

April 2, 1967
Psalm 16
Norman S. Ream

INTO THE PRESENCE

"In thy presence there is fulness of joy."
Psalm 16:11

One of the strongest arguments for God is the naturalness of our longing for Him.

All men acknowledge God's existence at one time or another, whether in time of severe need, or in time of great joy and happiness. They reach out for that which is beyond themselves in order to find strength and help, or to express their joy and gratitude. Such thoughts and words spring forth from men almost in spite of themselves.

An example with which many of us are familiar came out of World War II when it became a commonplace expression to insist that there were no atheists in foxholes. In the extremes of danger or of pain men did what men have probably always done--cried out, "God, help me."

Chicago Wesley Memorial Hospital provides us with an example of men turning to God in their moments of greatest joy and gratitude. In its fathers' waiting room that hospital keeps a notebook in which fathers may write their thoughts as they wait outside the delivery room. There are few fathers who do not mention God. Here are some quotations from that notebook:

"God, being merciful, blessed us with two 3-pound girls."

"Thank God for little babies!"

"Only God, the creator and sustainer, could give such a perfect gift--a baby girl."

"Thank God we have a boy to raise."

"Two girls! Thank you, Lord! They are both healthy."

And finally this entry:

"My wonderful, beautiful wife just gave birth to the most wonderful, most beautiful little girl in the world, delivered by the most wonderful doctor in the world. I love my wife, our baby, the doctor, and the whole wide world. Nothing can ever equal this moment. Thank you, thank you, thank you, dear God."

Could anyone deny that under these circumstances recognition of God is as natural as breathing? From whence comes this natural human function? Is it reasonable to suggest that something so natural is purely emotional, and less vital and necessary to man than breathing itself?

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Man turns to God in this most natural way because God is. If God is, then any man who does not seek Him in prayer is foolish and pitiable. To have an opportunity to know God and not use that opportunity is the greatest tragedy of human existence, for in God's presence is indeed "fulness of joy".

II

But in spite of what I have just said, most men and women do not know how to pray. When a cry to God springs from either our great need or our great joy, it is an acknowledgment of God's existence and of His goodness and mercy, but it is not really prayer. Prayer is fellowship with God and few there be who achieve it in any meaningful and lasting way. It is too difficult a discipline; it demands too much.

Prayer means taking time and it means drawing apart. These things Jesus did regularly. The science writer, Loren Eisely, who writes so beautifully and movingly of nature, wrote also of this in his book, The Immense Journey:

"It is a commonplace of all religious thought, even the most primitive, that the man seeking visions and insight must go apart from his fellows and live for a time in the wilderness. If he is of the proper sort, he will return with a message. It may not be a message from the God he set out to seek, but even if he has failed in that particular, he will have had a vision or seen a marvel, and these are always worth listening to and thinking about."

Well, most of us will not or cannot go for a time into the wilderness. But again, most of us will not even go for a time into our closet and shut the door as Jesus urged us to do. We have tried it a few times, you know, and nothing seemed to happen. And besides, if God is as good as ministers say he is, he wouldn't make things so difficult. So we give it up as a bad job, and in spite of the longing in our breasts for meaning and understanding, we go our way, purposeless, passionless, day after day.

"In thy presence is fulness of joy". That joy could be ours, if only we wanted it badly enough. We think that prayer is for the purpose of overcoming some kind of reluctance on the part of God. We think that prayer is the way to get things from God. We think that if only we pray hard enough, we can get God to will our will. Prayer is none of these things.

As Frank Laubach puts it, "Prayer is opening the windows." "Prayer", as Georgia Harkness puts it, is "Laying hold of God's willingness." Prayer does something to us, not to God, and Gerald Heard is everlastingly right when he says, "Prayer is not asking for things, not even for the best things; it is going where they are."

III

Let me say a word about how to pray, by quoting two men who know how. The first, St. Francis de Sales. Said he, "He prays well who is so absorbed with God that he does not know he is praying."

The second man is Douglas Steere, who wrote, "Perhaps there is no simpler way of describing mental prayer than 'putting God at the center of attention'".

Both of these men, you will note, have said the same thing in different ways. God must become the central concern of life. He must be both the way and the goal. You must want Him more than you want anything else in life. The psalmist, who wrote that "in God's presence is fulness of joy", wrote also of how he had discovered this joy: "I have set the Lord always before me."

Gerald Heard has put it in another way when he has written, "God is always closer to us than we are to Him." What he means is this, that God has given Himself to His children. He is with us constantly. It is we who determine whether or not we abide in His presence or outside of His presence. Prayer is putting ourselves consciously into the presence of God. Prayer, therefore, does not require any words, any formal expressions. Prayer is a consciousness that one does dwell in the presence of God. You put yourself into that presence or take yourself out of that presence according to your own will.

But this is where the rub is--we do not control our own wills. We are not well disciplined enough. Prayer is the supreme mental activity, and very few of us have much control over our mental activity. The researchers tell us that the primary secret of genius is the ability to concentrate. How many of us can concentrate on anything for more than a few moments? It does indeed require a strict and difficult discipline to be able to "set the Lord always before me."

IV

I must confess that I grew up in a Christian home, graduated from a theological seminary, and served the church as a minister for a number of years before I really began to understand the real meaning and significance of prayer. Of course, no prayer if it proceeds from a sincere and unselfish spirit is ever in vain. If it draws a man closer to God it has value. But the older I get and the more experienced in prayer I get, the more I come to understand how foolish it is to ask God to do anything, or to give us anything. Who am I, this finite little human creature, to tell the God of all creation what is a wise course for Him to take? How little I know of my own needs or the needs of others. For me to ask God to do something specific demonstrates that I have very little faith in the love and mercy of God and God's desire to do always that which is best for His children.

Do not ask God to do things for you. Do not ask Him to give you things. Ask only that His will be done in your life and in the lives of those whom you love. For if God's will is done, that which is for the

best will be done. How often have we had the experience of wanting something so badly, thinking that we needed something so badly, convinced that what we wanted was good, only to discover later that it was the worst thing that conceivably could have happened. But if we pray for that which God wants, no matter what it is that God does will, from the standpoint of eternity, be good and true and beautiful.

A fine Christian gentleman I once knew, by the name of Nels Ferre, came to this country after his parents had died and lived with his grandmother. One day his grandmother opened his bedroom door and heard him praying that God would give him a bicycle. She interrupted his prayers. "Nels", she said, "that's no way to pray. Thank Him and praise Him. Thank Him and praise Him."

There are indeed very few occasions when we ever need to ask God for anything. But the time is always present when we need to thank God for everything and praise Him for His goodness and mercy.

The more we pray, the more real God becomes to us. We need those longer periods of time, in the morning or in the evening, when we can uninterruptedly concentrate on God's goodness and mercy for 20 or 30 minutes at a time. But we also need those shorter intervals during the day when we draw our attention away from the things of this world momentarily to remind ourselves that we are in the presence of God and that this is God's world. He is with us, He is seeking to do good things for us in this moment. And when we practice that discipline, the world in which we live becomes a different kind of world. We see things from a different perspective. We feel His presence and in His presence we lose our fears, our uncertainties, our own vanity and pride.

V

A number of years ago in Baltimore, Maryland, a prisoner escaped from the penitentiary. This is how he did it. He fashioned himself a crude tool with a piece of steel. With that tool, he scraped the slate loose from the floor. He then cut through the concrete foundation of the prison. Then he burrowed a tunnel seventy feet long, disposing of the dirt by carrying it back to the cell in a gunny sack and putting it down the drain bit by bit. He worked only in darkness with the aid of a crude lamp he fashioned. He had to dig a trench to take care of water seepage. All of this while being on the look-out for the guards who paced by his cell every fifteen minutes on the look-out for strange noises. After 20 months he escaped.

Men will do all of this and more to gain their physical freedom. How much are we willing to do to gain spiritual freedom and spiritual strength and courage? The way to that freedom is through a disciplined life of prayer. Too many of us are like the child who prayed and then said to his father, "I asked God to make me good: why didn't he?"

God has given us the means whereby we may gain the strength to do these things for ourselves. That means is the gift of prayer. Whether we use it or not, is up to us.

"No one was ever lost who prayed; no one was ever saved who did not pray."