

## Chapel Sunday School

October 5, 2025

1. Review: The Spirit testifies with our spirit Rm 8:15,16. Intelligent Mysticism. Anticipation and Availability. Difficult to write on prayer.
2. Luke 11:1,2, "Teach us to Pray." Lk 18:1-8 Persistent. "They will get justice."
3. John 1:12,13. Children
4. Luke 11:5-11. Parable not allegory, one point, not how God answers
  - Shameless, importunity, relentlessly, boldness
  - This is a familial relationship, ie a child approaches his father. V. 11
  - This is not an emergency. One room and likely one bed. (bread)
  - Adoption-change in status, v employer
  - This does not result from a change in behavior, like the gospel.
5. The problem of unanswered prayer
  - The child prays trustingly, and comes back again and again.
  - The father redirects to something better for the child.
  - The father gives you what you would have asked for if you knew all.

I have a vivid memory of two back-to-back nights in Chicago. One evening I met with a good friend who informed me she was leaving her husband, also a close friend. "He doesn't meet my needs," she said. "I know he tries to be a good husband and good father, but I've found someone better. I'm leaving him." After listening to her, I talked about the difficulties all marriages face and reminded her of her husband's good qualities and all that she would be losing. She agreed with everything I said but had already made up her mind. I left that meal with a heavy heart, knowing my wife and I had lost one of our best couple friendships.

The very next night I attended a celebration organized by a young widow whose husband had died of brain cancer. On the night that would have been Chuck's thirty-second birthday, she was holding a party in his memory. I

## Available

BUD

Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the U.S. Senate, once remarked that God has equipped us to go deep-sea diving and instead we wade in bathtubs. What makes the difference, I firmly believe, is how seriously we take prayer. I see prayer as the process of becoming available for what God wants to do on earth through us.

Somebody asked me if I've ever experienced a bona fide miracle. Oh, yes. Several times. We live in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. And miracles abound, or we would not be here. I organize work teams to rehab buildings so that homeless and underprivileged people can own their own homes. One day I was working with a sandblaster, with air piped in through my helmet, and the compressor started leaking carbon monoxide, a poisonous gas you can't taste or smell. I soon passed out. A friend of mine was driving on a highway at the other end of the state and he unmistakably heard God tell him, "Ken, you need to check on Bud." It seemed so strange and so inconvenient—he was five hours away!—that he passed up the two best routes to Chicago and only after God kept pressing him did he turn back toward Chicago. He found me unconscious, dragged me to a hospital, and literally saved my life.

Why didn't God speak to someone closer by? Well, maybe God did, to scores of people, but maybe they weren't listening. My friend Ken made him-

knew the agony they had been through during his surgery and prolonged treatment. Lynn now faced the double burden of paying off medical bills and supporting two children as a single mother. Still reeling from the news of my friend's impending divorce, I went to Lynn's house with a sense of foreboding.

I heard not a word of complaint or regret that night. Lynn passed around photos and had each of us call up memories of her husband. We laughed, and cried, and Lynn pulled out a guitar and sang some of his favorite songs. She talked about the good times they had shared together, his corny jokes, the cartoons he drew, the intimacy of walking together through the progression of his illness. "I will always miss him," she said, "but I'll always be grateful for the exciting few years we shared together. Chuck was a gift to me."

self available (albeit a little reluctantly). God wants to do miracles every day through us, if only we make ourselves available.

We live amid spiritual warfare and only God's love will overcome the power of evil, poverty, and injustice. There have been five murders in my neighborhood this year. People ruin their lives on drugs and alcohol. Some turn their lives around, then slide back into addiction. Every year, though, people are resurrected. We hold an annual Easter service on the beach as the sun rises over Lake Michigan. This year a woman testified, "Last year I was dead, now I'm alive." That's the real miracle of prayer, the miracle of new life.

Our homeless shelter for women and children, in fact, is named New Life. Before eating together, we gather in a circle, hold hands, and sing a prayer: "Our God is good to us. And so we thank our God, for giving us the things we need, the sun and the rain and the food we eat." A visitor once asked if that kind of song was appropriate for homeless people. Let me tell you, it is abundantly clear that the people in that room have more sense of thanksgiving and praise than many people in the average suburban pew. They pray unashamedly, just to survive, and thank God for every little blessing that comes their way.

The poor know grassroots things about the gospel that the rest of the church needs. I learn to pray by listening to them, and then by asking God to make me constantly available for whatever we can do to serve one another and Christ's reign.

stantial criticisms lodged against much of the new emphasis on contemplative spirituality, within both the Catholic and Protestant churches.<sup>21</sup> As I looked around for resources to help me with my prayer life as well as others', I saw how confusing the landscape was.

### "An Intelligent Mysticism"

The way forward for me came by going back to my own spiritual-theological roots. During my first pastorate in Virginia, and then again in New York City, I had the experience of preaching through St. Paul's letter to the Romans. In the middle of chapter 8, Paul writes:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (vv. 15–16)

The Spirit of God assures us of God's love. First, the Spirit enables us to approach and cry to the great God as our loving father. Then he comes alongside our spirit and adds a more direct testimony. I first came to grips with these verses by reading the sermons of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a British preacher and author of the mid-twentieth century. He made the case that Paul was writing about a profound experience of God's reality.<sup>22</sup> Eventually I found that most modern biblical commentators generally agreed that these verses describe, as one New Testament scholar put it, "a religious experience that is ineffable" because the assurance of secure love in God is "mystical in the best sense of the word." Thomas Schreiner adds that we must not "underempha-

size the emotional ground" of experience. "Some veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity, but the abuse of the subjective in some circles cannot exclude the 'mystical' and emotional dimensions of Christian experience."<sup>23</sup>

Lloyd-Jones's exposition also pointed me back to writers I had read in seminary, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, the seventeenth-century British theologian John Owen, and the eighteenth-century American philosopher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. There I discovered no choice offered between truth *or* Spirit, between doctrine *or* experience. One of the most accomplished of the older theologians—John Owen—was especially helpful to me at this point. In a sermon on the gospel, Owen gave due diligence to laying the doctrinal foundation of Christian salvation. Then, however, he exhorted his hearers to "get an *experience* of the power of the gospel . . . in and upon your own hearts, or all your profession is an expiring thing."<sup>24</sup> This heart experience of the gospel's power can happen only through prayer—both publicly in the gathered Christian assembly and privately in meditation.

In my pursuit of a deeper prayer life, I chose a counterintuitive course. I deliberately avoided reading any new books on prayer at all. Instead, I went back to the historical texts of Christian theology that had formed me and began asking questions about prayer and the experience of God—questions I had not had in my mind very clearly when I studied these texts in graduate school decades before. I discovered many things I had completely missed. I found guidance on the inward life of prayer and spiritual experience that took me beyond the dangerous currents and eddies of the contemporary spirituality debates and movements. One I consulted was the Scottish theologian John Murray, who provided one of the most helpful insights of all:

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It is necessary for us to recognize that there is *an intelligent mysticism* in the life of faith . . . of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer. . . . He communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love. . . . The life of true faith cannot be that of cold metallic assent. It must have the passion and warmth of love and communion because communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion.<sup>25</sup>

Murray was not a writer given to lyrical passages. Yet when he speaks of “mysticism” and “communion” with the one who died and ever lives for us, he is assuming that Christians will have a palpable love relationship with him and do have a potential for a personal knowledge and experience of God that beggars the imagination. Which, of course, means prayer—but what prayer! In the midst of the paragraph, Murray quotes Peter’s first epistle: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” The older King James version calls it “joy unspeakable and full of glory.” Some translate it “glorified joy beyond words.”<sup>26</sup>

As I pondered that verse, I had to marvel that Peter, in writing to the church, could address all his readers like this. He didn’t say, “Well, some of you with an advanced spirituality have begun to get periods of high joy in prayer. Hope the rest of you catch up.” No, he assumed that an experience of sometimes overwhelming joy in prayer was normal. I was convicted.

One phrase of Murray’s resonated particularly, that we were called to an *intelligent* mysticism. That means an encounter with God that involves not only the affections of the heart but also the convictions of the mind. We are not called to choose between a Christian life based

## The Necessity of Prayer

on truth and doctrine *or* a life filled with spiritual power and experience. They go together. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for “something more,” for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.

## Learning to Pray

As Flannery O’Connor asked so plaintively, how, then, do we actually learn how to pray?

In the summer after I was treated successfully for thyroid cancer, I made four practical changes to my life of private devotion. First, I took several months to go through the Psalms, summarizing each one. That enabled me to begin praying through the Psalms regularly, getting through all of them several times a year.<sup>27</sup> The second thing I did was always to put in a time of meditation as a transitional discipline between my Bible reading and my time of prayer. Third, I did all I could to pray morning and evening rather than only in the morning. Fourth, I began praying with greater expectation.

The changes took some time to bear fruit, but after sustaining these practices for about two years, I began to have some breakthroughs. Despite ups and downs since then, I have found new sweetness in Christ *and* new bitterness too, because I could now see my heart more clearly in the new light of vital prayer. In other words, there were more restful experiences of love as well as more wrestling to see God triumph over evil, both in my own heart and in the world. These two experiences of prayer we discussed in the introduction grew together like twin trees. I now believe that is how it should be. One stimulates the other. The result was a spiritual liveliness and strength that this



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Christian minister, for all my preaching, had not had before. The rest of the book is a recounting of what I learned.

Prayer is nonetheless an exceedingly difficult subject to write about. That is not primarily because it is so indefinable but because, before it, we feel so small and helpless. Lloyd-Jones once said that he had never written on prayer because of a sense of personal inadequacy in this area.<sup>28</sup> I doubt, however, that any of the best authors on prayer in history felt more adequate than Lloyd-Jones did. The early-twentieth-century British writer P. T. Forsyth expressed my own feeling and aspiration better than I can:

It is a difficult and even formidable thing to write on prayer, and one fears to touch the Ark. . . . But perhaps also the effort . . . may be graciously regarded by Him who ever liveth to make intercession as itself a prayer to know better how to pray.<sup>29</sup>

Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God *as* God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life.

We must learn to pray. We have to.