**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**18. INFIRMITIES IN PRAYER by JOHN H. JOWETT**

I WANT to consider some of the weaknesses which beset us when we commune with God in prayer. If we can clearly recognize our infirmities we may apprehend what is the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities." I know I cannot go far along the road, for it soon passes into mystery and obscurity. But steadily to contemplate our weaknesses will surely reveal to us where the Holy Spirit will bring us needful strength. And in the enumeration of some of these infirmities I think I should first of all mention the weakness of appetite. We may realize this weakness if we contrast it with the strength of appetite revealed in other relationships. Take a man's appetite for business with all its keenness of strenuousness and intensity. Or take a man's appetite for pleasure, which is often as burning as the thirst of the fever-stricken. Or contrast our appetite for a novel with our interest in the things of God. When we turn to pray there is frequently no effective driving taste in our fellowship. And the taste for a thing is always a mighty dynamic. When our taste for anything is weak we loiter along the road, and we are oppressed with our own. weakness. So it is with our weakness of appetite in prayer. We are oppressed by comparative indifference, and in the sense of insipidity we play with the great concern.

And there is a second infirmity which I will call our weakness of faith. We have no strong belief in our business. Real faith is a fountain of boundless energy. At Tobermory, on the west of Scotland, a little handful of men have a strong faith that a sunken galleon from the Spanish Armada is the prison house of great treasure, and their faith is productive of an energy which makes zealous quest. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for." Faith acts mightily on the assumption that the thing hoped for is, and that the next step may bring us face to face with our goal. Have we this kind of faith? When we turn to God in prayer, do we turn to it with the quiet assurance that we are drawing near to a boundless treasury? Do we set about it as though our hands were upon mighty levers whose movement can effect a revolution? King George touched an electric button in London, and a gate swung open in Canada. A lever was turned in London and a Government House in Cape Town was flooded with light. When we pray to the Lord, does any analogous possibility thrill our souls? Have we faith that we can open closed doors, or that we can be the ministers of enlightenment even to souls that are far away? Surely one of our infirmities is our weakness of faith. We are not uplifted by the assurance that we are in touch with the possibilities of endless possessions.

Another infirmity which I will name is the weakness of spirituality. Even when we go to the treasury we frequently ask for the smallest things. We do not honour the great God by the greatness of our quests. "We ask amiss." Suppose that I were to be admitted into a great library, and I were to be taken around by the owner and reader of the books, and suppose he pointed out to me their wealth of glorious lore, and the wonders of music, of vision, and of dream which they enshrined, and suppose he were to say to me, "Take whatever you like from my library," and I were to choose a wastepaper basket! Would not my request disparage the owner, and trifle with the wealth of his provision? Or if in some great studio the artist himself should point out to me the riches of perception, and the glory of workmanship in line and colour, and he were to offer me anything I pleased to choose, and suppose I were to carry away a picture-frame! But occasions that would be incredible in human relationships are quite common in our relationships with God. We ask Him for things that matter least. We neglect the things that are all-important. We emphasize the temporal rather than the eternal. We choose the earthly instead of the heavenly. We emphasize goods more than goodness, and we are more concerned with bodily health than with spiritual robustness. And all the time the big things are waiting, "above all that we can ask or think."

And here is another of our infirmities when we seek to commune with God, our weakness of sympathy. There is little range in our intercessions. The liners on the high seas can now be contrasted by the wealth of their wireless equipments. Some equipments can only carry correspondence over exceedingly limited areas, while the greatest liners throw their mystic arms over enormous seas. A man's sympathies may be regarded as his wireless equipment. Some are pathetically poor and have no range beyond the circle of their own family life. Others may be sensitive ever the area of their own denomination. But powerful saints have an equipment which touches the joys and sorrows of the uttermost parts of the earth. Our prayers are determined in their range by the wealth or poverty of this equipment, and I think we may say that very commonly our sympathetic correspondences are dwarfed and scanty.

And the last infirmity that I will mention is the weakness of understanding. Frequently when I pray I am face to face with problems to which I can see no solution. We cannot see all round the thing, and we "know not what to pray for as we ought." I am writing these words in the critical hours of the Balkan crisis. Just precisely how shall I pray about it? What would be best for Europe? What redistribution of powers will redound most to the glory of God? Here my understanding may be limited, and I pray without the requisite enlightenment. Well, in all these ways the spirit is encumbered by infirmity, and we are in great need of a mighty Helper. "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities," and most assuredly He helps us in the midst of all the weaknesses of an enemy. Wherever the soul stumbles in its frailties, the Holy Spirit, if we permit Him, will bring the needful help.

But more than all this I feel sure that the Holy Spirit strengthens the very prayers we make. For what weak things they are, even at the best! Perhaps my body is itself a hindrance. I have a hard day's work, and I am tired out, and I have scarcely the physical or mental vigour to fix my thoughts upon the Highest. My evening prayer is very weak, and has little promise of effectiveness. But surely just here the Holy Spirit will help my infirmities by adding strength to my petitions! Some signatures change weak appeals into conquests. If we can only secure the signature of a member of the Royal house, what urgency it gives to our plea! And perhaps in the mysterious depths of the soul our poor lame appeals receive the signature of the Holy Spirit, and He "maketh intercessions for us with groanings that cannot be uttered."

And, finally, I think the Holy Spirit corrects our prayers. We may pray in our shortsightedness, and we ask the things that will bring no blessing. But the Holy Spirit, who knoweth the mind of God, puts aside our own petition and intercedes for what will bring us the gift of God's wonderful grace. The Apostle Paul prayed that he might be delivered from his "thorn in the flesh," but the Holy Spirit interceded for him, and while the thorn remained he received an all-sufficient endowment of the grace of God. And St. Monica, the mother of Augustine, prayed that her son might not be taken from her side. But the Holy Spirit interceded, and Augustine was taken to Italy, to Milan, to Ambrose, and to his life in Christ!

And thus are we saved from the peril of our own limitations, and better things are given to us than we desired. Our Friend in Communion watches our interests rather than our words, and the gracious answer that comes to us is inspired by His understanding of all things, "yea, of the deep things of God."