

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

PETER'S SHORTEST PRAYER.

A Sermon

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“Lord, save me.”—Matthew xiv. 30.

I AM going to talk about the characteristics of this prayer in the hope that there may be many, who have never yet prayed aright, who may make this their own prayer to-night, so that from many a person here present this cry may silently go up, “Lord, save me.”

Where did Peter pray this prayer? It was not in a place set apart for public worship, nor in his usual place for private prayer; but he prayed this prayer just as he was sinking in the water. He was in great peril, so he cried out, “Lord, save me.” It is well to assemble with God's people for prayer if you can; but if you cannot go up to his house, it matters little, for prayer can ascend to him from anywhere all over the world. It is well to have a special spot where you pray at home; probably most of us have a certain chair by which we kneel to pray, and we feel that we can talk to God most freely there. At the same time, we must never allow ourselves to become the slaves even of such a good habit as that, and must always remember that, if we really want to find the Lord by prayer,—

“Where'er we seek him, he is found,
And every place is hallowed ground.”

We may pray to God when engaged in any occupation if it is a lawful one; and if it is not, we have no business to be in it. If there is anything we do over which we cannot pray, we ought never

to dare to do it again; and if there is any occupation concerning which we have to say, "We could not pray while engaged in it," it is clear that the occupation is a wrong one.

The habit of daily prayer must be maintained. It is well to have regular hours for devotion, and to resort to the same place for prayer as far as possible; still, the spirit of prayer is better even than the habit of prayer. It is better to be able to pray at all times than to make it a rule to pray at certain times and seasons. A Christian is more fully grown in grace when he prays about everything than he would be if he only prayed under certain conditions and circumstances. I always feel that there is something wrong if I go without prayer for even half an hour in the day. I cannot understand how a Christian man can go from morning to evening without prayer. I cannot comprehend how he lives, and how he fights the battle of life without asking the guardian care of God while the arrows of temptation are flying so thickly around him. I cannot imagine how he can decide what to do in times of perplexity, how he can see his own imperfections or the faults of others, without feeling constrained to say, all day long, "O Lord, guide me; O Lord, forgive me; O Lord, bless my friend!" I cannot think how he can be continually receiving mercies from the Lord without saying, "God be thanked for this new token of his grace! Blessed be the name of the Lord for what he is doing for me in his abounding mercy! O Lord, still remember me with the favour that thou showest unto thy people!" Do not be content, dear brethren and sisters in Christ, unless you can pray everywhere and at all times, and so obey the apostolic injunction, "Pray without ceasing."

I have already reminded you, dear friends, that Peter prayed this prayer when he was in circumstances of imminent danger: "Beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." "But," asks someone, "ought he not to have prayed before?" Of course he ought; but if he had not done so, it was not too late. Do not say, concerning any trouble, "Now I am so deeply in it, I cannot go to God about it." Why not? "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" It would have been well if the disciples had prayed before the first rough breath of the tempest began to toss their little barque, yet it was not too late to pray when the vessel seemed as if it must go down. As long as you have a heart to pray, God has an ear to hear. Look at Peter; he is "beginning to sink." The water is up to his knees, it is up to his waist, it is up to his neck, but it is not yet too late for him to cry, "Lord, save me;" and he has no sooner said it than the hand of Jesus is stretched out to catch him, and to guide him to the ship. So, Christian, cry to God though the devil tells you it is no use to cry; cry to God even if you are beneath the tempter's foot. Say to Satan, "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise;" but do not forget to cry unto the Lord. Cry to God for your children even when they are most ungodly, when their ungodliness almost breaks your heart. Cry to God on behalf of those whom you are teaching in the Sunday-school; even when you seem to think that

their characters are developing in the worst possible form, still pray for them. Never mind though the thing you ask for them should appear to be an impossibility, for God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

I would also say to any unconverted person who is here under conviction of sin,—Dear friend, if you are beginning to sink, yet still pray. If your sins stare you in the face, and threaten to drive you to despair, yet still draw near to God in prayer. Though it seems as if hell had opened its mouth to swallow you up, yet still cry unto God. "While there's life, there's hope."

" While the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return ;"—

and the vilest sinner who returns shall find that God is both able and willing to save him. Never believe that lie of Satan that prayer will not prevail with God. Only go as the publican did, smiting upon your breast, and crying, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and rest assured that God is waiting to be gracious unto you.

I cannot help feeling that Peter's short, simple prayer was uttered in a most natural tone of voice: "Lord, save me." Let us always pray in just such a way as the Spirit of God dictates to us, and as the deep sorrow and humiliation of our heart naturally suggest to us. Many men who pray in public get into the habit of using certain tones in prayer that are anything but natural, and I am afraid that some even in private fail to pray naturally. Any language that is not natural is bad; the best tone is that which a man uses when he is speaking earnestly, and means what he says, and that is the right way to pray. Speak as if you meant it; do not whine it, or cant it, or intone it, but pour it out of your soul in the most simple, natural fashion that you can. Peter was in too great peril to put any fine language into his prayer; he was too conscious of his danger to consider how he might put his words together, but he just expressed the strong desire of his soul in the simplest manner possible: "Lord, save me;" and that prayer was heard, and Peter was saved from drowning, just as a sinner will be saved from hell if he can pray after the selfsame fashion.

I. Now, coming to Peter's prayer itself, and suggesting that it is a suitable prayer for all who are able to pray at all, my first observation upon it is that IT WAS A VERY BRIEF PRAYER.

There were only three words in it: "Lord, save me." I believe that the excellence of prayer often consists in its brevity. You must have noticed the extreme brevity of most of the prayers that are preserved in Scripture. One of the longest is the prayer of our Saviour recorded by John, which would, I suppose, have occupied about five minutes; and there is the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, which may have taken six minutes. Almost all the other prayers in the Bible are very short ones; and, probably, in our public services, we pray far longer than all of

them put together. This may, perhaps, be excused when there are many petitions to be presented by one person on behalf of a large congregation; but at our prayer-meetings, where there are many to speak, I am certain that, the longer the prayer is, the worse it is. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. The Spirit of God sometimes inspires a man in such a way that, if he would keep on praying all night, we should be glad to join with him in that holy exercise; but, as a general rule, the Spirit of God does no such thing. There are some who pray longest when they have least to say, and only go on repeating certain pious phrases which become almost meaningless by monotonous reiteration. Remember, dear friends, when you are praying, whether in public or in private, that you have not to teach the Lord a system of theology; he knows far more about that than you do. You have no need to explain to the Lord all the experience that a Christian ought to have, for he knows that far better than you do. And there is no necessity for you always to go round all the various agencies, and institutions, and mission stations. Tell the Lord what is in your heart in as few words as possible, and so leave time and opportunity for others to do the same.

I wonder if anyone here ever says, "I have no time for prayer." Dear friend, dare you leave your house in the morning without bowing the knee before God? Can you venture to close your eyes at night, and wear the image of death, without first commending yourself to the keeping of God during the hours of unconsciousness in sleep? I do not understand how you can live such a careless life as that. But, surely, you did not really mean that you had not time to offer such a prayer as Peter's "Lord, save me." How much time does that take, or this? "God be merciful to me a sinner." If you realized your true condition in God's sight, you would find time for prayer somehow or other, for you would feel that you must pray. It never occurred to Peter, as he was beginning to sink, that he had no time for prayer. He felt that he must pray; his sense of danger forced him to cry to Christ, "Lord, save me." And if you feel as you should feel, your sense of need will drive you to prayer, and never again will you say, "I have no time for prayer." It is not a matter of time so much as a matter of heart; if you have the heart to pray, you will find the time.

I would urge you to cultivate the habit of praying briefly all the day. I have told you before of the Puritan who, in a debate, was observed to be making notes; and when they were afterwards examined, it was found that there was nothing on the paper except these words, "More light, Lord! More light, Lord! More light, Lord!" He wanted light upon the subject under discussion, and therefore he asked the Lord for it, and that is the way to pray. During the day, you can pray, "Give me more grace, God. Subdue my temper, Lord. Tell me, O my God, what to do in this case! Lord, direct me. Lord, save me." Pray thus, and you will be imitating the good example of brevity in prayer which our text sets before you.

II. Notice, next, that, brief as Peter's prayer was, IT WAS WONDERFULLY COMPREHENSIVE, AND ADAPTED FOR USE ON MANY DIFFERENT OCCASIONS: "Lord, save me."

It covered all the needs of Peter at that time, and he might have continued to use it as long as he lived. When his Master told him that Satan desired to have him that he might sift him as wheat, he might well have prayed, "Lord, save me." When he had denied his Master, and had gone out, and wept bitterly, it would have been well for him to pray, "Lord, save me." When he was afterwards journeying to and fro, preaching the gospel, he could still pray, "Lord, save me;" and when, at last, he was led out to be crucified for Christ's sake, he could hardly find a better prayer than this with which to close his life, "Lord, save me."

Now, as Peter found this prayer so suitable for him, I commend it to each one of you. Have you been growing rich lately? Then, you will be tempted to become proud and worldly; so pray, "Lord, save me from the evils that so often go with riches; thou art giving me this wealth, help me to be a good steward of it, and not to make an idol of it." Or are you getting poor? Is your business proving a failure? Are your little savings almost gone? Well, there are perils connected with poverty; so pray, "Lord, save me from becoming envious or discontented; let me be willing to be poor rather than do anything wrong in order to get money." Do you, dear friend, feel that you are not living as near to God as you once did? Is the chilling influence of the world telling upon you? Then pray, "Lord, save me." Have you fallen into some sin which you fear may bring disgrace upon your profession? Well then, ere that sin grows greater, cry, "Lord, save me." Have you come to a place where your feet have well-nigh slipped? The precipice is just before you, and you feel that, if some mightier power than your own does not interpose, you will fall, to your serious hurt, if not to your destruction. Then, at once breathe the prayer, "Lord, save me." I can commend this prayer to you when you are upon the stormy sea, but it will be equally suitable to you upon the dry land: "Lord, save me." I can commend it as suitable to you when you are near the gates of death, but it is just as much adapted to you when you are in vigorous health: "Lord, save me." And if you can add to the prayer, "and, Lord, save my children, and my kinsfolk, and my neighbours," it will be even better. Still, for yourself personally, it is an admirable prayer to carry about with you wherever you go: "Lord, save me."

III. Peter's prayer had a third excellence, IT WAS VERY DIRECT.

It would not have done for Peter just then to have used the many titles which rightly belong to Christ, or to have begun asking for a thousand things; but he went straight to the point of his immediate need, and cried, "Lord, save me." When one of our dear friends, who has lately gone to heaven, was very ill, one of his sons prayed with him. He began in a very proper way, "Almighty Father, Maker of heaven and earth, our Creator,"—but the sick man stopped him, and said, "My dear boy, I am a poor sinner, and I want God's mercy; say, 'Lord, save him.'" He wanted his son to get to the point, and I can sympathize with him; for, often,

when some of our dear brethren have been praying here, and have been beating about the bush, I have wished that they would come to the point, and ask for what they really needed. They have kept on walking round the house, instead of knocking at the door, and seeking to enter. Peter's prayer shows us how to go direct to the very heart of the matter: "Lord, save me."

Many persons fail to receive answers to their prayers because they will not go straight to God, and confess the sins that they have committed. There was a member of a Christian church who had, on one occasion, fallen very shamefully through drink. He was very penitent, and he asked his pastor to pray for him, but he would not say what his sin had been. The pastor prayed, and then told the brother himself to pray. The poor man said, "Lord, thou knowest that I have erred, and done wrong," and so on, making a sort of general confession, but that brought him no peace of mind. He felt that he could not go away like that, so he knelt down again, and said, "Lord, thou knowest that I was drunk; it was a shameful sin that I committed, but I am truly grieved for it; O Lord, forgive me, for Jesus' sake!" and ere his prayer was finished, he had found peace because he had plainly confessed his sin to God, and had not sought to hide it any longer. You remember that David could get no peace until he came to the point, and prayed, "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation." Before that, he had tried to smother his great sin; but there was no rest for his conscience until he had made a full confession of his guilt, and after that he could say, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." Let our prayers, whether for ourselves or others, and especially our confessions of sin, go straight to the point, and not go beating about the bush. If any of you have been using forms of prayer, which have not obtained for you any answers to your supplications, put them all on one side, and just go and tell the Lord plainly what you want. Your prayer will then probably be something like this, "O God, I am a lost sinner! I have been careless about divine things; I have listened to the gospel, but I have not obeyed it. Lord, forgive me, save me, make me thy child, and let me and my household too be thine for ever." That is the way to pray so that God will hear and answer you.

IV. Another characteristic of Peter's prayer was that IT WAS A VERY SOUND-DOCTRINE PRAYER: "Lord, save me."

Peter does not appear to have had any idea of saving himself from drowning, he does not seem to have thought that there was sufficient natural buoyancy about him to keep him afloat, or that he could swim to the ship; but, "beginning to sink, he cried, Lord, save me." One of the hardest tasks in the world is to get a man to give up all confidence in himself, and from his heart to pray, "Lord, save me." Instead of doing that, he says, "O Lord, I do not feel as I ought; I want to feel my need more, I want to feel more joy, I want to feel more holiness." You see, he is putting feelings in place of faith; he is, as it were, laying down a track

along which he wants God to walk instead of walking in the way which God has marked out for all who desire to be saved. Another man is seeking to reform himself, and so to make himself fit for heaven; and he prays in harmony with that idea, and of course gets no answer. I like to hear such a prayer as this, "O Lord, I cannot save myself, and I do not ask thee to save me in any way that I prescribe; Lord, save me anyhow, only do save me! I am satisfied to be saved by the precious blood of Jesus. I am satisfied to be saved by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. I know I must be born again if I am ever to enter heaven; quicken me, O thou ever-blessed Spirit! I know I must give up my sins. Lord, I do not want to keep them, save me from them by thy grace, I humbly entreat thee. I know that only thou canst do this work; I cannot lift even a finger to help thee in it; so save me, Lord, for thy great mercy's sake!" This is sound doctrinal truth,—salvation all of grace, not of man, nor by man; "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God;" salvation according to the eternal purpose of God, by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit, through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When a sinner is willing to accept salvation on God's terms, then the prayer shall ascend acceptably to the Most High, "Lord, save me."

V. Notice also that PETER'S PRAYER WAS A VERY PERSONAL ONE: "Lord, save *me*."

Peter did not think of anybody else just then; and when a soul is under concern about its eternal interests, it had better at first confine its thoughts to itself, and pray, "Lord, save *me*." Yes, and in the Christian's after-life, there will come times when he had better, for a while, forget all others, and simply pray, "Lord, save *me*." Here we are, a great congregation, gathered together from very various motives; and perhaps some here, who are not yet personally interested in Christ, are vaguely hoping that God will bless somebody in this assembly; but if the Holy Spirit shall begin to work upon some individual heart and conscience, the convicted one will begin to pray, "Lord, save *me*. I hear of many others being brought to Jesus; but, Lord, save *me*. My dear sister has been converted, and has made a profession of her faith; but, Lord, save *me*. I had a godly mother, who has gone home to glory; and my dear father is walking in thy fear; let not their son be a castaway, Lord, save *me*."

I entreat everyone here to pray this personal prayer, and I beg you who do love the Lord to join me in pleading with him that it may be so. I see some little girls over there; will not each one of you, my dear children, pray this prayer? I pray the Holy Spirit to move you to cry, "Lord, save little Annie," or "Lord, save little Mary;" and may you boys be equally moved to pray, "Lord, save Tom," or "Lord, save Harry." Pray for yourself in just that simple way, and who knows what blessing may come to you? Then you mothers will surely not let your children pray for themselves, while you remain prayerless; will not each one of you cry, "Lord, save *me*"? And you working-men, whom I am

so glad to see at a week-night service, do not go away without presenting your own personal petitions. The apostle Peter had to pray for himself, the most eminent servants of God had to pray for themselves, and you must pray for yourselves. If all the saints of God were to pray for you, with one united voice, as long as you live, you would not be saved unless you also cried to God for yourself. Religion is a personal matter, there is no such thing as religion by proxy. You must repent for yourselves, and pray for yourselves, and believe for yourselves if you would be saved. May God grant that you may do so!

VI. I want you to notice, next, that PETER'S PRAYER WAS A VERY URGENT ONE: "Lord, save me."

He did not say, "Lord, save me to-morrow," or "Lord, save me in an hour's time." He was "beginning to sink;" the hungry waves had opened their mouths to swallow him, and he would soon be gone. He had only time to cry, "Lord, save me;" but he no doubt meant, "Lord, save me now, for I am now in danger of being drowned. Lord, save me now; for, if thou shouldst delay, I shall sink to the bottom of the sea." "And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him," and so saved him. There are many people who would like Jesus to save them, but when? Ah! that is the point which they have not settled yet. A young man says, "I should like Christ to save me when I grow older, when I have seen a little more of life." You mean when you have seen a great deal more of death, for that is all you will see in the world; there is no real life there except that which is in Christ Jesus. Many a man in middle life has said, "I mean to be a Christian before I die, but not just yet." He has been too busy to seek the Lord, but death has come to him without any warning; and, busy or not, he has had to die quite unprepared.

There is hope for a sinner when he prays, "Lord, my case is urgent, save me now. Sin, like a viper, has fastened itself upon me; Lord, save me now from its deadly venom. I am guilty now, and condemned already, because I have not believed in Jesus; Lord, save me now, save me from condemnation, save me from the damning sin of unbelief. Lord, for aught I know, I am now upon the brink of death, and I am in danger of hell as well as of death as long as I am unforgiven. Therefore, be pleased to let the wheels of thy chariot of mercy hasten, and save me even now, O Lord!" I have known some, who have been so deeply under the influence of the Holy Spirit, that they have knelt down by their bedsides, and said, "We will never give sleep to our eyes, or slumber to our eyelids, till we have found the Saviour," and ere long they have found him. They have said, "We will wrestle in prayer until our burden of sin is gone;" and when they have reached that determination, it has not been long before they have obtained the blessing they desire. When nothing else succeeds, importunity will surely prevail. When thou wilt not take a denial from God, he will not give thee a denial; but as long as thou art content to be unsaved, thou wilt be unsaved. When you cry, with all the urgency of which you are capable, "I must have Jesus, or die; I

am hungering, thirsting, pining, panting after him, as the hart panteth after the water-brooks;" it shall not be long before you clasp that priceless treasure to your heart, and say, "Jesus is my Saviour; I have believed in him."

VII. Now, lastly, I must remind you that PETER'S PRAYER WAS AN EFFECTUAL ONE: "Lord, save me," and Jesus did save him.

There may be comfort, to some here present, in the thought that, although this was the prayer of a man in trouble, and a man in whom there was a mixture of unbelief and faith, yet it succeeded. Imperfections and infirmities shall not prevent prayer from speeding if it be but sincere and earnest. Jesus said to Peter, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" which shows that he did doubt although there was also some faith in him, for he believed that Christ could save him from a watery grave. Many of us also are strange mixtures, even as Peter was. Repentance and hardness of heart can each occupy a part of our being, and faith may be in our heart together with a measure of unbelief, even as it was with the man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

Do any of you feel that you want to pray, and yet cannot pray? You would believe in Jesus, but there is another law in your members which keeps you back. You would pray an effectual prayer, like that of Elijah, never staggering at the promise through unbelief; but, somehow or other, you cannot tell why, you cannot attain to that prayer. Yet you will not give up praying; you feel that you cannot do that. You linger still at the mercy-seat even when you cannot prevail with God in prayer. Ah, dear soul! it is a mercy that God does not judge thy prayer by what it is in itself; he judges it from another point of view altogether. Jesus takes it, mends it, adds to it the merit of his own precious blood, and then, when he presents it to his Father, it is so changed that you would scarcely recognize it as your petition. You would say, "I can hardly believe that is my prayer, Christ has so greatly altered and improved it." It has happened to you as it sometimes happens to poor people who are in trouble, as it did happen to one whom I knew some time ago. A good woman wanted me to send in a petition, to a certain government office, concerning her husband, who was dead, and for whose sake she wanted to get some help. She drew up the petition, and brought it to me. About one word in ten was spelt correctly, and the whole composition was unfit to send. She wanted me to add my name to it, and post it for her. I did so; but I first re-wrote the whole petition, keeping the subject matter as she put it, but altering the form and wording of it. That is what our good Lord and Master does for us only in an infinitely higher sense; he re-writes our petition, sets his own sign-manual to it, and when his Father sees that, he grants the request at once. One drop of Christ's blood upon a prayer must make it prosper.

Go home, therefore, you who are troubled with doubts and fears, you who are vexed by Satan, you who are saddened by the recollection of your own past sins; notwithstanding all this, go to God,

and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee," and ask for his forgiveness, and his forgiveness you shall receive. Keep on praying in such a fashion as this, "Lord, save me, for Jesus' sake. Jesus, thou art the Saviour of sinners, save me, I beseech thee. Thou art mighty to save; Lord, save me. Thou art in heaven pleading for transgressors; Lord, plead for me." Do not wait till you get home, but pray just where you are sitting, "Lord, save me." May God give grace to everyone here to pray that prayer from the heart, for Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

MATTHEW VI. 5—34.

Verse 5. *And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.*

We ought to pray in the synagogue, and we may pray at the corners of the streets; but the wrong is to do it to "be seen of men," that is, to be looking for some present reward in the praises that fall from human lips.

5—7. *Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*

They seem to attribute a sort of power to a certain form of words, as if it were a charm, and they repeat it over and over again. Not only do the poor Mohammedans and heathen "use vain repetitions," but the members of the Romish and other churches that I might name do the same thing; words to which they attach but very slight meaning, and into which they put little or no heart, are repeated by them again and again, as if there could be some virtue in the words themselves. Let it not be so with you beloved. Pray as long as you like in secret, but do not pray long with the idea that God will hear you simply because you are a long while at your devotions.

8. *Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.*

He does not need to be informed, nor even to be persuaded. Mere words are of no value in his ears. If you must needs use many words, ask men to lend you their ears, for they may have little else to do with them; but God careth not for words alone, it is the thought, the desire of the heart to which he ever hath regard.

9. *After this manner therefore pray ye:*

Here is a model prayer for you to copy as far as it is suited to your case:—

9—13. *Our Father which art in heaven,* Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.† Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation,‡ but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

* See *The New Park Street Pulpit*, No. 213, "The Fatherhood of God."

† See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,778, "A Heavenly Pattern for our Earthly Life."

‡ See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,402, "Lead us Not into Temptation."