

THE BEGINNING OF PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning I want to begin with you a series on the subject of prayer, taking the development of this series largely from Old Testament truth and teaching about prayer. Our method is still going to be expositional -- understanding what each passage says -- but it will be centered around this theme of prayer.

I do this because I feel a great sense of lack in my own life in this regard. I want to understand more the ministry, the power, and the necessity of prayer. I sense that this lack is a common problem among most Christians. In fact, I would like to ask you to indicate by a raised hand how many of you feel that your prayer life lacks something. Well, with that unanimous vote, we will proceed then to this subject of prayer.

I want to begin with what I think is the first prayer in the Bible, found in the account in Genesis 3 of the conversation between Adam and Eve when they were hiding from the Lord God, and they heard him walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Now, there are words from God to man before this account in Genesis, but this is the first *dialogue* between God and man recorded in the Scriptures. It is essential, therefore, to see dialogue as a necessary part of prayer.

Prayer, basically, is simply conversation with God. There are always only two people represented in true prayer, you and God -- and no one else. Others may be present, as in this account where there were two people and God. There can be two hundred people, or, as here this morning, many hundreds of people present, but real prayer is always a conversation directly between a single human being and God himself. There are many kinds of prayer we could talk about and will be talking about in the course of these studies. We will look at intercession, thanksgiving, supplication, and various forms of petition, etc., but fundamental to them all is simply a conversation, a dialogue between an individual and God.

This is what Jesus had in mind in his great teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "When you pray..." (Notice he did not say *if* you pray. He takes it for granted that, in the Christian life, there is going to be prayer. Prayer, as one hymn puts it, is "the Christian's native breath." We cannot live without it. So we will pray at times; there is no doubt about it.) Jesus says, "When you pray, go into your closet, and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret." By that phrase "shut the door," he certainly does not mean that we are to pray only in literal closets. I'm sure if we tried that we would probably feel it so stuffy we could not even breathe, so prayer would not go on very long. Also, we do not always have closets available. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, saying, "Shut out everything else. When you pray do not let anything else interfere. Do not be involved with thinking about other things or people, but talk only to God himself."

I find it interesting to listen to people pray. Sometimes you can hear some amazing things. When you listen you can often detect that people do not think about God so much as they are thinking about the people who are listening to their prayer. I know a wonderful man who, whenever he prays, almost invariably will begin with directing prayer to God, but then he is so aware of other people listening that he starts preaching to them in prayer. Have you ever heard anything like that? This man will start out, "Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come before you. We know that God is a prayer-hearing God and all those who come to God in prayer shall be blessed by Him." Before you know it he has begun not to speak to God but to speak to those present about God. But that is not prayer. Prayer is a conversation, simple and direct, between you and God himself.

That is what you see in this opening account here in the Bible. Genesis 3:8-9a:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, {Gen 3:8-9a RSV}

That is the beginning of prayer. Now it is suggested here, and I think deliberately so, that this was an habitual thing in the lives of Adam and Eve. It is rather remarkable, but the first prayer is recorded only after the fall. Yet the account suggests very plainly that prayer had been a continual delight and blessing to Adam and Eve, and was daily a part of their experience. This seems to be an habitual action on God's part. He comes into the garden in the cool of the day to converse with the two that had come from his creative hand, and together they talked in the garden.

We are not sure just how God appeared to them. We are not told that in Scripture, but apparently he appeared as another human being. The remarkable thing, of course, is that, in some faint way at least, this pictures that incarnation, when God himself would come down and be man -- not merely appear as man but actually be one of us -- and all the encouragement that has meant in terms of prayer since the incarnation of Jesus our Lord. But here, apparently, God appears as a man because they heard him walking in the garden. The sound of his footsteps reminded Adam and Eve that the time had come for their daily conversation and interchange with God.

Now, the most remarkable thing about this incident, though, is that the initiative for beginning this prayer starts with God. It is the Lord who comes into the garden. It is the Lord who calls out for man. Prayer, therefore, begins with God. In many ways, that is the greatest truth about prayer that we can learn from this incident, because all through the rest of Scripture that truth underlies every prayer that is ever uttered from here on. So we must always read the accounts of Scripture from that point of view.

A lot of false teaching has gone out that pictures prayer as something man does to God. In the messages I have heard on prayer, at times, it seems that it is man who rescues God from a predicament by praying at the right time. In the account in Genesis further on, where Abraham is pleading with God for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah after God has announced that he is going to destroy them for their evil, it sounds very much as though Abraham steps up and says, "Lord, you're surely not going to do that! That's not like you at all. You don't destroy the righteous with the wicked, do you?" {cf, Gen 18:23, 18:25}. Then Abraham proceeds to pin the Lord down as to how many righteous it takes in order to save a city. He begins with 50, then 45, and reduces it by 5's until he gets a little bit bolder and starts in with 10's. He finally ends up with ten people, and he gets God to agree that if there are ten righteous people in the cities the Lord will spare them. I have heard messages on that passage which make it sound as though Abraham is more compassionate than God, as though God is wrathful and vengeful and has lost his temper and is out to destroy these cities but Abraham steps up and lays a restraining hand on him and says, "Now take it easy. Don't get carried away here. There are some righteous people in this city."

But we read the account wrong if we see it that way. Man is never more compassionate than God. Compassion is born of God and only shows up in human beings when it is implanted by the Spirit of God. "He who loves," John says, "is born of God," {1 Jn 4:7 RSV}. You cannot feel compassion and mercy and pity without the moving of the Spirit of God. It is always a mistake, therefore, to think that we are called on in the act of prayer to do something to God, or that we are being summoned to persevere in prayer to such a degree that we, as the saying goes, "pray through" and persuade a reluctant God to do or not to do something that he has set his heart upon. That is not prayer. Prayer, as in this first instance in the Garden of Eden, begins with God. It is God who calls. It is God who helps.

Surely that is what the great verse on prayer in Romans 8 is teaching us: "We do not know what to pray for as we ought," {cf, Rom 8:26}. Have you ever felt that way -- overwhelmed by a situation, hardly able to analyze it, not knowing all the factors involved, feeling your heart moved and torn, and hardly knowing what to ask for? We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses, the Apostle Paul says, and begins to pray through us so that our hearts become the prayer-room of God himself. The Spirit of God prays to the Father, and he who knows the mind of the Spirit heeds and acts according to what the Spirit prays, using us as the instrument.

There is the biblical picture of prayer -- it begins with God. That is why, when we feel a need or a desire to pray, or to set up a disciplined habit of prayer, it is God who has begun that. He has planted that desire in us and we are responding. I hope we will remember that because that is the first great truth about prayer we learn in the Scripture.

Notice too that the prayer Adam and Eve habitually had with God, by contrast to this very scene, was apparently one of relaxed, informal and uninhibited conversation. Now, sin has entered. The guilty pair are hiding in the bushes, aware of their nakedness, feeling the shame and the guilt of what they have done. But the very account implies that this is something different and new, that the opposite of this behavior was true before the introduction of evil, that they would come skipping and laughing into the presence of God to greet their beloved Friend as he came into the garden to chat with them about all the concerns of their hearts. That is an indication of what you find in prayer all through the rest of Scripture, especially what Jesus taught us about prayer. We are not coming to a solemn, severe judge; we are coming to a loving Father.

There have been times in my ministry here as a pastor, during these 30 years, when I have been occasionally treated with great respect, especially when I have gone away from here -- you know a prophet is not without honor save in his own country! That is not true of me, but sometimes I get more honor when I go abroad. People call me "Doctor" Stedman. They speak with great, obvious reverence and respect, and that is nice, in a way. But you know, I have noticed that when my children were small they never treated me that way. When I would come home from a day here at church, they did not come out in the driveway and say, "Oh, thou great and mighty pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, welcome home to lunch!" They knew me better than that. They were more intimately related to me than that. They would run and jump into my arms and tell me what they had been doing that day.

That is the picture Jesus gives us of true prayer; and that is what you see, by implication, here in the Garden of Eden. The very fact that it took place in the cool of the day is an indication that it was a relaxed, unpressured time. Their work, or whatever it was they had been doing, was over and they could feel relaxed and refreshed. With a 7-Up in hand, I am sure, they walked through the garden, talking with their dear Friend in intimate and unrestricted conversation about whatever was on their hearts. That was prayer, that artless manifestation of being relaxed in the presence of a trusted Friend.

But now notice something more from this account. Sin had entered by this time, and Adam and Eve were hiding from God. All the informality was gone, replaced instead with fear, a sense of shame, and an unwillingness to come before his presence. But God himself again assumes the initiative to correct that condition. He begins to address questions to Adam and Eve.

Now, it is very, very important to understand that, because there is already evident in this account a gulf that had come in between man and God, and it is God who undertakes to bridge that gulf. There are times in our prayer lives when we too sense that gulf that separates us from God. We are either too afraid, too lazy, or too dull to come before him. The encouraging thing to me about this account is that God himself assumes the responsibility to change that. He does it in prayer by the asking of questions. There follows these three questions that come from the divine lips:

- "Where are you, Adam?" {cf, Gen 3:9b RSV};
- "Who told you that you were naked?" {Gen 3:11a RSV}; and finally,
- "What is this that you have done?" {Gen 3:13a RSV}

It is very important, of course, to understand that God does not ask these questions because he does not know the answers to them. He knows the answer to every question before he ever asks it. He never asks a question for his own benefit; no account of Scripture ever records a divine question that was asked to satisfy the curiosity of God. Jesus was always asking his disciples questions, not because he did not know the answers, but because the questions would arouse an investigation, a search on the part of the individual, and he himself would learn something from that search.

Remember that remarkable passage in the book of Job, when, in the 38th chapter, God summons Job before him and says to him, "Stand up now and gird up your loins like a man and answer me," {cf, Job 38:3}. He reminds Job that he had been asking for that privilege for a long time, saying, "Oh, if I just had a chance to talk to God. I've got some questions I would like to ask him about what he is doing to me." Now God says, "All right Job, here is your chance. Here I am. But let me first ask you some questions to establish your credentials, to see if you can play in my league." Then begins the series of the most remarkable scientific

questions ever asked any human being on the face of this earth. But not one of them can Job answer. Finally, he is found on his face in the dust, crying out, "I despise myself, I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes," {cf, Job 42:6}. God then begins to work.

Something similar is occurring here in the Garden of Eden. Here are Adam and Eve hiding. They do not want to know God, to talk with him, or to see him, but God himself calls them out, and gently, not harshly, begins to ask them some questions. His first question is very important:

"Where are you?" {Gen 3:9a RSV}. I do not know any question more important in life than that. God is teaching us by this means that, in this sin-cursed earth in which we human beings must now dwell, it is important that we frequently ask ourselves, "Where am I?" and evaluate what is going on in our lives.

If somebody who had never been here before started out for this service today but got lost and telephoned someone here, and said, "I don't know how to get there. Can you help me?" what would be the first question he would be asked? Of course it would be, "Where are you?" The very first thing a man or a woman, a boy or a girl must ask himself is, "Where am I? Where am I in this journey through life? What's happened to me? Am I nearer to the fulfillment of my dreams than I was a year ago, or am I further away and finding them fading rapidly into the distance? Am I nearer the objective, the ideal, or what I wanted to be as a man or a woman now than I was a few years ago? Where am I?" That is the first important question we need to ask frequently of ourselves. How wonderful that God teaches man this about himself.

Adam must have struggled with the answer. "Where am I? Well, here I am Lord, here in the bushes, feeling shameful and naked and deprived and away from you." He must have suddenly realized in his heart that was not where he was just the day before. He begins, for the first time perhaps, to grasp the enormity of what has happened to him.

I have seen men and women go through that many times; so have you. All the difficulties of our life tend to be God's voice shouting at us, "Where are you?" Have you ever been laid up in the hospital suddenly, by an accident or an illness, and there in the quiet of the hospital room when nobody is around you have some moments to think, and the question comes rising out of your heart, "Where am I?"

Adam stammers out an answer to that question (Verse 10),

... "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." {Gen 3:10 RSV}

God's second question is equally significant: "Who told you that you were naked?" {Gen 3:11a RSV}. That is a very perceptive question. God implies, "I didn't tell you, but somewhere you have learned this. You never knew it before." It is interesting to imagine this scene. Here are Adam and Eve cavorting around the garden, enjoying themselves, and doing their work, absolutely stark naked, totally unaware of any implications of that, unaware that they are candidates for a centerfold somewhere! Now, suddenly, without any visible outward change, they are filled with shame because of this fact. God's question implies, "Somebody told you that. You didn't find it out yourself because it has been true for a long time and you didn't know it. Somebody has been talking to you." Of course, the only other one who has so far appeared on the scene is the serpent. He must have told them they were naked. Thus the Lord God in his mercy and compassion has led this couple to an understanding that there is a tremendous need in life to discriminate in the voices we listen to.

We need to heed this warning as well. There are many voices shouting at us all the time. Turn on the television and listen to the commercials. The quiet voices shouting through the stridency are constantly saying to us, "You need this. You don't have it. You're deprived. You need this new mouthwash in order to make you able to handle social situations. You need this luxurious cruise through the Caribbean because you deserve it. Somebody's keeping it from you. If you could overcome the obstacles that have been thrown in your way by perhaps unmeaning persons you can gain what you now lack and you can have the happiness that you have been looking for." That comes all the time, doesn't it? That constant din of voices that are saying to us, "You're naked. You don't have anything. You've been cheated. If you only had this you'd find what you have been looking for." Here, in prayer, the Lord is able to dispel this illusion, to remove it from their eyes

and to show them that a voice other than his is talking to them. I do not know anything more important today than to understand that there are voices in this world we must reject. There are pleas made to us continually that we must set aside. We must not listen to them. We must close our ears to them because they are the voice of someone other than the Lord our God.

Then God brings them to the third question, "What is this that you have done?" {Gen 3:13a RSV}. In response, Adam and Eve begin the age-old game of passing the buck. Adam took it like a man -- he blamed it on his wife! Eve took it like a woman -- she blamed it on the neighbors! Hidden in each of their responses, however, is the implication, "You're to blame, God. 'The woman which Thou gavest me. She gave me the fruit and I ate it.' 'The serpent whom you allowed in the garden beguiled me and I ate.'" The commentators make a great deal out of this passage, and rightly so. This is the beginning of that natural tendency that every one of us feels to minimize our guilt, to blame someone else for what we have done. Yet, somehow, I think that misses the point of what this text is saying, for, in each case, both Adam and Eve were reduced to three little words that are of great significance here. Both of them end their feeble effort at justification with these words of acknowledgment, "and I ate," {Gen 3:12b, 3:13b RSV}. There is the responsibility that they acknowledge was theirs. They made the final decision. They are trying to find some excuse for the pressure they were under, but ultimately they have come to the place where they acknowledge it, "Yes, we did it. We ate of the fruit we were forbidden to take of."

Then everything changes instantly. God now is no longer probing; there are no more questions. He assumes the role of defense attorney. He turns now and focuses upon the serpent and begins to curse him, announcing certain unavoidable consequences that will follow the man and the woman because of their wrongful choice. These are always there when we choose wrong. Nevertheless, God announces that he will be with them in it; he will go through the hurt and the heartache with them. The scene ends with the Lord God himself tenderly fashioning clothing out of the skins of animals to clothe Adam and Eve in their nakedness.

This is a beautiful account of the forgiveness of God. The great lesson for us to learn is that it was the act of prayer, the beginnings of a dialogue, painful as it may have been, that permitted the Lord God to break through the misunderstanding and the confusion of their situation and help them to see where they were in reality and to accept his forgiving grace and restoring love. That is what prayer is about. It is a way of bringing us back into relationship to the Lord our God.

Now, one further word on this. This account indicates the reason for our reluctance to pray. We are like Adam and Eve, afraid of God at times, or we think he is of no account and no help to us, so what is the use of coming to him in prayer? In our confusion and bewilderment, oftentimes, we find ourselves reluctant to pray. That was Adam and Eve's situation here. Their whole reluctance was traceable to the entrance of evil into their lives. I am sure this explains why we sometimes find it hard to pray; we do not *feel* like praying. But the wonderful thing is that if we bring even that problem to the Lord he will help us with it, for, as this account indicates, it is his delight to untangle all the tangled mess that our sins have made, to help us see the reality behind the confusion in which we are living, and to bring us at last to the place of acknowledgment and restoration.

We are going to leave the account there and trust that we have learned from this how gracious is the Lord our God and how glorious is the relationship of intimacy and fellowship we may have with him, despite the obstacles to prayer that every one of us must confront and live with day-by-day.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for this beautiful account, for the glory of the fact that you have undertaken to help us in our infirmities, knowing that we struggle in prayer; and we are feeble about it. There are times when we hide ourselves as Adam and Eve did. Thank you for the voice that refuses to let us go, but gently calls us out to deal with our infirmities and enables us to find the place of cleansing and forgiveness and restoration. We pray that we may learn more about prayer as we go through this account in scripture. Teach us Lord, to frequently lay hold of this great privilege and to enjoy it as it was intended to be enjoyed. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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