

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

COMFORT FOR THOSE WHOSE PRAYERS ARE FEEBLE.

A Sermon

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“Hide not thine ear at my breathing.”—Lamentations iii. 56.

YOUNG beginners in grace are very apt to compare themselves with advanced disciples, and so to become discouraged; and tried saints fall into the like habit. They see those of God's people who are upon the mount, enjoying the light of their Redeemer's countenance, and, comparing their own condition with the joy of the saints, they write bitter things against themselves, and conclude that surely they are not the people of God. This course is as foolish as though the lambs should suspect themselves not to be of the flock because they are not sheep, or as though a sick man should doubt his existence because he is not able to walk or run as a man in good health. But since this evil habit is very common, it is our duty to seek after the dispirited and cast-down ones, and comfort them. That is our errand in this short discourse. We hear the Master's words, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,” and we will endeavour to obey them by his Spirit's help.

Upon the matter of prayer, many are dispirited because they cannot yet pray as advanced believers do, or because, during some peculiar crisis of their spiritual history, their prayers do not appear to them to be so fervent and acceptable as is the case with other Christians. Perhaps God may have a message to some troubled ones in the present address, and may the Holy Ghost apply it with power to such!

“Hide not thine ear at my breathing.” This is a singular description of prayer, is it not? Frequently, prayer is said to have a voice; it is so in this verse: “Thou hast heard my voice.” Prayer has a melodious voice in the ear of our Heavenly Father. Frequently, too, prayer is expressed by a cry. It is so in this verse: “Hide not thine ear at my cry.” A cry is the natural, plaintive utterance of sorrow, and has as much power to move the heart of God as a babe's cry to touch a mother's tenderness. But there are times when we cannot speak with the voice, nor even

cry, and then a prayer may be expressed by a moan, or a groan, or a tear,—“the heaving of a sigh, the falling of a tear.” But, possibly, we may not even get so far as that, and may have to say, like one of old, “Like a crane or a swallow, so do I chatter.” Our prayer, as heard by others, may be a kind of irrational utterance. We may feel as if we moaned like wounded beasts, rather than prayed like intelligent men; and we may even fall below that, for, in the text, we have a kind of prayer which is less than a moan or a sigh. It is called a *breathing*: “Hide not thine ear at my breathing.” The man is too far gone for a glance of the eye, or the moaning of the heart, he scarcely breathes, but that faint breath is prayer. Though unuttered and unexpressed by any sounds which could reach a human ear, yet God hears the breathing of his servant’s soul, and hides not his ear from it.

We shall teach three or four lessons from the present use of the expression “breathing.”

I. WHEN WE CANNOT PRAY AS WE WOULD, IT IS GOOD TO PRAY AS WE CAN.

Bodily weakness should never be urged by us as a reason for ceasing to pray; in fact, no living child of God will ever think of such a thing. If I cannot bend the knees of my body because I am so weak, my prayers from my bed shall be on *their* knees, my heart shall be on its knees, and pray as acceptably as aforetime. Instead of relaxing prayer because the body suffers, true hearts, at such times, usually double their petitions. Like Hezekiah, they turn their face to the wall that they may see no earthly object, and then they look at the things invisible, and talk with the Most High, ay, and often in a sweeter and more familiar manner than they did in the days of their health and strength. If we are so faint that we can only lie still and breathe, let every breath be prayer.

Nor should a true Christian relax his prayer through *mental difficulties*, I mean those perturbations which distract the mind, and prevent the concentration of our thoughts. Such ills will happen to us. Some of us are often much depressed, and are frequently so tossed to and fro in mind that, if prayer were an operation which required the faculties to be all at their best, as in the working of abstruse mathematical problems, we should not at such times be able to pray at all. But, brethren, when the mind is very heavy, then is not the time to give up praying, but rather to redouble our supplications. Our blessed Lord and Master was driven by distress of mind into the most sad condition; he said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death;” yet he did not for that reason say, “I cannot pray;” but, on the contrary, he sought the well-known shades of the olive grove, and there unburdened his heavy heart, and poured out his soul like water before the Lord. Never let us consider ourselves to be too ill or too distracted to pray. A Christian ought never to be in such a state of mind that he feels bound to say, “I do not feel that I could pray;” or, if he does, let him pray till he feels he can pray. Not to pray because you do not feel fit to pray is like saying, “I will

not take medicine because I am too ill." Pray for prayer: pray yourself, by the Spirit's assistance, into a praying frame. It is good to strike when the iron is hot, but some make cold iron hot by striking. We have sometimes eaten till we have gained an appetite, so let us pray till we pray. God will help you in the pursuit of duty, not in the neglect of it.

The same is the case with regard to *spiritual sicknesses*. Sometimes it is not merely the body or the mind which is affected, but our inner nature is dull, stupid, lethargic, so that, when it is time for prayer, we do not feel the spirit of prayer. Moreover, perhaps our faith is flagging, and how shall we pray when faith is so weak! Possibly we are suspicious as to whether we are the people of God at all, and we are molested by the recollection of our shortcomings. Now the tempter will whisper, "Do not pray just now; your heart is not in a fit condition for it." My dear brother, you will not become fit for prayer by keeping away from the mercy-seat, but to lie groaning or breathing at its foot is the best preparation for pleading before the Lord. We are not to aim at a self-wrought preparation of our hearts that we may come to God aright, but "the preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, are from the Lord." If I feel myself disinclined to pray, then is the time when I need to pray more than ever. Possibly, when the soul leaps and exults in communion with God, it might more safely refrain from prayer than at those seasons when it drags heavily in devotion. Alas! my Lord, does my soul go wandering away from thee? Then, come back my heart, I will drag thee back by force of grace, I will not cease to cry till the Spirit of God has made thee return to thine allegiance. What, my Christian brother, because thou feelest idle, is that a reason why thou shouldst stay thine hand, and not serve thy God? Nay, but away with thine idleness, and resolutely bend thy soul to service. So, under a sense of prayerlessness, be more intent on prayer. Repent that thou canst not repent, groan that thou canst not groan, and pray until thou dost pray; in so doing God will help thee.

But, it may be objected, that *sometimes we are placed in great difficulty as to circumstances*, so that we may be excused from prayer. Brethren, there are no circumstances in which we should cease to pray in some form or other. "But I have so many cares." Who among us has not? If we are never to pray till all our cares are over, surely then we shall either never pray at all, or pray when we have no more need for it. What did Abram do when he offered sacrifice to God? When the patriarch had slaughtered the appointed creatures, and laid them on the altar, certain vultures and kites came hovering around, ready to pounce upon the consecrated flesh. What did the patriarch do then? "When the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away."* So must we ask for grace to drive our cares away from our devotions. That was a wise direction which the prophet gave to the poor woman

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 420, "Abram and the Ravenous Birds;" and No. 1,993, "Driving Away the Vultures from the Sacrifice."

when the Lord was about to multiply her oil. "Go, take the cruse," he said, "pour out the oil, and fill the borrowed vessels;" but what did he also say? "Shut the door upon thee." If the door had been open, some of her gossiping neighbours would have looked in, and said, "What are you doing? Do you really hope to fill all these jars out of that little oil cruse? Why, woman, you must be mad!" I am afraid she would not have been able to perform that act of faith if the objectors had not been shut out. It is a grand thing when the soul can bolt the doors against distractions, and keep out those intruders; for then it is that prayer and faith will perform their miracle, and our soul shall be filled with the blessing of the Lord. Oh, for grace to overcome circumstances, and, at least to breathe out prayer, if we cannot reach to a more powerful form of it!

Perhaps, however, you declare that your circumstances are more difficult than I can imagine, for *you are surrounded by those who mock you, and, besides, Satan himself molests you.* Ah! then, dear brother or sister, under such circumstances, instead of restraining prayer, be ten times more diligent. Your position is pre-eminently perilous, you cannot afford to live away from the throne of grace, do not therefore attempt it. As to threatened persecution, pray in defiance of it. Remember how Daniel opened his window, and prayed to his God as he had done aforetime. Let the God of Daniel be your God in the chamber of prayer, and he will be your God in the lions' den. As for the devil, be sure that nothing will drive him away like prayer. That couplet is correct which declares that—

"Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees."

Whatever thy position, if thou canst not speak, cry; if thou canst not cry, groan; if thou canst not groan, let there be "groanings which cannot be uttered;" and if thou canst not even rise to that point, let thy prayer be at least a breathing,—a vital, sincere desire, the outpouring of thine inner life in the simplest and weakest form, and God will accept it. In a word, when you cannot pray as you would, take care to pray as you can.

II. But now, a second word of instruction. It is clear from the text, from many other passages of Scripture, and from general observation, that **THE BEST OF MEN HAVE USUALLY FOUND THE GREATEST FAULT WITH THEIR OWN PRAYERS.**

This arises from the fact that they present living prayers in real earnest, and feel far more than they can express. A mere formalist can always pray so as to please himself. What has he to do but to open his book, and read the prescribed words, or bow his knee, and repeat such phrases as suggest themselves to his memory or his fancy? Like the Tartarian Praying Machine, give but the wind and the wheel, and the business is fully arranged. So much knee-bending and talking, and the prayer is done. The formalist's prayers are always good, or, rather, always bad, alike. But the living child of God never offers a prayer which pleases himself; his standard is above his attainments; he wonders that God listens to

him, and though he knows he will be heard for Christ's sake, yet he accounts it a wonderful instance of condescending mercy that such poor prayers as his should ever reach the ears of the Lord God of Sabaoth.

If it be asked in what respect holy men find fault with their prayers, we reply, that *they complain of the narrowness of their desires*. O God, thou hast bidden me open my mouth wide, and thou wilt fill it, but I do not open my mouth! Thou art ready to bestow great things upon me, but I am not ready to receive great things. I am straitened, but it is not in thee; I am straitened in my own desires. Dear brethren, when we read of Hugh Latimer on his knees perpetually crying out, "O God, give back the gospel to England," and sometimes praying so long that he could not rise, being an aged man, and they had to lift him up from the prison-floor, and he would still keep on crying, "O God, give back the gospel to poor England," we may well wonder that some of us do not pray in the same way. The times are as bad as Latimer's, and we have as great need to pray as he had, "O God, drive away this Popery once again, and give back the gospel to England." Then, think of John Knox. Why, that man's prayers were like great armies for power, and he would wrestle all night with God that he would kindle the light of the gospel in Scotland. He averred that he had gained his desire, and I believe he had, and that the light which burns so brightly in Scotland is much to be attributed to that man's supplications. We do not pray like these men; we have no heart to ask for great things. A revival is waiting, the cloud is hovering over England, and we do not know how to bring it down. Oh, that God may find some true spirits who shall be as conductors to bring down the fire divine! We want it much, but our poor breathings—they do not come to much more,—have no force, no expansiveness, no great-heartedness, no prevalence in them.

Then, how far we fail in the matter of *faith*! We do not pray as if we believed. Believing prayer is a grasping and a wrestling, but ours is a mere puffing and blowing, a little breathing,—not much more. God is true, and we pray to him as if he were false. He means what he says, and we treat his Word as if it were spoken in jest. The master-fault of our prayer is want of faith.

How often do we lack *earnestness*! Such men as Luther had their will of heaven because they *would* have it. God's Spirit made them resolute in intercession, and they would not come away from the mercy-seat till their suit was granted; but we are cold, and consequently feeble, and our poor, poor prayers, in the prayer-meeting, in the closet, and at the family altar, languish and almost die.

How much, alas, is there of *impurity of motive* to mar our prayers! We ask for revival, but we want our own church to get the blessing, that we may have the credit of it. We pray God to bless our work, and it is because we wish to hear men say what good workers we are. The prayer is good in itself, but our smutty fingers spoil it. Oh, that we could offer supplication as it should

be offered! Blessed be God, there is One who can wash our prayers for us; but, truly, our very tears need to be wept over, and our prayers want praying over again. The best thing we ever do needs to be washed in the fountain filled with blood, or God can only look upon it as a sin.

Another fault good men see in their supplications is this, that *they stand at such a distance from God in praying*, they do not draw near enough to him. Are not some of you oppressed with a sense of the distance there is between you and God? You know there is a God, and you believe he will answer you; but it is not always that you come right up to him, even to his feet, and, as it were, lay hold upon him, and say, "O my Father, hearken to the voice of thy chosen, and let the cry of the blood of thy Son come up before thee!" Oh, for prayers which enter within the veil, and approach to the mercy-seat! Oh, for petitioners who are familiar with the cherubim, and the brightness which shines between their wings! May God help us to pray better! But this I feel sure of,—you who plead most prevalently are just those who will think the least of your own prayers, and be most grateful to God that he deigns to listen to you, and most anxious that he would help you to pray after a nobler sort.

III. A third lesson is this,—THE POWER OF PRAYER IS NOT TO BE MEASURED BY ITS OUTWARD EXPRESSION.

A breathing is a prayer from which God does not hide his ear. It is a great truth undoubtedly, and full of much comfort too, that our prayers are not powerful in proportion to their expression; for, if so, the Pharisee would have succeeded, since he evidently had greater gifts than the Publican had. I have no doubt, if there had been a regular prayer-meeting, and the Pharisee and the Publican had attended, we should have called on the Pharisee to pray. I do not think the people of God would have enjoyed his prayer, nor have felt any kinship of spirit with him; and yet, very naturally, on account of his gifts, he would have taken upon himself to engage in public devotion; or, if that Pharisee would not have done so, I have heard of other Pharisees who would. No doubt the man's spirit was bad, but then his expression was good. He could put his oration so neatly, and pour it out so accurately. Let all men know that God does not care for that. The sigh of the Publican reached his ear, and won the blessing; but the boastful phrases of the Pharisee were an abomination unto him.

If our prayers were forcible according to their expression, then rhetoric would be more valuable than grace, and a scholastic education would be better than sanctification; but it is not so. Some of us may be able to express ourselves very fluently from the force of natural gifts, but it should always be to us an anxious question whether our prayer is a prayer which God will receive; for we ought to know, and must know by this time, that we often pray best when we stammer and stutter, and we pray worst when words come rolling like a torrent, one after another. God is not moved by words; they are but a noise to him. He is only moved by the deep thought and the heaving emotion which dwell in the innermost

spirit. It were a sorry business for you, who are poor, if God only heard us according to the beauty of our utterances; for it may be that your education was so neglected that there is no hope of your ever being able to speak grammatically; and, besides, it may be, from your limited information, that you could not use the phrases which sound so well. But the Lord hears the poor, and the ignorant, and the needy; he loves to hear their cry. What cares he for the grammar of the prayer? It is the soul of it that he wants; and if you cannot string three words of the Queen's English together correctly, yet, if your soul can breathe itself out before the Most High anyhow, if it be but warm, hearty, sincere, earnest petitioning, there is power in your prayer, and none the less power in it because of its broken words, nor would it be an advantage to you, so far as the Lord is concerned, if those words were not broken, but were well composed. Ought not this to comfort us, then?

Even if we are gifted with facility of expression, we sometimes find that our power of utterance fails us. Under very heavy grief, a man cannot speak as he was wont to do. Circumstances can make the most eloquent tongue grow slow of speech; it matters not, your prayer is as good as it was before. You call upon God in public, and you sit down, and think that your confused prayer was of no service to the church. You know not in what scales God weighs your prayer; not by quantity, but by quality, not by the outward dress of verbiage, but by the inner soul and the intense earnestness that was in it does he compute its value. Do you not sometimes rise from your knees in your little room, and say, "I do not think I have prayed, I could not feel at home in prayer"? Nine times out of every ten, those prayers are most prevalent with God which we think are the least acceptable; but when we glory in our prayer, God will have nothing to do with it. If you see any beauty in your own supplication, God will not; for you have evidently been looking at your prayer, and not at him. But when your soul sees so much *his* glory that she cries, "How shall I speak unto thee,—I who am but dust and ashes?" when she sees so much *his* goodness that she is hampered in expression by the depth of her own humiliation, oh, then it is that your prayer is best. There may be more prayer in a groan than in an entire liturgy; there may be more acceptable devotion in a tear that damps the floor of yonder pew than in all the hymns we have sung, or in all the supplications which we have uttered. It is not the outward, it is the inward; it is not the lips, it is the heart which the Lord regards; if you can only breathe, still your prayer is accepted by the Most High.

I desire that this truth may come home to any one of you who says, "I cannot pray." It is not true. If it were necessary that, in order to pray, you should talk for a quarter of an hour together, or that you should say pretty things, why then I would admit that you could not pray; but if it is only to say from your heart, "God be merciful to me a sinner;" ay, and if prayer is not saying anything at all, but desiring, longing, hoping for mercy, for pardon, for salvation, no man may say, "I cannot," unless he is honest

enough to add, "I cannot because I will not; I love my sins too well, and have no faith in Christ; I do not desire to be saved." If you will to pray, O my hearer, you can pray! He who gives the will joins the ability to it.

And oh! let me say, do not sleep this night until you have tried and proved the power of prayer. If you feel a burden on your heart, tell the Lord of it. Cover your face, and speak with him. Even that you need not do, for I suppose that Hannah did not cover her face when Eli saw her lips move, and supposed that she was drunken. Nay, your lips need not even move; your soul can now say, "Save me, my God, convince me of sin, lead me to the cross; save me to-night; let me not end another day as thine enemy; let me not go into the cares of another week unabsolved, with thy wrath hanging over me like a thunder-cloud! Save me, save me, O my God!" Such prayers, though utterly wordless, shall not be powerless, but shall be heard in heaven.

IV. We will close with a fourth practical lesson,—**FEEBLE PRAYERS ARE HEARD IN HEAVEN.**

Why is it that feeble prayers are understood of God and heard in heaven? There are three reasons.

First, *the feeblest prayer, if it be sincere, is written by the Holy Spirit upon the heart, and God will always own the handwriting of the Holy Spirit.* Frequently, certain kind friends from Scotland send me for the Orphanage some portions of what one of them called the other day "filthy lucre,"—namely, dirty £1 notes. Now these £1 notes certainly look as if they were of small value. Still, they bear the proper signature, and they pass well enough, and I am very grateful for them. Many a prayer that is written on the heart by the Holy Spirit seems written with faint ink, and, moreover, it appears to be blotted and defiled by our imperfection; but the Holy Spirit can always read his own handwriting. He knows his own notes; and when he has issued a prayer, he will not disown it. Therefore, the breathing which the Holy Ghost works in us will be acceptable with God.

Moreover, *God, our ever-blessed Father, has a quick ear to hear the breathing of any of his children.* When a mother has a sick child, it is marvellous how quick her ears become while attending it. Good woman, we wonder she does not fall asleep. If you hired a nurse, it is ten to one she would. But the dear child, in the middle of the night, does not need to cry for water, or even speak; there is a little quick breathing,—who will hear it? No one would except the mother; but her ears are quick, for they are in her child's heart. So, if there is a heart in the world that longs for God, God's ear is already in that poor sinner's heart. He will hear it. There is not a good desire on earth but the Lord has heard it. I recollect when, at one time, I was a little afraid to preach the gospel to sinners as sinners, and yet I wanted to do so, so I used to say, "If you have but a millionth part of a desire, come to Christ." I dare say more than that now; but, at the same time, I will say that at once,—if you have a millionth part of a desire, if you have only a little breathing,—if you desire to be

reconciled, if you desire to be pardoned, if you would be forgiven, if there is only half a good thought formed in your soul, do not check it, do not stifle it, and do not think that God will reject it.

And, then, there is another reason, namely, that *the Lord Jesus Christ is always ready to take the most imperfect prayer, and perfect it for us*. If our prayers had to go up to heaven as they are, they would never succeed; but they find a Friend on the way, and therefore they prosper. A poor person has a petition to be sent in to some government personage, and if he had to write it himself, it would puzzle all the officers in Downing-street to make out what he meant; but he is wise enough to find out a friend who can write, or he comes round to his minister, and says, "Sir, will you make this petition right for me? Will you put it into good English, so that it can be presented?" And then the petition goes in a very different form. Even thus, the Lord Jesus Christ takes our poor prayers, fashions them over again, and presents the petition with the addition of his own signature, and the Lord sends us answers of peace.

The feeblest prayer in the world is heard when it has Christ's seal to it. I mean, he puts his precious blood upon it; and wherever God sees the blood of Jesus, he must and will accept the desire which it endorses. Go thou to Jesus, sinner, even if thou canst not pray, and let the breathing of thy soul be, "Be merciful to me, wash me, cleanse me, save me," and it shall be done; for God will not hear your prayer so much as hear his Son's blood, "which speaketh better things than that of Abel." A louder voice than yours shall prevail for you, and your feeble breathings shall come up to God covered over with the omnipotent pleadings of the great High Priest who never asks in vain.

I have been aiming thus to comfort those distressed ones who say they cannot pray; but, ere I close, I must add, how inexcusable are those who, knowing all this, continue prayerless, Godless, and Christless! If there were no mercy to be had, you could not be blamed for not having it. If there were no Saviour for sinners, a sinner might be excused for remaining in his sin. But there is a fountain, and it is open; why then wash ye not in it? Mercy is to be had "without money and without price,"—it is to be had by asking for it. Sometimes poor men are shut up in the condemned cell, sentenced to be hanged; but suppose they could have a free pardon by asking for it, and they did not do so, who would pity them? God will give his blessing to everyone who is moved to seek for it sincerely at his hands on this one sole and only condition,—that that soul will trust in Jesus; and even that is not a condition, for he gives repentance and faith, and enables sinners to believe in his dear Son. Behold Christ crucified, the saddest and yet the gladdest sight the sun ever beheld! Behold the eternal Son of God made flesh, and bleeding out his life! A surpassing marvel of woe and love! A look at him will save you. Though ye are on the borders of the grave, and on the brink of hell, by one look at Jesus crucified your guilt shall be cancelled, your debts for ever discharged before the throne of God, and yourselves led