

Praying, Part 7 - Hanging On

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[0 : 00] So, let's go straight to business. Let us pray. Lord, teach us to pray.

For prayer is life for your children. Prayer is light. Prayer brings wisdom. Prayer brings communion with yourself and resources of love and care for others.

Teach us to experience the power of prayer in our own lives beyond anything that we've known as yet. And bless the thoughts that we are now to think together as means to that end.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. I think the first thing that I should do this morning is apologise for not talking the language of North America with perfect aplomb.

My title is Hanging On. You, left to yourselves, I think, would have said Hanging In or else you would have talked about Holding On.

[1 : 24] But I had a reason, I suppose, as I reflect, for choosing the title I did. The phrase Hanging On takes me back, oh, I don't know, 30 or 40 years, I suppose, to the time when my wife Kit and I were taking a little used path to see a waterfall that nobody bothered to inspect anymore.

The path hadn't been well maintained. Kit didn't have any problem with it because she's always been very agile.

She's like a mountain goat on unstable terrain. But I'm different. I was always a clumsy oaf, as they say.

And as you can see, I have a high centre of gravity. And so lose my balance quicker than some. And I was pushing my way along this almost defunct path.

It was on a slope, I mean, on a sideways slope, badly cambered, you would say. And there was a steep bank down into the stream on the right-hand side.

[2 : 49] And to steady myself, I had my one hand up, and I was holding a little branch of a tree, which overhung the path, just to steady myself.

And my foot slipped, and I began to descend. And I remember, as it were yesterday, Kit yelling, hang on!

And what she meant was that I should hang on to the branch that I'd been holding because it would enable me to recover my balance. But alas, the branch had broken.

But you know how it is when your wife says something, you do it. So I was slipping down the bank, holding on very firmly to this broken branch.

Well, I'm glad to say that I didn't actually make the stream. There was a tree root, I think it was, which stopped me a little distance down the bank, and I recovered.

[4 : 06] But it's the kind of thing that you don't forget. And it links up, in my mind, with the refusal to give up, which is generally regarded as a virtue, if I was asked to state the opposite of hanging on, I would say, well, it's giving up or letting go.

And when I use that phrase, giving up, again, pictures come to my mind. There's an apocryphal story, it's often told, a lot of people believe it, that right at the end of his life, Winston Churchill, the elderly Winston Churchill, very elderly, was the speaker at what we would call a convocation, what they call prize day, at Harrow, his old school, and that all he did was toddle up to the microphone and say, this is the beginning and also the end, never, never, never, never, never give up.

And then walked away and that was his, his guest speech, you see, for speech day. Well, the story, I believe, is not true.

Nonetheless, it's a very Churchillian fancy, isn't it? And in my office, up on the, on the cork board on the wall, I have a large cartoon of, you may have seen it because it's been the rounds, I think, this one.

It's a cartoon of a pelican which has in its great beak the head of a frog.

[6 : 08] But the rest of the frog isn't in the beak yet and the frog's front legs are out and are gripping the pelican's narrow neck.

And the legend that goes with the picture is a version of the same formula as Churchill is alleged to have used.

Never, never give up. Well, those are the thoughts which are in my mind as I use the phrase that we used to use regularly back in Britain for perseverance, hang on.

And I want us to think together about this dimension of the activity of praying, hanging on when you feel like letting go and giving up.

When I was a student and getting my Christian nurture from the IV group, I remember the fellow leading the group, president of the Christian Union, had one or two phrases which he constantly used for encouragement.

[7 : 30] Keep on keeping on was one of them. And that's a way of describing what hanging on means, at least to me, when I use it.

It's the phrase of encouragement. encouragement. It's a phrase that calls for what in Britain we used to call stickability and what you folk call, I find, stick-to-itiveness.

And it gives you the thought, which is what I've been elaborating this last three or four minutes, the thought of continuing in face of discouragement and all sorts of incentives to stop.

well, what I want to say to you this morning is that that is a big part of the life of prayer. All sorts of realities can discourage, discourage the continuance of faithful praying, just as they discourage the continuance of other things that we ought to do.

Circumstances can knock you for six. You find yourself disappointed in some project in which you've invested yourself, and it takes the wind right out of your sails.

[8 : 56] Health troubles can also take the wind out of your sails, and make you feel in this instance that the effort of keeping praying, as you know you should keep on praying, is too much for you.

I should say perhaps by way of footnote, that if your problem is clinical depression, then praying on your own is not the best thing to do.

Pray, yes, but pray in company, because if you're depressed, and you get on your own, Satan will have a field day with you, you have been warned.

But in other cases where you're under par physically, well, you will find that the effort of keeping going in prayer is almost, if not quite, beyond you, and you'll be tempted to stop.

Similarly, if it's relations that have gone to pot, as relationships sometimes do, and your nervous energy is being drained by the fact that you're not in a good relationship with somebody close to you, and as I say, it's draining the life out of you all the time, breakdowns of relationships and the family are very exhausting to the heart, I mean to the soul, heart, in that sense.

[10 : 49] And there is discouragement, which again makes you feel well, it simply isn't worth praying, God, you may be tempted to feel, has let me down in this matter.

And, well, that's it. I'm not saying that any of these decisions are rational, I'm only saying that the temptation to make them real becomes very strong.

And patience and persistence perseverance in praying is a Christian virtue, I may call it that, which we have to work hard to cultivate, maintain.

And it's worth a whole session of thinking about it, at least so it seems to me. This, remember, is the inside story of the Christian's life.

praying first to last is inside story stuff. It's not a matter of keeping up appearances. One of the problems in evangelical circles is that we're so very sensitive about keeping up appearances, because we know that our evangelical friends, for sure, will be very sensitive, let's say very alert, in classing their Christian friends as being either very keen or not very keen, and if you have the appearance of being a zealous prayer, you are likely to land up in their estimate in class one, whereas otherwise you'd be in class two.

[12 : 40] well, as I said, I'm not talking about keeping up appearances, I'm saying all these things to get you on wavelength, brothers and sisters, and getting you on wavelength, for what I've got to say, does mean getting you off wavelengths on which you might very well be stuck in the way that I think a lot of evangelicals do get stuck.

So, all of this is ground clearing, and what I'm going to talk about, let me say it yet again, is hanging on in prayer, from the heart, in the heart, when the discouragements are great, and you don't feel like doing it, and you think of 101 reasons why you shouldn't, and, well, your mind probably is in a muddle anyway, and lo and behold, the day has gone by, and you've done no serious praying at all, and the same thing happens tomorrow, and so it goes on.

No, there is a better way than that. We need the help of God in order to find it and follow it. Well, you may remember that earlier in this series of talks, I made quite a point of saying that help is regularly the best prayer we can make, and to ask the Lord to help us to keep going in fellowship with him is an excellent prayer at any time for anybody.

All right. What are we going to do together? We're going to follow the path opened by that little five-letter word that I make a lot of use of in my ministry.

You've probably heard me do so in the past. We know how four-letter words become notorious in contemporary society.

[14 : 48] Well, this is a five-letter word. I would like it to be equally notorious. It's spelt T-H-I-N-K and is pronounced think. And what I'm going to offer you now is an exercise in thinking.

An exercise whereby, through the grace of God, the down drag of feeling, discouraged feeling, may be overcome.

I'm talking about persistent praying. And my material is arranged under four headings, the relationship that makes persistent praying appropriate, the records of persistent praying in scripture, the reasons why persistent praying is necessary, and then fourth, the reason, back to where we've just been, reasons why persistent praying is difficult.

I shall simply be repeating though what I've just said. You know how spiral tunnels work? There's one famous one on the old CPR line, and Switzerland is full of them.

The tunnel spirals up so that while you're in the mountain, you're going round in not circles but spirals and you're gaining height.

[16 : 27] You come out of the tunnel up above the point at which the train went in, you look down and you can see the entry of the tunnel. If it's one of those huge freight trains that the CPR still goes in for on that classic Trans Canada line, I know that you can see the end of the train, last lot of cars, still on the line into the tunnel when you come out at the top, though I suppose nobody except the train crew sees that nowadays.

Well, when we get to the end of this talk, I hope we shall have gained some height in the way that spiral tunnels enable you, well, to gain, actually give you a gain in height, and then when you're high several hundred feet higher up, of course, on a mountain side, you can see a great deal more than you could see at the beginning.

So that's the route we're going to follow, and away we go with my heading number one, the relationship that makes persistent praying, appropriate.

Jesus indicated that it's appropriate in two famous parables which have sometimes had his disciples scratching their heads.

Remember? The friend at midnight knocking up his friend next door in order to borrow some bread from him.

[18 : 11] and the unjust judge giving in to the persistent visits of the widow, the widow, the biblical figure of the underprivileged person.

The widow troubles me, he said, so I'll give her what she wants in order to get rid of her. Well, both of those stories were told obviously not to give us our image of God our heavenly father, but to encourage us always to pray and not to lose heart, which is how actually Luke telling the unjust judge story expresses it in chapter 18 and verse 1 of his gospel.

Yes, persistent praying, according to our Lord Jesus, is most certainly appropriate. Now, why is this?

It's worth spending a moment reminding ourselves. Answer to my question, because a covenanted family bond unites our God to us and us to our God, a covenanted family bond, which focuses in the New Testament concept of adoptive sonship.

Now, ladies, I have to say sonship because it's a legal category in the New Testament. See, the culture in those days made the sons heirs that was true in Jewish culture, it was true in Greco-Roman culture everywhere in the empire.

[20 : 06] The sons inherited, the daughters didn't, and one of the central truths which that concept of adoptive sonship gives you is the certainty that you are an heir of God.

Remember? The spirit, Paul in Romans 8 says it this way, the spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and its sons, actually, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, see, you get from the thought of sonship to the thought of inheritance, God.

And that, for first century readers, was part of the concept of being a son of God every time Jesus used it, every time the apostle Paul used it, any time it occurs in the New Testament.

The thought of being an heir of glory is entailed by the notion. So, you will excuse me, ladies, if I just talk about being sons of God, legal category, I'm not implying that in some way males are preferred to females.

That's not the Bible point. The Bible point is as stated. Now, an adoptive son is who he is because he's been chosen, or because, to use the Bible phrase, he has become, he has become his father's elect one.

[21 : 54] This, again, is part of the Bible picture. Let me say it this way, all through the Bible, Old and New Testament together, as Luther said, or is reported to have said, on one occasion, and it's a wonderful truth whether it was he who said it or not, religion is a matter of personal pronouns.

Matter of being able to say to the creator, my God, our God. Those are the personal pronouns, you see. Just as family is a matter of personal pronouns, of the child being able to say to this adult, my father, my mom.

And of course the response implied is that the person addressed will say, my child, my son.

Think of marriage, that's a covenanted relationship, my husband, my wife. Think of parent and children, as I've just been doing.

Well, when I talk about a covenanted family bond, I start by filling in the fact that the personal pronouns are saying something real and true in a way that for people who are not believers, they simply wouldn't, because the relationship isn't there.

[23 : 31] Those folk are not, in this sense, children of God, and they cannot say to the creator, my God. So, well, I only say that in order to draw the contrast.

Let me say they are infinitely at a disadvantage compared with those who can say it. In the Old Testament, you get the thought of God's choice, God's election, right at the start.

God chooses Abram, and chooses Abram's family. Says they're going to be a great nation. And when God sends Moses, when first he commissions Moses, still at the burning bush actually, he commissions Moses to be the person who goes and challenges Pharaoh to let God's people go, well, you read it in chapter 4 and verses 21 through 23.

I'm reading verse 22. You shall say to Pharaoh, thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son. See?

Family. My, personal pronoun there, spotted, give it its full weight. My firstborn son. And I say to you, let my son go, that he may serve me.

[25 : 09] My son, for whom I care. And though you don't have much more said in the Old Testament about sonship to God as a category for his people, it's there undoubtedly in the minds of God's people.

Every now and then it breaks surface like it does, for instance, in Malachi chapter 2 and verse 10, where the prophet prompted by God reasons with the people on God's behalf in a paragraph that begins with the words, had we not all one father?

Why then are we faithless to one another profaning the covenant of our fathers? Faithlessness in God's family is scandalous.

Well, I'm simply illustrating that the thought of God's choice and of the sonship of his people. It's already outlined there in the Old Testament and in the New Testament it's filled in, as you know, by the full-scale image, thought, of the personal adoption of each believer into God's family.

Personal adoption through a personal link with a personal savior. And so you've got Paul summarizing the gospel in Galatians 4 by saying that when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his son, his eternal son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

[27 : 13] And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father, that is, prompting us to cry for ourselves in certainty and confidence, my Father, my God.

Well, that's what God has done for us, says Paul. That's the privilege of Christ's people. so, we can now, we can now give full weight to the fact that all the way through the Gospels, when the Lord Jesus is teaching his disciples the basic truths of Christian life, life.

It's precisely life with Father that he's presenting to them. And right at the center of the Sermon on the Mount, it's not the only place, but all the way through chapter 6 of Matthew, life with Father, with the one who is the Lord Jesus, Father eternally, and our Father too, as a result of our adoption into the family, life with Father is what Christian life is all about.

And that's the thought that Jesus is elaborating. as far as the Lord Jesus himself is concerned, what the saints are to say to him and say about him, that forever is to be what doubting Thomas said, John chapter 20 verse 28, when he'd been brought to the point of doubting no longer because Jesus had appeared and said, Thomas, if you want to put your hands over my wounds and feel them, well, you may.

Thomas didn't do that. Thomas simply, I suspect, knelt down, but he certainly said, my Lord and my God.

[29 : 31] And those who say to the Lord Jesus with Thomas, my Lord and my God, will also say to the one whom Jesus called Father, my Father, and will rejoice in the covenanted relationship, the family relationship, which binds the believer, that's you, that's me, to the God who is Father and Son, and who, before the New Testament is over, turns out to be Spirit as well.

One God in being, three persons within the unity of that being, we're in covenant with all of them, and in relation to the first, we are children of a heavenly Father.

All right, that's the relationship that makes persistent prayer appropriate. Just as it's appropriate in the human family, when the children are in need, that they should run to Father.

I said something about that last week, I'm not going to dwell on the point again, but I think I only have to say it for you to know straight away, even if you weren't here last week, that yes, of course, that's how it ought to be.

The business, well, the business of Father is to protect his children and sustain them and look after them, as well as nurturing them in the way in which he wants them to go when they're grown.

[31 : 11] Well, I could dwell on this for a long time, but I mustn't. Within that frame of the covenanted family relationship between us believers and our God, we see in scripture, and we should settle in our own mind, the promises of answered prayer, which our Heavenly Father gives to his children.

Promises. I think I have stressed already in some of these talks that living by the promises of God is a very central way of looking at the Christian life, and one which we today don't, in my judgment, make anything like enough of.

It isn't a matter of feeling at the center of the relationship. Feelings have their ups and their downs, and sometimes you don't feel anything.

It's a matter of divine promise at the center of the relationship. Whether the sun is shining, or whether the clouds are down and the rain is falling, doesn't make the slightest difference.

The promise of God stands. Where are the promises of God? Here in the written word. Evangelicals understand this better than the rest of the church, or at least have done in the past, and God grant that evangelicals today will renew their grip on this central truth.

[32 : 55] Abram trusted the promise of God. God has given us exceeding great and precious promises. The thought keeps popping up in the New Testament.

We live by the promises of God. And here now are a couple of promises which I don't think I've stressed in the course of these talks as yet.

This is the moment for you to hear them and to hear me underlining them as foundation principles for living our Christian life.

Come rain, come shine, whatever. Matthew chapter 7, Sermon on the Mount, verses 7 through 11. Says Jesus, Ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you.

We are talking about persistent praying and it's relevant that I should say at once that all three verbs in the Greek are in the present tense and in Greek the present tense expresses continued or continuous action.

[34 : 13] Keeping on, keeping on, doing something. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. that is part of the meaning of our Lord's word, part of what nowadays they call the semantic field that the sentence covers.

He's talking about persistent praying. For he says, note the boldness of this categorical statement, everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

You have heard me express my belief that there's no such thing as unanswered prayer when a child of God brings requests to his heavenly Father.

The prayer will be taken notice of. It may not be answered in the form in which we offer it. It may be answered by God making us aware that there are things in our life that have got to be changed before he can give us, I mean give us for our blessing, the thing that we've asked for.

It may be that he will answer our prayer in a way which makes us realize I was bringing a situation of real need to the Lord. Yes, I was, but I wasn't asking for precisely the right thing.

[35 : 40] And God has answered the prayer I ought to have made rather than the prayer that I did make. Well, that may be, but that's not unanswered prayer.

Unanswered prayer would be prayer that God simply ignores. And there are no such prayers, I believe, ever because God is who he is and he's faithful to his own children.

prayer. So, I am bold to believe the Lord Jesus when he says, everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be open.

And he knows that hearing this will make his disciples draw breath. It sounds too good almost to be true, and certainly it sounds amazing in terms of what we ordinarily tell ourselves when we haven't meditated on this matter.

So he says, in order to make sure that they don't doubt his point. Or, which of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

[36 : 58] If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him?

Well, Jesus says it, and I believe Jesus means it. And it's a tremendous incentive to persistent prayer to realize that when the Lord Jesus said that, yes, he did mean it.

The other passage that I was going to refer you to. See, I'm losing time, so I'll do this very quickly, but it's 1 John chapter 5 and verses 14 and 15, where John, the beloved disciple, author of the gospel, as I believe, and some critics doubt that.

I don't think they have good reason to doubt it. John, author of the gospel, says, this is the confidence that we have towards him, that's the Lord Jesus, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us, and if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we've asked of him.

and that is simply the apostle echoing words of the Lord Jesus, which are recorded in the gospel, John 14, 13, and then 16, 23, and 24.

[38 : 32] It's the Lord Jesus saying that if we ask anything in his name, he will do it, he will pray the Father, and it will be done.

Now, the key phrases there, of course, are in his name, and according to his will. Those phrases cover the sort of situation that I was talking about a minute ago, where we don't pray the prayer that we should have prayed, and the Father and the Son have better in mind for us than simply giving us the specific thing we've asked for.

but we have called on the Father in the name of the Son. We have tried, in other words, to pray according to our Savior's will, and his good will and the Father's good will are there, as certain facts, and our prayer is going to be answered one way or another in terms which are really positive, for God's glory and for our good.

Well, I must stay on that, although I'd like to, frankly, but these thoughts, you see, are incentives and directives to persistent praying, never mind how discouraging the circumstances and how exhausted our inner feelings and whatever.

these are the truths within our relationship with the Lord that make persistent praying appropriate, and so you can't wonder that we are directed by the Apostle Paul, for instance, to pray without ceasing, constantly.

[40 : 29] But I must hurry on now. Second heading, records of persistent praying in the Bible, object lessons. I have to go quickly here, but there are two categories of object lessons that I want to lay before you.

One is persistent praying in the Psalms. You've heard me say before that the Psalms are given us to be our prayer book as well as our hymn book.

that is, they establish perspectives and lines of vision and patterns of communion between ourselves and the Lord, which all our praying, all our praising, and all our hymnology, liturgy, ought to be matching, ought to be following.

praying. We look in the Psalms and we find that there's a technical term for persistent praying. This is what I want you to note here.

It's the term translated wait in the phrase, wait on or wait for the Lord. And whereas in ordinary secular use, waiting sounds like inactivity, the activity of waiting on and for the Lord in the Psalms is just the opposite of inactivity.

[42 : 09] It's the effort of keeping on, keeping on in prayer and expectation. it involves sustained concentration of a kind which only God himself can give.

But let's settle it in our minds, if we are ever to follow the psalmists in this regard, we must seek help for sustained concentration in our own praying.

Otherwise, well, whatever else we're doing, we shall be coming up to the pattern which the Psalms set before us.

To make this point vivid, I used Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, the message.

And I'm going to tell you what he does with these passages that first I quote to you from the English Standard Version, where else, that I have in my hand.

[43 : 12] Psalm 27 and verse 14. We read in the ESV, Wait for the Lord.

Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord. See, this is part of what's being called for.

It's an activity. The activity of waiting for the Lord involves focusing on the Lord, attending to the Lord, and being strong and letting your heart take courage, which you do by asking the Lord to help you to hang on until the time for his action comes.

That's the sustained concentration. Well, Peterson renders that. stay with God. And when I read that, I thought immediately of my daughter putting her dogs into the ring in obedience trials.

Any of you go into that? There's all sorts of things going on in the ring and around the ring and behind the ring. There's a lot of noise. There's any number of distractions. But part of the drill is that when the owner says to the dog, stay, the dog stays.

[44 : 39] Motionless. Steady. Never mind the distractions. And at top level anyway, in obedience trials, I think it's three minutes and it might even be five for which they have to stay.

It's quite a test. And some dogs don't stay. And some Christians, I'm afraid, don't stay the course. They don't stay put. They don't stay.

But there it is. This is the exhortation at the end of Psalm 27. Wait for the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.

Psalm 37. What have we here? In the ESV, the word-for-word translation of the Hebrews, as far as we could make it so, you have in verse 7, be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

And then in verse 34, you have repeated the same idea, wait for the Lord and keep his way and he will exalt you to inherit the land.

[45 : 57] Wait for the Lord. and Peterson says, quiet down before God. It's a good way of putting it, isn't it? Quiet down before God.

You've been in panic, you've been in turmoil, whatever. Quiet down before God and wait passionately. In order to get the emphasis, he inserts the word passionately in his rendering.

Wait passionately for the Lord. Psalm 40 verse 1 is a testimony. I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined to me and heard my cry and drew me up from the pit of destruction and so on.

Well, Peterson renders that. I waited and waited and waited for the Lord. What he's rendering actually is a Hebrew idiom which we don't have, can't really match in English directly.

Waiting, I waited. The two forms of the verb are both there in a way that in English would seem very gawky but in Hebrew, as actually in Greek, you can do this in Greek as well, just emphasizes, underlines, enforces the thought.

[47 : 22] Waiting, I waited. I waited patiently, the ESV and the KJV and the Psalter we use in church.

Yes, this is a thought. I kept on waiting until, and then God moved. Psalm 62 is rather striking.

In both verse 1 and verse 5 of this psalm, you have the following, for God alone, my soul waits in silence.

From him comes my salvation. In silence is expressing the thought that I've got beyond complaining, I've got beyond running around, making a noise, rushing to and fro, as people in trouble tend to do.

No. I've got beyond the complaining, I am waiting in silence. I don't need to say any more, he has heard my prayer, from him comes my salvation.

[48 : 40] I am waiting to see it. And that's in verse 5 as well. for God alone, oh my soul, wait in silence.

The man's talking to himself, admonishing himself, for my hope is from him. And Peterson both times gives us a broken sentence.

God, the one and only, dash, I'll wait as long as he says. That's a bit it, isn't it? I'll wait. And so, there are some more passages, but I don't think I dare spend any more time.

At your leisure, look up Psalm 130 verse 5, and the last verse of Psalm 131, and you will find that the same set of thoughts are there.

Wait on the Lord, wait patiently, wait trustfully. He is going to move in his own time and save you and bless you.

[49 : 53] that I must rush on. From persistent praying in the psalms, whereby we practice the art, shall I say, and the discipline of waiting on God, we turn to persistent praying in the histories.

Very quick again here. You've heard me talk about Nehemiah, from whose life story, his memoirs, I have learned so much over the years.

You will remember that Nehemiah's books, his memoirs, start with him giving a date, and then a prayer, and then another date.

It happened in the month he's lived in the 20th year as I was in Susa, the capital, that Hanani came with certain men from Judah and brought bad news about Jerusalem having its walls flattened yet once more by hostile forces, so that Jerusalem is in distress.

Nehemiah fasts and prays, and at the end of the prayer, verse 11 of Nehemiah chapter 1, we find him summing up all that he's been concerned to say.

[51 : 29] Well, I suppose that he must have written this out at some stage, and this is the focal sentence, O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.

This is Nehemiah's sidelong reference to those who've been praying with him about the need in Jerusalem, I think, and give success to your servant today, and this is actually explaining what success today he's asking for, grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Who's this man? Well, it's the king. What's the mercy? Well, Nehemiah's a high-class slave, he's the king's cup-bearer, we're told, which meant that every day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year.

He was to be at the palace, and to taste the king's food and drink, being prepared for the banquet that evening.

It was high-risk employment, because, you see, they used to poison food and drink, if they wanted to get rid of the monarch in those days. It was quite a thing to do.

[52 : 47] And the point of the cup-bearer's ministry was that, well, the food or the drink is poisoned, he will show it, and then the king won't, the king will take that food or drink that drink.

What happens to the cup-bearer is neither here nor there. The point is the king will survive, high-risk employment. Well, that's Nehemiah's job. I mean, it's a position of great dignity for a slave, and we know that cup-bearers in the ancient palaces were very influential people.

But at the same time, it's a job which ties him down. And there's no, he's a slave, remember, and there's no, what shall I call it, no statutory holidays attached to the position.

And he says, I was cup-bearer to the king. Well, all right. Nonetheless, he prayed, and what they're praying for, quite obviously, is that somehow or other, Nehemiah will be able to go to Jerusalem and handle the situation, because his friends are telling him, Nehemiah, you've got what it takes to put Jerusalem in order.

Well, then he gives another date. In the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, he tells you actually how mercy was given in that month, and in an amazing way, he was appointed on the spot as the king's special commissioner, who would go to Jerusalem to rebuild it.

[54 : 32] Can't go into the details there, but the point I want to make is that it's clear, Nehemiah and his friends were praying along the lines of the verse I quoted, 1.11, give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

They prayed for nine months. How do I know that? Well, because the two dates actually dates nine months apart. Each day they prayed grant mercy to Nehemiah today, and they had to wait.

They had to wait on God, they had to wait for God. Prayer was answered in due course, but they had to wait. In the first chapter of Samuel, you hear about Hannah praying for a child, and it's clear that she's been praying for a long time.

Zechariah, in Luke chapter one, you read about Zechariah, John the Baptist servant, who also was childless, and it's clear that he and his wife had been praying about that for a long time.

After all, they're both of them old, past the age ordinarily, when children can be born to a couple. But when the angel appears to Zechariah, well, Luke has introduced this by saying in verse 7, they had no child because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

[56 : 18] And now in verse 13, the angel says, don't be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Note that. Your prayer has been heard, and your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son, and your call is named John.

Your prayer has been heard. How many years have they been praying for what the lawyers call issues? We don't know.

But clearly it would have been a long time. And I spoke last time about Paul having appointed three solemn sessions of prayer.

prayer. I would imagine they were retreats, you know, and he's off for the day or for the afternoon so that he can talk to the Lord in a thorough way about the thorn in the flesh which he's asking the Lord.

But it's the Lord Jesus, by the way, that we're speaking of here, which he's asking the Lord Jesus to heal. and in these three prayer sessions he wants to give the Lord all the reasons why he's convinced that it's the right thing to ask for and it will make for the Lord's glory for him to give it.

[57 : 34] You know, examples in the Old Testament from Daniel and from Ezra and there are others show that one of the things that God asks us to do is to give our reasons for the things that we ask him to do.

Give reasons. Give what the Puritans called arguments. Tell me why you want me to do this. Why you think it's the right thing to ask for in your situation.

Why you think it advances my kingdom. Why you think it makes for my glory. Tell me why. In the human family of course sometimes when a child comes up with an irresponsible request or we think it's irresponsible, we think it's casual, we think it's not thought out, we will sit the child down and say now you tell me why you want that.

Just tell me why. Well, our God sometimes I believe does the same with us and I think that that's what Paul was doing in those three sessions of prayer. Before it became clear to him but what the Lord was saying was no Paul I'm not going to remove the thorn in your flesh but yes Paul I am going to sustain you in your ministry nonetheless.

You were afraid that your ministry would suffer because of your health I'm telling you that it won't. Paul gets the message and said most gladly then will I glory in my weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[59 : 09] we are talking about vain repetition here let me say that explicitly we are talking about the child of God showing the Lord that he or she is serious in asking for what we are asking for.

This is just a request that we make once and then we forget it. we do a lot of that. But this is a request which is on our hearts and we bring it to the Lord again and again and so imitate the widow in Jesus' parable of the unjust judge.

That's what we are encouraged to do by the models of doing it that you have in these narratives. Yes well again I know I'm losing time but we rush on and I'll finish this as quickly as I can.

Third heading reasons why persistent praying is necessary. Two reasons God's overall time frame sometimes rules out immediate answers because God knows the best time to give a particular blessing that he plans to give and it isn't just yet.

Think of Nehemiah. God kept him waiting for nine months and had he not done so Nehemiah wouldn't have had the downcast look on his face which had become evidently very much part of him and which one day the king commented on thus giving Nehemiah the opportunity to say respectfully but firmly how could I not be down in the mouth when Jerusalem my city is in ruins and the king is very friendly and cooperative in response to that.

[61 : 21] Nehemiah couldn't have raised the subject but that's how it was raised. Well it's part of God's plan that Nehemiah and his friends should pray for nine months and Nehemiah's faith show his burden of concern so that the door might be opened in that way.

And there are all sorts of applications of the principle that God's time frame sometimes rules out immediate answers which I would make if I have time and which I haven't got time to make.

But you could develop the thought of those. Let God choose the best time to give his best gifts. And the second reason why persistent praying is necessary, God's nurturing strategy sometimes rules out immediate answers.

Children say to us or we who are parents have heard this, I can't wait. And all of us who are parents have from time to time I'm sure said to our children, you've got to learn to wait.

Because it's one of the differences between childishness and maturity. Mature people are among other things those who have learned to wait. God is, when he keeps us waiting, God is in the business of maturing us so that we grow in Christ.

[62 : 53] He is in the business of teaching us all sorts of lessons which belong to adult believership, adult Christianity. Again, clock beats me so I can't go into that as I'd like to.

So to my fourth heading, reasons why persistent praying is difficult. and now we come back to the Jeremiah with which I started.

Let's be honest, it is difficult and though we keep up appearances perhaps very successfully, we all wish in our hearts that we were steadier and better altogether in this business of keeping up communion with God, praying with sustained concentration persistently about situations of need as well as about blessings and in praise of one dimension of prayer.

We don't and what are the reasons? Well, there's opposition. Just give you the headings. The world will seek to distract and derail us from praying by implying that this is a weird and pointless way to live.

The broad way of the world is the way that it's always very tempting to follow. Do as other people do and in this instance, they don't pray constantly.

[64 : 29] Why should we? That's the world. The flesh is weak as Jesus said in Gethsemane, remember, when the disciples who ought to have been praying for him as he prayed for strength to go through with what was coming, they actually dozed off, went to sleep.

The spirit is willing, said the Lord Jesus sadly, but the flesh is weak. And our flesh, our constitutions are weak and we need help and the thing for us to do is to ask our Lord for help to keep praying persistently as we should.

Well, then of course, there's the devil. Do you remember how in Ephesians 6, verse 18, I think it is, Paul talks about taking the shield of faith with which to quench the flaming arrows or flaming darts of the evil one?

What Paul is referring to is dirty warfare as practiced in the first century AD. It was thought of as dirty warfare when you tied a burning cloth, dipped in oil, to the end of your arrow and shot it off because of course when the arrow hit anything, it would burn as well as piercing and so do double damage.

That's the thought. Satan fights dirty. It was thought of as dirty fighting, though it was done regularly by the people that the Roman army fought against.

[66 : 14] And Satan will do it, says the Lord Jesus. You need the shield of faith, that is, the certainty that Scripture gives to us, the certainty that the gospel gave to the Ephesians in the days before the New Testament was all written, the certainty that God will supply, the certainty of his presence, his power, and his guarantee to note and answer all faithful prayers.

Nothing changes that. So that faith, God-given, will quench the fiery darts of the wicked one, which all take the form of reasons for stopping, praying, and throwing your hand in, in relation to your fellowship with God, doing it on a temporary basis anyway, if not permanently.

The blazing arrows are thoughts of that kind, and faith will quench them. But there it is, we've got the world, the flesh, and the devil against us so that there's direct opposition to steady faithful praying, and we're all of us tempted to unbelief in the way that Satan successfully tempted Eve to unbelief in the garden.

Unbelief starts as thoughtlessness, Satan put ideas into Eve's head, and she didn't think, back to my five-letter word, she didn't think of what God had said to her, and she didn't think whether she ought to believe God rather than believe the serpent in what he was saying.

So unbelief began for her with thoughtlessness, and unbelief will begin for us with thoughtlessness if we give it her for children. faith will keep us going in obedience, pray, always.

[68 : 29] Faith will keep us in expectation, hope, always. Faith will keep us hanging on in prayer, despite all the discouragements that we feel.

and there are tricks that we can use, different tricks help different people. If you find that your thoughts wander when you're praying silently, pray aloud.

If you find that once the day gets going, you can never find time to pray, get up earlier and pray before you do anything else. if you find that your thoughts, your words, simply won't come together, write out the petition that you're seeking to get into focus, and use your own written prayer in order to present the matter to God.

You may find that journaling in which you record the prayers that you've been making, and look for God's answers.

You may find that that is helpful, some do. Take note of the distractions and try to avoid them.

[69 : 54] Well, these are just common sense things which help. They won't make hanging on in prayer easy, but they may help to make it possible. What am I saying?

Well, let me boil it down like this. Get real in prayer, I'm saying. It's tough keeping going.

Get serious in prayer. It matters that we keep going because of the relationship with our God that we are called to maintain and move along in.

Follow then the advice of the motto of the first seminary at which I taught in England. The motto was, be right and persist.

God help us to persist in our praying. God help us then to be found hanging on. That's it friends.

[71 : 08] Once again, I've overrun and I've taken almost all the discussion time, I think. I'm sorry about that. I don't know how it is. Things just seem to grow as I'm saying them.

Well, any quick comments, reactions, or whatever before we close? you may feel that this is stuff about which really you rather go away and think.

But Bill, Bill? The idea that waiting is an active soul, I don't think that is interesting to have a handle on that. There's a very interesting use of the word wait in the famous verse that says, those that wait upon the Lord shall use their strength, they shall rise up between the people.

When you look into the translation of that word wait, it means to cling to by twisting, to cling to God as a sort of a rope. And we're the breakable thread, and if you twist the thread around the rope, hold on to the end of the rope and the thread, it takes on the strength of the rope itself, it can't be broken.

Have you ever seen that? I've never seen that, and I've never run across it being said, but it's a very vivid image for what I was trying to say in my own way, about waiting on the Lord, refusing to be distracted from focusing on him, trusting in him, and keeping steady in so doing, never mind the pressure that you're under.

[73 : 02] Thank you, Bill, for that. Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes?

Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes? It's been start to finish.

But I'm happy to share these things, and I hope there is some help. Next week, were you going to tell them, Bill, or am I? You can't. Next week, the title to which my material is pointing is joining in and I'm going to talk about all the different aspects of corporate prayer as I understand them. That's what's coming.

Thank you so much. Thank you. God bless you. God bless you.

God bless you. God bless you.

[75 : 19] God bless you. God bless you. God bless you.

God bless you. God bless you. God bless you.

God bless you. God bless you.

God bless you.