup>8</sup>E.g. R. A. Bodey, ed., *Inside the Sermon. Thirteen Preachers Discuss Their Methods of Preparing Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 28-35. Bodey says "faithful, earnest prayer and long hours of diligent, believing study of the Word of God" are more necessary than anything else (28).

<sup>9</sup>Roger Martin, *R. A. Torrey, Apostle of Certainty* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1976). J. I. Packer rightly applauds Richard Baxter's words: "Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching: he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them. If we prevail not with God to give them faith and repentance we shall never prevail with them to believe and repent" (Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* [London: Banner of Truth, 1974] 120-23, cited by J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Holiness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1990] 289).

<sup>10</sup>Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986 rpt.

The truth is, many things are important in preaching. No conscientious herald of God will consciously choose to neglect any of them. He will labor hard on the exegesis of his text, use reliable sources, stimulate his mind from a breadth of reading, take pains to be accurate, and get a clear outline. He will search for vivid analogy, memorize Scripture, nourish an evangelistic and edifying aim, and be always looking to God. He may write out his message entirely or preach it from notes. He will integrate details and form clear transitions. He will know the people to whom he speaks. He will pay attention to earnestness, enthusiasm, artistic touches, forcefulness, grace, and tasteful humor. He will be concerned about enunciation, gestures, courage, posture, timing, eye-contact, and other matters, and will guard against hurtful remarks.

The emphasis on prayer need not undercut any of these aspects, but *these others should not remove the spotlight from the necessity of prayer.*

Unfortunately preachers get unbalanced in several ways:

(1) They emphasize prayer alone and lazily shirk the responsibility to be God's workmen through faithful study.

(2) They put all their emphasis on human aspects of sermon preparation and have no pervasive dependence on God in prayer. God can, in spite of this, bless, but the preacher serves up only a product of human craft. Its fine technique is impressive, but it lacks vital forcefulness.

(3) They emphasize homiletical ingenuity, but offer only a shallow exposure to God's Word through neglect of diligent labor in study and prayer. They have little to feed the hungry and reflect little dependence on God.

But there is good news! Preachers can be balanced. They emphasize a prayerful choice of a text, prayerful diligence studying the passage and books that clarify the meaning. They search diligently for relevant illustrations, labor earnestly to organize their material

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of 1948 ed.), especially "Ministers Must Be Men of Prayer" 137-44; W. E. Sangster, *Power in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976 rpt. of 1958 ed.). Chapter 7 is "Steep it in Prayer" 96-107.

well, and build good transitions. They pray the whole time. Then they deliver their messages, fortified by a godly life and a spirit relying on God. This is the preferred way. Prayer is a major force, but the other essentials are not taken lightly.

*Proclamation in OT Times*

What role has prayer played during Bible times and since? An examination of prayerful preaching by men with a great impact for God is very informative.

*Moses.* The law-giver Moses had a ministry similar to today's preacher. He spoke God's Word and made it relevant to needs of his day. Prayer figured heavily in his ministry.<sup>11</sup>

One example is Moses' pleading with God to spare Israel after their idolatrous worship of a golden calf. He interceded with God to retain His purpose in *redemption* of Israel from Egypt. Second, he was zealous that God preserve His *reputation* from all taint of dishonor before the ungodly. He also implored God to furnish a *remembrance* of His own covenant pledge (Exod 32:11-13). He begged God to forgive His people (Exod 32:32).

*Samuel.* To encourage his people, Samuel, a priest and a prophet, used God's loyalty to His covenant aim for Israel's good (1 Sam 12:22). He saw the Lord's steadfastness as consistent with His reputation. For God to renege on His promise would make Him unfaithful to His Word and character, sacrificing His very honor. Samuel knew God's covenant purpose to possess Israel and submitted his will to God's purpose. Walking in step with God, he told his hearers, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by

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<sup>11</sup>Prayer is frequent in Moses' life. Some instances are Exod 3:1-4:17, 5:22-23; 6:12, 30; 8:12, 30; 9:33; 15:1-18, 25; 17:8-13; 19:23; 32:7-14, 30-34; 33:18; Num 11:2, 11-15, 21-22; 12:13; 14:13-19; 16:15, 22; 27:15-17; Deut 3:23-28; 9:7-29; 32:1-43.

ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam 12:23).

The link between *preaching* God's Word to them and *praying* for them is evident. Prayer harmonizes with God's will. The preacher Samuel, rather than sinning by failing to pray, took the God-honoring way: "I will instruct you in the good and right way" (1 Sam 12:23). He set an example for every preacher in his *perception* of the will that God's Word articulated, *prayer* for the people to relate to that will, and *proclamation* of that will. All three elements, including prayer, were crucial.

*Daniel.* Daniel was the human channel God used to record His prophetic plan for centuries to come. Daniel's preparation for this task revolved about prayer. He made it paramount in receiving God's *information* about Nebuchadnezzar's dream. He also sought the *interpretation* by prayer (Daniel 2). Later, he meditated on Jeremiah 25 and 29 about the seventy years God had set for Israel to be in Babylonian exile (Daniel 9) and made three requests for his people: the restoration of Jerusalem (Dan 9:16), the rebuilding of the temple (Dan 9:17), and the return of the people (Dan 9:18, 19). God's answer was His plan to grant all three in His time (Dan 9:24-27). In Daniel 10, Daniel humbled himself for three weeks of fasting and prayer (Dan 10:2-3). He prayed (Dan 10:12) and received God's Word about developments in Persia, Greece, and later powers (Daniel 10` 12).

*Proclamation In NT Times*

*Jesus.* The Savior used prayer to prepare Himself for ministry.<sup>12</sup> Luke refers more often to His prayer than the other gospel writers. This fits Luke's emphasis on Jesus' humanity. Jesus is king (Matthew), servant (Mark), and God (John), but is also man and prays as a man.

Prayer was of overwhelming importance in the preaching of Jesus. The Son of man commenced and consummated His ministry on earth in prayer (Luke 3:21, 22; 24:49-51). He saw prayer as vital when people were thronging to hear Him preach. Differing from some of today's preachers, Jesus took the awesome demand on His time as a call to keep prayer as a priority. He ". . . would slip away to the wilderness to pray" (Luke 5:16). The desert solitude with God was an essential before serving a multitude that gathered to hear. For preachers sensitive to His heart-beat, bent knees are as crucial to the kingdom as opened lexicons. His vigil before God reflected His value system. Jesus depended on God even though He was Himself God in the flesh!

Back from such a rendezvous in prayer (Luke 5:16), Jesus was ready to preach and confound antagonistic religious experts (Luke 5:17). One wonders what the lips of the preacher had prayed. Was it for wisdom to meet trials or for the crowds to have their blinders removed to see their desperate spiritual need (Luke 5:15, 26)? One thing is certain. Whatever He prayed, the Jesus who preached was the Jesus who prayed.

Before appointing the twelve disciples, Jesus "went off to the mountain to pray" (Luke 6:12). Exhibiting His dependence on and submission to God by an all-night session in prayer, Jesus later preached the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49). Still later, one of the twelve requested, "Lord, teach us to pray . . ." (Luke 11:1). In

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<sup>12</sup>Cf. Charles E. Hoekstra, "An Examination of the Prayer Life of Jesus to Ascertain the Relation of Prayer to the Pastor's Work" (DMin dissertation, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, 1987). Besides surveying instances in Jesus' ministry, Hoekstra relates prayer to pastoral work and suggests applications.

response, the praying preacher taught "The Disciples' Prayer" (Luke 11:2-4) and other matters related to prayer (Luke 11:5-13).

Prayer preceded Jesus' announcements about the church and the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:18-19; Luke 9:18) and about His death, resurrection, a man losing his soul, men being ashamed of Him, and His future coming (Luke 9:18, 29-35). It also prefaced His transfiguration (Luke 9:18, 29-35).

Jesus urged His disciples to pray. He dealt with men He was molding into preachers. "Beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (Matt 9:38). Observing that priority could keep the preachers praying all their lives.

*Early Christians.* An urgency to pray gripped early Christians. In Acts they prayed in many circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Luke continued his emphasis on prayer in this, his second volume. The prayers of these early saints are a great stimulant to others who want to please God.

They prayed, awaiting the Spirit's coming with power at Pentecost (Acts 1:14; cf. 1:5-7; 2:33), an important preparation for Peter's potent message of Acts 2. Their prayers also sought God's choice in replacing Judas among the twelve (Acts 1:15-26).

Prayer was one of four Christian essentials (Acts 2:42). If it was that important then, how crucial must it be for preachers today. Believers prayed on a regular schedule (Acts 3:1; 10:9) as well as at any moment of urgency. Peter and John furnish an example. They were God's channels for His miraculous healing of the lame man (Acts 3:7-10). Later, they with others prayed for boldness in witnessing (Acts 4:29-31), a prayer that God answered in enabling them to face enemies. They were empowered, unified, and selfless. Later, the apostles gave the importance of prayer in preaching: "We will devote ourselves to

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Hermann Wang, "The Prayers of Acts" (unpublished ThM thesis, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA, 1988), a treatment of most prayers in Acts; Warren Wiersbe, *Something Happens When Churches Pray* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984). Wiersbe sees God's Word as the source of wisdom in prayer, successful efforts stemming from prayer, the Spirit's power through prayer, etc.

prayer, and to the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4). The order is interesting.<sup>14</sup> Even if the mention of prayer first is not significant, it is certain that prayer is just as primary for preachers as the Word.

*Paul.* Paul prayed that God would help new converts grow (Acts 14:23). Apparently he viewed prayer as inseparable from preaching as did his predecessors (cf. Acts 6:4). Behind the prayer of Acts 14:23 and the appointment of elders lies the reminder of God's concern for new believers. Their spiritual growth depended on the appointment of elders who could exhort them and feed them from the Word of God (cf. Acts 14:22). Prayer was needed to undergird this process.

Paul and his associates prayed when they preached God's Word in Europe (Acts 16:13). They penetrated the heavenly curtain before they penetrated the human curtain (Acts 16:14). God used prayer to prosper their ministry, which was also *His* ministry.

Paul's dependence on prayer in preaching is synonymous with his dependence on God rather than human ability (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-5). This did not rule out his skillful use of effective techniques of communication, however. Just as Jesus adopted good methods, such as parables, so did Paul.<sup>15</sup> Paul, however, depended ultimately on the cross-centered content of God's Word and the power of God's Spirit for effectiveness in preaching, a dependence exhibited in prayer.

Paul's dependence on God also surfaces in appeals for others to pray for him. An example is Eph 6:18-20. As a part of his call for Christians to don God's armor, he details that armor and bids them pray "all-out" for him (note the fourfold use of "all").

(1) All situations. Pray "through (di [*dia*]) all prayer and petition." Engage in every form of prayer. The word *proseuxw*

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<sup>14</sup>Sinclair Ferguson wonders about the significance of the mention of prayer before preaching in Acts 6:4, without drawing a conclusion (Bodey, *Inside* 82).

<sup>15</sup>Jesus and Paul used introductory devices, good organization, vivid examples, appeals for a verdict, etc.

(*proseuchs*) can mean prayer in general, in all its expressions,<sup>16</sup> such as praise/thanks, confession, petition, and intercession. "Petition" (*desew* [*deses*]) specifies each request.<sup>17</sup>

(2) All seasons. "At every time" takes in all the opportunities when believers pray. Pray "in the Spirit" for the success of the preacher and the preached Word. Ask in submission to the Spirit's will and wisdom, with reliance on His power and motives keyed to His values.

(3) All steadfastness. Paul wants them "alert with all perseverance and petition." "Keep alert" (*gryponv* [*agrupne*]) refers to staying awake to carry out a task. Alert prayer is with "all perseverance" (*proskarthsiw* [*proskartersis*]). The related verb means "to hold fast to."<sup>18</sup> The same word is used for the early Christians who *clung* to the Word (Acts 2:42). Paul wants alert, tenacious people praying for him, in every specific request (*dhsiw* [*desis*]).

(4) All subjects. Paul wants prayer warriors to intercede for "all the saints," including himself: "pray on my behalf" (v. 19). Pray for what? Paul mentions "boldness" twice. He wants to wield the sword of the Spirit, preaching "as I ought to speak." Speaking with boldness suits the fact that if filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), Paul would speak "in the strength of His might" (Eph 6:10). Boldness is necessary if the preacher is to triumph over fear and the forces pitted against his success (Eph 6:12). It also matches a message that provides every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3) and an inheritance with God (Eph 1:11, 14). The preacher should not voice such truths in a vague, weak, or confusing way.

The prayer that drenched Paul's sermons is also suggested in Phil 4:6. "In everything" includes more than sermons as objects of prayer, but it certainly includes every aspect of sermon preparation

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<sup>16</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953 [rpt.]) 160.

<sup>17</sup>Lightfoot, *Philippians* 160.

<sup>18</sup>W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979) 715.

too. "By prayer" uses the word *proseyx* (*proseuch*), a general word for prayer, again.<sup>19</sup> Paul continues, "with supplication" (*dhsiw* [*desis*]), a "special petition [request] for the supply of wants. . . ."<sup>20</sup> Paul exhorts, "Let your requests be made known." These requests (*atmata* [*aitmata*]), as Lightfoot supposes, are "the several objects of *dhsiw*."<sup>21</sup>

Such praying is "with thanksgiving." Why? The praying person wants to show gratitude for past answers that sweetened life. Thanks is also apropos for God's present bounty in granting His audience and action. Thanksgiving is due the Spirit for His help (Rom 8:26, 27; Eph 6:18-20; Phil 1:19). These illustrate the many reasons for gratitude.

Prayer continues through the centuries of church history since the NT era.

#### THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER FOR POWER IN PREACHING TODAY

The clarion call for prayer as preparation for preaching resounds in preachers of relatively modern times up to the present. Preachers pray and solicit others to pray for their messages. God's power in preaching results.

##### *Power Through Preachers' Prayers*

R. Kent Hughes, current senior pastor of the College Church of Wheaton, assessed scores of books on preaching, and was frequently disappointed that authors said little or nothing about prayer. This led him to comment,

This, and what experience God so far has given me in preaching and prayer, has brought a conviction. Should I ever write a book on essentials for

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<sup>19</sup>Lightfoot, *Philippians* 160.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

preaching, I know now that I would devote at least a *third* of it to spiritual preparation in matters such as prayer. This would be the *first* third.<sup>22</sup>

E. M. Bounds (1835-1913) served as a Civil War chaplain for the confederacy. He later pastored several churches and became a man driven by prayer. His morning habit was to pray from four to seven. His listeners commented on his powerful public prayers and his messages. At least eight of his manuscripts on prayer have been published,<sup>23</sup> and a biography is soon to appear.<sup>24</sup> Bounds' books have aroused many to greater fervor in prayer. He wrote,

The young preacher has been taught to lay out all his strength on the form, taste, and beauty of his sermon as a mechanical and intellectual product. We have thereby cultivated a vicious taste among the people and raised the clamor for talent instead of grace, eloquence instead of piety, rhetoric instead of revelation, reputation and brilliancy instead of holiness.<sup>25</sup>

Much in this is true, but it is not an "either/or" situation. The combination of homiletical skill *and* much prayer is the answer. Bounds also wrote, "Light praying will make light preaching. Prayer makes preaching strong [the God who answers prayer does this] . . . and makes it stick."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>R. Kent Hughes, personal conversation, Dec. 21, 1990; cf. Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministers from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987). The chapter "Success is Prayer," 71-81, esp. 77, emphasizes the primacy of prayer; cf. also R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians, The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), where he discusses Eph 6:18-20.

<sup>23</sup>All published in recent editions by Baker Book House. Cf. E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.). A biographical sketch on Bounds is given on pp. 5-7 and the back cover.

<sup>24</sup>Authored by Lyle W. Dorsett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, July, 1991 [tentative]), according to personal letter from Dorsett, Jan 18, 1991. The second part of Dorsett's book has selections from Bounds' writings, especially some long-lost essays in Christian papers. He has data, including pictures, from Bounds' descendants.

<sup>25</sup>E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) 74.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

David Larsen, Professor of Homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has emphasized prayer:

Strange it is that any discussion of preaching should take place outside the context of believing prayer. We have not prepared until we have prayed. . . .

We cannot represent God if we have not stood before God. It is more important for me therefore to teach a student to pray than to preach. . . .<sup>27</sup>

After a powerful message by Alexander Whyte (1836-1921), pastor of Free Saint George's West in Edinburgh, Scotland, a listener exulted, "Dr. Whyte, you preached today like you had just emerged from the throne chamber of the Almighty." The preacher replied, "In point of fact, I have."<sup>28</sup>

At an ordination of a man preparing to preach, Whyte advised, "Be up earlier than usual to meditate and pray over it. Steep every sentence of it in the Spirit. . . . And pray after it."<sup>29</sup>

A biographer says that as much as Whyte valued public worship and prepared diligently for it, secret prayer was more important to him. The "master notes of his preaching"<sup>30</sup> were discipline, prayer, inner motive, humility before God and men, and purity attained through suffering. The same writer notes that Whyte's secret prayer led to public prayer that had a powerful impact on people. One of Whyte's students spoke of the days when "every sermon in Free St. George's was a volcano, and every opening prayer a revelation."<sup>31</sup> Whyte "never grew weary of emphasizing the need of prayer and of discipline in the Christian life`the need of humility and

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<sup>27</sup>David Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching. Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 53-54. Chapter 4 is helpful on spiritual preparation, stressing identity in Christ, the Word, prayer, the Spirit's power, and personal holiness.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>29</sup>G. F. Barbour, *The Life of Alexander Whyte* (New York: George H. Doran, 1923) 296-97.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 307.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 309.

of `ever-new beginnings."<sup>32</sup>

A "morning watch" was almost as regular as the sun rising for H. A. Ironside (1876-1951). This expositor meditated in his Bible and prayed for an hour,<sup>33</sup> and afterward gave himself to more intensive study and further prayer. Rivers of living water overflowed from his times with God to crowds who heard him. He insisted, "If we would prevail with men in public, we must prevail with God in secret."<sup>34</sup>

Those at Trinity Chapel in Brighton, England, heard searching messages by Frederick W. Robertson (1816-1853). Some have called him the greatest of the English preachers. In early years, he concentrated on reading about David Brainerd and Henry Martyn.<sup>35</sup> He bathed his life in communion with God, longing to be conformed to the image of Christ and adjusting his values to His ideals.<sup>36</sup> He prayed without ceasing, different concerns drawing his attention each day: Sun., parish and outpouring of the Spirit; Mon., special devotion; Tues., spread of the gospel; Wed., kingdom of Christ; Thurs., self-denial; Fri., special examination and confession; Sat., intercession.<sup>37</sup>

Charles Finney (1792-1875), evangelistic in focus, lived like Jesus, slipping away to engage in special vigils of prayer and fasting. Speaking after much prayer, he saw God bring great blessing on his ministry.<sup>38</sup> He was convinced about the importance of prayer:

Without this you are as weak as weakness itself. If you lose your spirit of prayer, you will do nothing, or next to nothing, though you had the intellectual endowment of an angel. . . . The blessed Lord deliver, and preserve His dead

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 388-89.

<sup>33</sup>E. S. English, *H. A. Ironside, Ordained of the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1946) 176.

<sup>34</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Praying in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, n.d.) 59.

<sup>35</sup>Stopford A. Brooke, *Life and Letters of Fredk. W. Robertson, M. A.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865) 60.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>38</sup>L. G. Parkhurst, *Charles G. Finney's Answers to Prayer* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1983). See, for example, Chapter 25.

church from the guidance and influence of men who know not what it is to pray.<sup>39</sup>

Finney said, "I would say that unless I had the spirit of prayer I could do nothing."<sup>40</sup> If even for a moment he lost the sense of the spirit of grace and prayer, he could not preach with power and was impotent in personal witness.

A famous Methodist preacher of England, William Sangster (1900-1960), felt closeness to God to be of utmost importance in preparing a message, because after prayerful study,

the preacher seems to fade out and leave the hearers face to face with God. . . . If we are driven to make comparisons, we must insist that grace-gifts are more important than natural gifts. It is true that the Holy Spirit can work on very little, and if *effectiveness* is borne in mind rather than popularity, the unction of the Spirit is the greatest gift of all.<sup>41</sup>

For more than forty-six years George W. Truett (1867-1944) pastored the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas. After time with his family each evening, he went to his library to study and pray from 7 p.m. until midnight.<sup>42</sup> He also prepared at other hours. Once he was aboard a ship tossed by heavy winds and waves. The distress prompted a request for Truett to preach. He went alone with God, seeking a fitting message. After prayer, he found the message in Hebrews, "Ye have need of patience." When he announced his subject, the storm-weary people smiled their approval.<sup>43</sup>

Truett had a passion that people be saved. He said that the

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 126-27.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 59; cf. John 15:5, inability without Christ to do anything that will bear fruit. Bearing fruit (doing what counts as success before God) is related closely to prayer (John 15:7, 8).

<sup>41</sup>William Sangster, *The Approach to Preaching* (London: Epworth, 1951) 18; cf. also n. 10 in this article.

<sup>42</sup>Joe W. Burton, *Prince of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1946) 26.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 27.

person who will win others to Christ must pray much for himself and for them.<sup>44</sup> Requests came from all over the world for Truett to pray. On a Dallas street, he met a noted elderly criminal lawyer. "Dr. Truett," the man said, "I was at your church Sunday, and heard what you said about prayer. I don't suppose you ever pray for a sinner like me." Truett responded, "I have prayed for you, by name, daily, for years," and produced a notebook with the lawyer's name in it to prove it. The lawyer's lips trembled and his eyes grew moist. "Thank you, Doctor, thank you for remembering a hardened old sinner."<sup>45</sup>

Thomas Armitage paints this picture of prayer:

A sermon steeped in prayer on the study floor, like Gideon's fleece saturated with dew, will not lose its moisture between that and the pulpit. The first step towards doing anything in the pulpit as a thorough workman must be to kiss the feet of the Crucified, as a worshipper, in the study.<sup>46</sup>

Whitesell, a teacher of preaching, bears down on prayer:

The preacher must be a man of prayer. . . . He should pray for his messages . . . soak them in prayer, . . . pray as he goes into the pulpit, pray as he preaches insofar as that is possible, and follow up his sermons with prayer. . . .<sup>47</sup>

Also in support of this point is Sinclair Ferguson, Scottish pastor who since 1982 has been Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary:

For me, it is of primary importance that all my preparation be done in the context of a praying spirit . . . looking to the Lord and depending on the grace of His illuminating and enlivening Spirit. This is punctuated by specific

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>45</sup>P. W. James, *George W. Truett. A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1945) 267-68.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas Armitage, *Preaching: Its Ideals and Inner Life* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1880) 170.

<sup>47</sup>Faris D. Whitesell, *The Art of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950) 86; cf. the essentials of preaching in Chapter 3.

ejaculations and periods of petition for both exposition and application. . . .

To use a picture from John Owen, I think of the Spirit moving among the people, giving to each a parcel of identical shape, size, and wrapping (the sermon); but . . . the gift inside is specially appropriate to each. My prayer, therefore, is that my material may be in harmony with His purpose and my spirit sensitive to His gracious character, so that I may not distort Him in my words or by my spirit.<sup>48</sup>

An expositor at many Plymouth Brethren conferences, Henry Holloman, Professor of Systematic Theology at Talbot School of Theology, has said,

Behind every good biblical preacher is much hard labor in preparation (1 Tim 5:17; 2 Tim 2:15). However, only prayer can assure that his work is not wasted and that his message will spiritually impact the hearers. As the biblical preacher interweaves prayer with his preparation, he should focus on certain petitions: (1) that he will receive God's message . . . in spiritual as well as mental *comprehension*, 1 Cor 2:9-16; (2) that God's message will first grip his own heart in strong *conviction*, 1 Thess 1:5; (3) that he will clearly and correctly convey God's message in the power of the Spirit in effective *communication*, . . . 1 Thess 1:5; (4) that the Spirit will use the message to produce proper response and change, . . . spiritual *transformation*, 2 Cor 3:18 . . . and (5) that the whole process and finished product will accomplish God's purpose in *glorification* of God through Christ, 1 Cor 10:31; 1 Pet 4:11.<sup>49</sup>

Holloman clarifies that "knowledge and organization is what we must do, but prayer gives us what only God can do."

John MacArthur, pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, sees prayer as inseparable from preparing and preaching.

During the week . . . locked up with my books, . . . study and . . . communion mingle as I apply the tools of exegesis and exposition in . . . open communion

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<sup>48</sup>Sinclair B. Ferguson, cited by Bodey, *Inside* 82-83.

<sup>49</sup>Personal letter, Jan 14, 1991.

with the Lord. I seek His direction, thank Him for what I discover, plead for wisdom and insight, and desire that He enable me to live what I learn and preach.

A special burden for prayer begins to grip my heart on Saturday evening. Before I go to sleep, I . . . spend one final time going over my notes. That involves an open line of communication with God as I meditatively and consciously offer my notes up to the Lord for approval, refinement and clarity.

I awake Sunday morning in the same spirit of prayer. Arriving at the church early, I spend time . . . in prayer, then join elders who pray with me for the messages. On Sunday afternoon, I go through a similar time of reviewing my evening message prayerfully. . . .<sup>50</sup>

John Stott says a preacher, like a father (1 Thess 2:11), should pray for his church family. Preachers will only make time for this hard and secret work if they love people enough. "Because it is secret and therefore unrewarded by men, we shall only undertake it if we long for their spiritual welfare more than for their thanks. . . ." <sup>51</sup>

Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1842) pastored St. Peter's Church in Dundee, Scotland. References to prayers sprinkle his journal almost as thickly as heather blooms on a Scottish meadow. He wrote to Dan Edwards on October 2, 1840, after Dan had been ordained for missionary service to the Jews and for study in Germany:

I know you will apply hard to German; but do not forget the culture of the inner man. . . . How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; . . . Remember you are God's sword, His instrument. . . . In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses [He does bless, using gifts He gave as they are given back to Him] so much as <sup>52</sup>great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.

Andrew Blackwood, long-time Professor of Homiletics at

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<sup>50</sup>Personal letter, "Expository Preaching," Jan 16, 1991.

<sup>51</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 98-99.

<sup>52</sup>Bonar, *Memoirs* 95.

Princeton Theological Seminary, counsels the preacher to lay down one rule and never make an exception: start, continue, and end with prayer.<sup>53</sup> A biblical sermon, he says, will likely be worth whatever the preacher invests in it, the time he devotes, the thought he gives, and the prayer. For

in his study the prophet can build his altar and on it lay the wood. There he can lovingly place his sacrifice . . . sermon . . . but still he knows that the fire must come down from God. Come it will, if he prays before he works, and if he works in the spirit of prayer.<sup>54</sup>

Edward Payson (1783-1827) exemplified sermon preparation by diligent study infused with hours of prayer. He pastored the Second Congregational Church, Portland, Maine. His reading rapidity, sharpness in assimilating details, and good scholarship were notable.<sup>55</sup> He studied the writings of Jonathan Edwards and others,<sup>56</sup> but his greatest zeal was in studying the Bible and praying for God's help interpreting and applying it.<sup>57</sup> Prayer was "the most noticeable fact in his history. . . ." <sup>58</sup> He ". . . studied theology on his knees. Much of his time he spent literally prostrated with the Bible open before him, pleading the promises."<sup>59</sup>

Payson's discipline led him to guard his time. His usual schedule was twelve hours a day for study, two for devotion, two for relaxing, two for meals and family devotions, and six for sleep.<sup>60</sup> In his diary and letters, comments like the following recur: "Was much assisted in my studies . . . enabled to write twelve pages of my sermon.

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<sup>53</sup>Andrew W. Blackwood, *The Preparation of Sermons* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1948), 36.

<sup>54</sup>Blackwood, *Preaching* 196.

<sup>55</sup>Asa Cummings, *Memoir* 13-14.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

It was the more precious, because it seemed to be in answer to prayer."<sup>61</sup> He wrote on March 17, 1806, that since beginning to plead God's blessing on his preparation, "I have done more in one week than in the whole year before. . . ."<sup>62</sup>

Even in cases when Payson felt he had been weak in preaching, his people were refreshed. When lifeless in devotions, he often prayed on to victory.<sup>63</sup> God greatly enlivened this preacher as He quickened the psalmist.<sup>64</sup> Payson prayed hours for the lost and often witnessed to them. He saw many saved and added to the church.

A brother told Payson he felt discouraged about preaching because of inexperience and ignorance. Payson wrote to him admitting that he himself always felt inadequate:

This led me to pray almost incessantly. ... He who has thus guided me, and thousands of others equally foolish will, I trust, guide you. ... If we would do much for God, we must ask much of God; ... I cannot insist on this too much. Prayer is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for a minister, especially in seasons of revival. ... Pray, then, my dear brother, pray, pray, pray. ...<sup>65</sup>

The greatly used preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) put heavy emphasis on prayer. He felt that ministers ought to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). "All our libraries and studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets. We grow, we wax mighty, we prevail in private prayer,"<sup>66</sup> he wrote. He prayed in choosing a topic, getting into the spirit of a text, seeing God's deep truths, lifting those truths out, receiving fresh streams of thought, and for delivery. For

nothing can so gloriously fit you to preach as descending fresh from the mount

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Ps 119:25b, 37, 88.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 255-56.

<sup>66</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter With Spurgeon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 117.

of communion with God to speak with men. None are so able to plead with men as those who have been wrestling with God on their behalf.<sup>67</sup>

Spurgeon studied hard, but he got some of his best thoughts while preaching.<sup>68</sup> Or, feeling fettered, he secretly groaned to God and received unusual liberty. "But how dare we pray in the battle if we have never cried to the Lord while buckling on the harness!"<sup>69</sup>

After preaching, Spurgeon found prayer strategic. "If we cannot prevail with men for God, we will, at least, endeavor to prevail with God for men."<sup>70</sup>

So, the preacher who does his work God's way prays, but he also enlists others to pray for the success of the Word.

#### *Power Through Others' Prayers*

Early in this century, John Hyde prayed for speakers at conferences in India. He and R. M'Cheyne Paterson prayed for a month for a conference in 1904. George Turner joined them for three of those weeks.<sup>71</sup> God saved hundreds of people and renewed believers. Hyde knelt for hours in his room, or was prostrate on the floor, or sat in on a message while interceding for the speaker and the hearers.

Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), founder of the Moody Bible Institute, often saw God work in power when others prayed for his meetings in America and abroad. He often wired R. A. Torrey at the school, urging prayer. Faculty and students prayed all evening or into the early morning or all night.<sup>72</sup>

After Moody's death, Torrey (1856-1928) preached in many countries. He too had prayer backing. In Australia, 2,100 home prayer

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 118.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>E. G. Carr, ed., *Praying Hyde* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge, 1982) 13-14.

<sup>72</sup>R. A. Torrey, *Why God Used D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody, 1923) 16-17.

groups met for two weeks before he arrived. God turned many lives around.<sup>73</sup> After Torrey died, Mrs. Torrey said, "My husband was a man of much prayer and Bible study. He denied himself social intercourse with even his best friends, in order that he might have time for prayer, study, and the preparation for his work."<sup>74</sup>

Torrey said, "Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all pray."<sup>75</sup> He told church members, "Do you want a new minister? I can tell you how to get one. Pray for the one you have till God makes him over."<sup>76</sup> He believed, "Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power."<sup>77</sup> He was for many years pastor of the Chicago Avenue Church, later called Moody Memorial Church. Much of the growth there resulted from prayer by Torrey and his praying people who met on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings.<sup>78</sup>

Payson, already mentioned, rallied people to meet for prayer in "Aaron and Hur Societies" in fours and fives for an hour. They prayed before Payson preached.<sup>79</sup> A preacher needs to lead in prayer and also to get the church

excited to pray for the influences of the divine Spirit; and that they should frequently meet for this purpose. . . . In that duty we explicitly acknowledge, not only to Him, but to our fellow-creatures, that nothing but the influences of His Spirit can render any means effectual, and that we are entirely dependent . . . on His sovereign will.<sup>80</sup>

Payson depended on others' prayers. His speaking schedule

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<sup>73</sup>Martin, *Torrey* 139; for the impact after people prayed, see 110, 131-32, 134, 144, 169-70, 173, 186.

<sup>74</sup>Martin, *Torrey* 279.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>76</sup>R. A. Torrey, *The Prayer of Power* (New York: Revell, 1924) 35.

<sup>77</sup>Torrey, *Prayer* 17.

<sup>78</sup>Martin, *Torrey* 110.

<sup>79</sup>Cummings, *Memoir* 180.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 256.

was often heavy. He prepared four sermons a week and sometimes sermons for the press. Within a two-month period he also had three ordination messages, two messages for missions societies, and one for a women's asylum.<sup>81</sup> No matter how busy, he kept his own prayer vigils. His biographer says that "prayer . . . was eminently the business of his life . . . through which he derived inexhaustible supplies."<sup>82</sup> He adds that "his conversation was in heaven."

Spurgeon said much about others praying. The preacher, no matter how brilliant, godly, or eloquent, has no power without the Spirit's help:

The bell in the steeple may be well hung, fairly fashioned, and of soundest metal, but it is dumb until the ringer makes it speak. And . . . the preacher has no voice of quickening for the dead in sin, or of comfort for living saints unless the divine spirit [Spirit] gives him a gracious pull, and begs him speak with power. Hence the need of prayer for both preacher and hearers.<sup>83</sup>

Spurgeon said he would plead even with tears for others' prayers.<sup>84</sup> Only by abundant intercession could the church prosper or even continue. He saw the Monday night prayer meeting at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle as "the thermometer of the church."<sup>85</sup> A large part of the main auditorium and first gallery were filled at this meeting for years.<sup>86</sup> In Spurgeon's mind, the prayer meeting was "the most important meeting of the week."<sup>87</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 260-61.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 122.

<sup>83</sup>Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Quotable Spurgeon* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1990) 207.

<sup>84</sup>Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1971 rpt. of 1874 ed.) 19(1873):169.

<sup>85</sup>Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* (2 vols., Vol 2, The Full Harvest, 1860-1892, rev. ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987) 321.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 322.

Prayer reigns supreme along with the Word of God in ministries of the Old Testament, New Testament, and since then. The preacher today, as always, needs a wise balance between different aspects of sermon preparation that depend on human skill and the facets that call on God for His almighty power. The man who represents God in the pulpit should cultivate an ever-growing passion to be the most prayerful and diligent channel he can be for broadcasting the greatest message of all time.