

The Foot of the Cross

Prayer at the Foot of the Cross

By Octavius Winslow

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:19-22

"And so, dear friends, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. This is the new, life-giving way that Christ has opened up for us through the sacred curtain, by means of his death for us.

And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's people, let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water." Hebrews 10:19-22

If there is one exercise of the believing soul which more than another finds its appropriate place at the cross, it is communion with God. *Prayer is God's ordained channel of making known our requests to Him, and of communicating His blessings to us in response to those requests.* It is that holy engagement by which God and man are brought into the closest and holiest transaction. He who enters into the Holiest must be employed in the holiest exercise of the soul. This is prayer, real prayer- entering into the Holiest and standing in the immediate presence of the Holy One. Nor this alone. It is *not* a silent, awe-struck posture of the soul. Pavilioned within that holy place, prostrate in the presence of God, the believer is in sweet, holy, filial communion and fellowship with the invisible God- that God standing to him in the relation of a *Father*. Wondrous privilege of the believer! What can surpass, yes, what can equal it? The privilege of drawing near to God, of penetrating within the Holiest, of pouring out the heart in confession, supplication, and praise- oh, it distances in its solemnity and its preciousness every other privilege and enjoyment of the renewed soul. But the sacred and solemn topic which will more immediately engage our present thoughts is, the *relation of prayer to the sacrifice of Jesus*; in other words, *communion with God at the cross*. We shall contemplate in their order- the *place* into which the believer enters- the *door* through which he enters- and the *liberty and*

encouragement he has to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus.

THE PLACE INTO WHICH THE BELIEVER ENTERS.

We have, in the outset of the subject, the most sublime and solemn idea of access to God, of fellowship with the Invisible, found in the Bible. It is nothing less, it could be nothing greater, than entering into the Holiest. The typical reference will be familiar to the Bible reader. It points us to the inner shrine of the tabernacle, "the holy of holies," the place of the Shechinah glory, representing the visible glory of the invisible God, where the awful presence of the Holy One was felt, and into which the high priest alone entered once in the year. We have here a shadowing forth the *true nature of prayer- of access to God*; it is communion with the Invisible, which the believer experiences, and is privileged with, under the new and more gospel economy. When we approach God in prayer, in the fullest and most gospel sense, we enter into the Holiest. And yet, how few individuals there are, professing to be believers in Christ, who penetrate into this sacred place- who realize that, *when they approach God in prayer, they are actually in the presence of the Most Holy!*

Now, look at the illustration of real prayer suggested to us by this "entering into the Holiest." In the first place, we have presented to us the holiness of the act itself. By faith we penetrate into the inner shrine; and nothing gives us a more vivid and impressive view of the solemnity of prayer, of the awesome holiness of access to God, as this. What really is prayer? It is standing before the holy Lord God! It is "dust and ashes" entering into the presence of the Infinite! It is a poor, sinful, hell-deserving sinner in audience with the Righteous One! It is the finite, in its fallen, infirm, and necessitous condition, holding fellowship with the Infinite! Can you conceive of an engagement, can you imagine an employment of the soul more solemn, more holy than this?

Yet, beloved, what superficial views do most of us have of the sanctity that attaches itself to prayer! Oh, with what little solemnity we rush into the presence of the Holy One, as the horse into the battle, unprepared, reckless, and inconsiderate! What little composure of mind, what slight preparation of the heart, what imperfect calling off the thoughts and affections from the trifles of this world, is there in us when we rise and draw near to God! And yet those angels in heaven that stand in His presence, hearkening to the voice of His word, ever poised on the wing to obey His mandate, to do His will, never engage in a service more holy, never approach God so near, so filial, as when you, a sinful, needy, yet believing sinner, approach the throne of grace, standing in the Holy of holies, and in the presence of the Holiest of Beings!

The second idea suggested is, that of the DIVINE PRESENCE which encircles the believer in prayer. When a child of God approaches his Heavenly Father in *devotion, he is supposed to turn his back upon all other beings, and to realize*

that he is in the presence of the Lord of hosts, the King of glory; that he is encircled by the Divine perfections. The true, simple definition of prayer is, fellowship with God; the consciousness that God is present with us. It is to feel that you are with God, and that God is with you; that you are breathing forth the utterances of a humble, penitent, contrite heart, and the deep-felt necessities of your soul; and that God's ear is listening to your voice, bowed down to your feeblest utterance.

What a mockery were you to go to the Queen of these realms with a petition which involved your most precious interests, and were to be satisfied with occupying an 'waiting-room' of the palace in which the sovereign was not seen, her voice not heard, the royal presence not felt! Would you be satisfied by thus going and returning without an audience, and thus without having accomplished the object of your mission? Apply the illustration! *Prayer is entering with our requests "into the Holiest," where the Lord of heaven and earth occupies His throne, to hear and answer our petitions. It is a believing apprehension that He is there; it is a realization of His solemn yet precious presence, the consciousness of being encompassed by the God of love.* Oh, do not be satisfied with any prayer except this- "You, God, see me. You, my Father, are near me. I am breathing the atmosphere of Your holy, loving presence! I am conscious that I am in audience with the Invisible One, and that I stand in the presence of the great Searcher of Hearts."

The third idea is, the close proximity of the Holiest on earth with the Holiest in heaven. Communion with God now, is preparatory to communion with Him hereafter. Fellowship with God in time, is the commencement of an communion perpetuated through eternity. No believing soul that ever held fellowship with God on earth, that ever penetrated into the Holiest, and there felt the spell of the Divine presence, shall be banished from that heaven of glory where communion with God shall be perfected and eternalized. If you have walked with God along these *dark* lanes below, you shall walk with God the golden streets of the New Jerusalem. The broken, stammering accents of prayer here shall be perfected in your communion and communion with God hereafter. *Prayer links man with God, the present with the future, heaven with earth, the Holiest now with the Holiest to come.* And when your soul is conscious, "You are near, O Lord! I feel Your presence, I know Your voice," your experience is like unto that of the patriarch, and you exclaim, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

We are now conducted to THE DOOR by which we enter into the holiest. You will observe, my reader, that it is twofold- by the death and by the life of Jesus- that we enter into the Holiest in prayer. It is by blood-shedding- the death of Jesus; and it is a "living way " -the resurrection-life of Jesus. Let us see how these two views of Christ harmonize, and are indissolubly entwined with your access to God.

First, there is the cross of Christ- "by the blood of Jesus" -the blood He shed when He died upon the cross possessing all the dignity and efficacy of His Godhead- "by the blood of Jesus." Now, in what sense, beloved, do we "enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus?" In other words, what is the connection of the cross with prayer? In the first place, the blood of Jesus removes sin from us in the sight of God. We could not enter into the Holiest unless there were the removal of the great interposing barrier which sin presents. How could we, as sinners, unwashed by blood, presume to enter into the Holiest? It would be like the moth rushing into the candle-light. "*Our God is a consuming fire,*" and it is an awful thing to rush uncleaned, un sanctified, into His presence. Beloved, the blood of Jesus removes this barrier, annihilates this obstruction, by taking away our sins, by blotting out our transgressions; and so washed, we enter into the Holiest! Oh, you who have a humble hope in Christ, whose only foundation is the sacrifice He has offered, behold here the great difficulty, the grand impediment to your access to God totally annihilated! The blood of Jesus Christ has accomplished it. And now, between God the holy and you the sinful there is no impediment, no obstruction, no barrier. Nothing shall obstruct your coming to God as a pardoned sinner, and holding the closest, sweetest, holiest communion with Him, because the blood of Jesus Christ has washed away your sin, has blotted out your guilt, and removed the only obstruction to your closest communion with God.

"The blood of Jesus," too, gives us access to God by purifying the conscience. What is it that prevents the approach of many into the Holiest? It is the guilt of unremoved sin upon the conscience. When a man of God has sin upon his conscience- sin unconfessed and uncleaned; he then knows but little what it is to enter into the Holiest. But let him take a fresh hold of the sacrifice of Jesus, let him bring the conscience beneath the cross of the Crucified, let him wash in the fountain, look by faith anew to the blood, and that which intercepted and blocked his approach is removed; and with a heart sprinkled with the blood, he draws near to God, and holds communion with the Invisible. This my reader, is the grand secret of nearness to God and of communion with Him by prayer, bathing the conscience in the fountain; getting, as it were into the very wounds of Christ. And, strong as may be your conscious unworthiness, great as may be your backsliding, you shall realize that the blood purifying the conscience has brought you into fellowship with God.

There is still one more view. The blood of Jesus supplies us with the merit that gives us access and boldness to enter into the Holiest. We have no other merit but that supplied by an atoning Savior. The blood of Jesus has secured our access. It merits the acceptance of our *persons*, it merits the success of our *petitions*, and it merits and receives the Divine response to our *prayers*. The only merit you have, on the ground of which you can approach God in prayer, is the divine merit which the blood of Jesus Christ supplies; having no other, and conscious that you deserve nothing but the Divine anger, you throw yourself upon "the blood of Jesus," and your faith possesses all the merit that constitutes

the ground of your access to God.

To this I would add, the blood of Jesus supplies you with your plea and argument. When you approach God, a thousand arguments may arise in opposition to your approach, a thousand difficulties interpose themselves in the way of your access. In view of the sad memories that crowd around you, your sins and shortcomings, infirmities and imperfections, like so many haunting spectres staring you in the face and defying your approach, the moment your faith can take hold of the blood of Jesus, instantly, like the accusers of the poor woman who stood in the presence of the Lord, all go out, and you are left alone with God! The blood of Christ has answered and removed all the arguments, and with that one plea- the blood of the spotless Lamb of God, the blood that cleanses from all sin, the blood that has sprinkled the mercy-seat, the blood that intercedes for you within the veil- you approach the throne of grace, and in a moment, guilty and vile though you are, you find yourself standing in the presence of the Holy One! Oh, how precious should that blood be to us! Is there one blessing we ought to prize above every other, I hesitate not to say it is the *blood* of Jesus! Does this page address a poor trembling one, lingering on the sacred threshold of the most holy place, not daring to enter or lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven? Let me remind you of the efficacy of the blood of Jesus; it is sufficient to cleanse you from all sin. Plead by faith, it ushers you into the presence of God, secures your pardon, will bring peace to your sin-disturbed conscience, and give you a loving approach and access to God as your reconciled Father.

Then there is THE LIFE OF JESUS, associated with prayer "by a new and LIVING way." We approach God, beloved, under a new dispensation when we approach through the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus. "New," as it is opposed to the works of the Law; "new," because revealed in the glorious gospel of the grace of God with greater distinctness and vividness; "new," because it possesses a deathless freshness. Come to God, when, where, and with what you may, yet coming by Christ, approaching through the Crucified One, you tread the "new and living way."

Another idea suggested by this expression is, we approach God by a LIVING Savior, we come to God through Him who is "alive for evermore," who is at the right hand of the Father, who also makes intercession for us. Yes, He has passed into the heavens, personally to appear in the presence of God for us. And now Christ is *interceding* for us before the golden throne in heaven- a living Christ-sympathizing, with our needs, difficulties, and fears; a living Christ, imparting vitality to our soul, power to our prayers, and life to our fellowship and communion; a living Christ, bearing us upon His heart, and so entwining all our personal interests with His never-failing intercessions. Thus it is by the death of Christ on the one hand, and by His life on the other, that we are saved. "He was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son;

much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." With these two arguments- Christ's atoning death and Christ's resurrection life- who dare obstruct your coming to God? Who shall interpose an obstacle to your access into the Holiest? Shall sin, with its deepest crimson? shall Satan, with his countless accusations? shall the world, with all its specious arguments? shall unbelief, with its presumptuous suggestions? shall any one or all of these dare to say, "Stand back!" when the death of Christ, on the one hand, and the life of Christ, on the other, open wide the door into the presence of God, and sweetly allure us in- where we lose all our burdens, sorrows, and needs, while leaning in hallowed communion upon the very bosom of Ineffable Love?

It would be an essential defect in this imperfect outline of the medium of prayer- the atonement and intercession of the Great High Priest- did we omit in this place to introduce briefly the part which the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the ever-blessed Trinity, takes in this holy and sublime engagement. The Spirit is as essentially and as closely associated with true prayer as is *the Father the Object*, and *the Son the Medium*, of worship. All true prayer is the Holy Spirit's inspiration and help. "Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Oh, then, recognize and honor the Spirit in prayer! He is a *divine Object* of prayer- worship Him! He is the *gracious Author* of prayer- invoke Him! He is a *loving Answerer* of prayer- wait for Him! Exalt and honor and vindicate the Holy Spirit, and your mind will be more heavenly, your prayers more spiritual, your hopes more bright, your whole life more deeply sanctified and sanctifying. Blessed with the fulness of the Spirit, you shall be a blessing to others through the anointing of the Spirit; and upon your tomb shall be the epitaph, "Those who be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever."

"O Holy Spirit! now descend on me
As showers of rain upon the thirsty ground;
Cause me to flourish as a spreading tree;
May all Your precious fruits in me be found.

"Be my 'teacher' -to my soul reveal
The length, breadth, depth, and height of Jesus' love;
And on my soul Your blest instructions seal;
Raising my thoughts and heart to things above.

"Be my 'comforter' -when I'm distressed
Oh gently soothe my sorrows, calm my grief,
Help me to find upon my Savior's breast,
In every hour of trial, sure relief.

"Be my 'guide' into 'all truth' divine;

Give me increasing knowledge of my God;
Show me the glories that in Jesus shine,
And make my heart the place of His abode.

"Be my 'intercessor' -teach me how
To pray according to God's holy will;
Cause me with deep and strong desire to glow,
And my whole soul with heavenly longings fill.

"Be my 'earnest' of eternal rest,
And 'witness' with me I am God's own child,
With His unchanging love and favor blest,
By Jesus' blood be fully reconciled.

Be my 'sanctifier' -dwell within,
And purify and cleanse my every thought,
Subdue the power of each besetting sin,
And be my will to sweet submission brought.

"Be my 'quickener' -in me revive
Each drooping grace, so prone to fade and die;
Help me on Jesus day by day to live,
And loosen more and more each earthly tie.

"Blest SPIRIT! I would yield myself to Thee,
Do for me more than I can ask or think;
Let me Your holy habitation be,
And daily deeper from Your fulness drink.

The third point is the LIBERTY with which the believer enters by the blood of Jesus into the Divine presence. "Having therefore, brethren, boldness" -or, as the margin renders it, "LIBERTY to enter into the holiest." Liberty is a precious pearl. What will a man not give or imperil for his liberty? -liberty of body, liberty of action, the yet higher liberty of the soul! But what is all this compared to the liberty of drawing near to God as our Father? of looking up into His face as a reconciled God, conscious of filial relation to Him, great and holy though He be? - the privilege of calling Him Abba, Father, of reposing our heaviest burdens

on His arm, of pouring our plaintive utterances of sorrow into His listening ear? Yes, my reader, there is no liberty like this! And this holy liberty is yours.

Now, *what are some of the blessings to which this privilege introduces us?* First, there is the liberty of prayer, which the cross of Christ gives. It gives us warrant of approach to the mercy-seat. It dissolves the legal chain that too often would bind us. It removes the servility of spirit with which we too much approach our Heavenly Father. The cross of Jesus does all this, and so it gives us liberty to

draw near to God. Who can truly prostrate himself at the foot of the cross, except in the spirit of a penitent child, who through the blood of that cross- the new and living way- looks up to God as a sin-forgiving Father?

Then there is *the* liberty in prayer which the cross of Christ inspires. We can have no liberty in prayer but as we entwine our petitions around the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us but see *the cross to be the medium through which our prayers rise acceptably to God*- the glorious mystic ladder upon which our spirit ascends into the presence of the Holy One- and we feel ourselves disenthralled from the chains that bind us; and, upheld by God's free grace and the spirit of adoption, we enter into the presence of Jehovah, and feel ourselves at home with God.

Then there is the liberty procured by prayer. Beloved, prayer emancipates us from Satan's assaults, unbinds the chain of guilt, and bursts the fetters of unbelief. *There is no spiritual exercise of the believing mind which so completely emancipates the soul from its bondage as communion with God beneath the cross of Jesus.* Be your fetters what they may- enthralled by your fears and doubts, by difficult and trying circumstances, by sins and temptations, by the world's potent spell- only give yourself to prayer, only approach the foot of the cross in earnest supplication, and you are free! Such is the 'boldness' of a man of prayer, asking and pleading and wrestling in Christ's name and with Christ's blood.

"Boldness" in prayer suggests the idea of heroism. A praying man is a hero. He is clothed with a coat of armor, grasps an invincible shield, wields a two-edged sword. *He only is a true hero who knows what it is to obtain the mastery over indwelling corruption, victory over every besetting sin; foils Satan, overcomes the world, and fights his way to God through a host of spiritual foes.* That man is a hero in the noblest sense who has boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.

We approach now the EXHORTATION AND THE ENCOURAGEMENT TO PRAYER. "Let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith." "Let us draw near," that is, let us recede from the distance and the shyness, the coldness and the formality, which have too much prevailed to restrain prayer within us, and *let us take a closer position by the cross, and so draw near unto God.* Oh, how much closer in our communion with God we may walk than even Noah and Enoch! They approached by the blood of bulls and of goats- we, by the blood of God's slain Son! Then draw near, saint of the Most High, and keep no longer at a distance. Your God invites you, the golden scepter invites you, the blood upon the mercy-seat invites you, the Great Intercessor in heaven invites you! Oh, avail yourself, without hesitation, of the costliest, the holiest and most soothing privilege this side of glory- that of close, confidential, child-like communion with God. Allow no conscious unfitness, no sad memories of the past or depressing circumstances of the present, no seasons of unbelief or suggestions of Satan, to

keep your soul at a distance from God. With the cross of Jesus, streaming with His precious blood, confronting you- with the Great High Priest before the throne of heaven- with an indwelling Spirit inciting you to prayer and aiding your infirmities- with a pressure of guilt which confession to God alone can lighten, of needs which supplications to your heavenly Father alone can relieve, of sorrow which prayer to Jesus alone can soothe- will you yield to a moment's hesitation in arising and drawing near to God with a true heart and in full assurance of faith? Oh, how precious is prayer beneath the cross! -there, where God and the sinner meet- there, where He has opened His heart and we may open ours- there, where the voice of Christ's blood silences every voice of accusation and sin- there, where no utterances are heard but those of mercy, no sounds but those of love, no sign is seen but His encircling bow! Oh the blessedness of falling beneath the sacred, solemn shadow of that cross, and losing ourselves in God! Draw near, then, you weary ones, you tried ones, you tempted ones, you needy ones, you backsliding ones, draw near! "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God."

But if, my unconverted reader, you live and die a stranger to prayer, *you live a life of wretchedness, and you will die a hopeless death, and will enter unprepared upon an awful eternity*; and of you it will be said, as you go down to the shades of endless woe, "This is the man who never drew near to God." What can the world do for you, O you careless ones, when you come to die? Its pleasures, its possessions, its honors, its delights, what will they avail you when you lay your head upon a dying pillow? It is an awfully solemn thing to die without an interest in the merits and intercession of Christ! To die without having entered into the holiest here- what is it but to be exiled forever from the Holiest hereafter?

Child of God! approach the throne of grace. "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray." "He that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." "Whatever you shall ask in My name that will I do."

"Oh, what a privilege is prayer!
It calms the careworn breast;
It flies from earth to heaven
It makes the wretched blest.

"Prayer- mighty prayer has power
To reach the Eternal Throne;
While there, to claim Almighty aid,
And make it all our own.

"The weakest saint may thus overcome
The strongest of his foes;

He prays- His God a wall of fire
Around the suppliant throws.

"He prays- and all his enemies
Away like smoke are driven;
He prays- and to the fainting one
Jehovah's strength is given!

"Whatever his wrongs, whatever his needs,
He pours them forth in prayer!
And, soon as uttered, they have reached
His loving Father's ear.

"Is sin the burden that he feels,
While struggling to be free?
Helpless, he prays- but grace divine
Gives him the victory.

"Is holiness the prize he seeks?
He can obtain it there;
For nothing is impossible
To wrestling faith and prayer.

"The Spirit teaches him to plead
The merits of the Lamb;
And feeblest prayer acceptance gains
When perfumed with His name.

Prayer, ushered by that precious One,
Enters the court above;
Where shining hosts the answers bear
On rapid wings of love.

"Prayer is the weary heart's desire.
The sure relief of care;
It is to plead with God his word,
And find deliverance there.

"Prayer is to whisper every wish
To Him who can fulfil;
A beggar coming to a King,
To ask whatever he will.

"Prayer is not airy eloquence
Of word and phrase high wrought,
With mind still groveling here below:

Prayer is the heart's deep thought."

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