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Petition *and* Communion

by Percy C. Ainsworth

Hear me speedily, O Lord...

Cause me to hear...

For I lift up my soul unto Thee.

—Psalm 143:7, 8¹

YOU WILL NOTICE that the first verse begins “Hear me,” and the second begins “Cause me to hear”; and the second is greater than the first. Let us look, then, at these two attitudes of a person in the hour of prayer.

Hear me. The Psalmist began, where we all must begin, with ourselves. He had something to utter in the hearing of the Almighty. He had something to lay before his God—a story, a confession, a plea. His heart was full, and must outpour itself into the ear of Heaven. “Hear me speedily, O Lord.” We have all prayed thus. We have all faced some situation that struck a note of urgency in our life, and all our soul has come to our lips in this one cry that went up to the Father, “Hear me.” A sudden pain, a surprise of sorrow, a few moments of misty uncertainty in the face of decisions that had to be made at once, times when life has tried to rush us from our established position and to bear us we know not where—and our soul has reached out after God as simply and naturally as we grasp at some fixed thing when we are falling.

There are times, too, when prayer is an indefinable relief. We all know something about the relief of speech. We must speak to somebody. Our need is not, first of all, either advice or practical help. We want a hearing. We want someone to listen and sympathize. We want to share our pain. This is what “Hear me” sometimes means. Whatever Thou shalt see fit to do for me, at least listen to my cry. Let me unburden my soul. Let me get this weight of silence off my heart. This fashion of relief is part of the true office of prayer. Herein lies the reasonableness of telling our story in the ear of One who knows that story better than we do. We need not inform the All-knowing, but we must commune with the All-pitiful. We make our life known unto God that we may make it bearable unto ourselves.



BUT LET US LOOK at the attitude of mind and heart revealed in this second position, *Cause me to hear*. Now we are coming to the larger truth about prayer, and the deeper spirit of it. Prayer is not merely claiming a hearing; it is giving a hearing. It is not only speaking to God; it is listening to God. And as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are the words we hear greater than the words we speak. Let us not forget this. Let us not pauperize ourselves by our very importunity. Maybe we are vociferous when God is but waiting for a silence to fall in His earthly temples that He may have speech with His children. We talk about “prevailing prayer,” and there is a great truth in the phrase. All prayer does not prevail. There is that among us that passes for prayer but has no spiritual grip, no assurance, no masterful patience, no fine desperation. There is a place for all these things, and a need for them, in the life of prayer. We need the courage of a great faith and the earnestness that is born of necessity. We need to be able to lift up our faces toward heaven in the swelling joys and the startling perils of these mortal hours and cry, “Hear me,” knowing that God does hear us and that the outcrying of every praying heart rings clear and strong in the courts of the Heavenly King. But we need something more; we need a very great deal more than this, if we are to enter into the true meaning of prevailing prayer.

The final triumph of prayer is not ours; it is God's. When we are upon our knees before Him, it is God, and not we, who must prevail. This is the true victory of faith and prayer, when the Father writes His purpose more clearly in our minds, lays His commandment more inwardly upon our hearts. We do not get one faint glimpse into the meaning of that mysterious conflict at Peniel until we see that the necessity for the conflict lay in the heart of Jacob and not in the heart of God. The man who wrestled with the Angel and prevailed passes before us in the glow of the sunrise weary and halt, with a changed name and a changed heart. So must it be with us; so shall it be, if ever we know what it is to prevail in prayer.

Importunity must not become a blind and uninspired clamouring for the thing we desire. Such an attitude may easily set us beyond the possibility of receiving that which God knows we need. We must not forget that our poor little plea for help and blessing does not exhaust the possibilities of prayer. Our words go upward to God's throne twisted by our imperfect thinking, narrowed by our outlook, sterilized by the doubts of our hearts, and we do not know what is good for us. God's word comes downward into our lives laden with the quiet certainty of the Eternal, wide as the vision of Him who seeth all, deep as the wisdom of Him who knoweth all.

So, however much it may be to say "Hear me," it is vastly more to say "Cause me to hear." However much I have to tell God, He has more to tell me. This view of prayer will help to clear up for us some of the difficulties that have troubled many minds. We hear people speak of unanswered prayer; but there is no such thing, and in the nature of things there cannot be. I do not mean by that, that to every prayer there will come a response some day. To every prayer there is a response now. In our confused and mechanical conception of the God to whom we pray, we separate between His hearing and His answering. We identify the answer to prayer with the granting of a petition. But prayer is more than petition. It is not our many requests, it is an attitude of spirit. We grant readily that our words are the least important part of our prayers. But very often the petitions we frame and utter are no part of our prayers at all. They are not prayer, yet uttering them we may pray a prayer that shall be heard and answered, for all who truly desire in prayer the help of God for their life receive that help there and then, though the terms in which they describe their need may be wholly wide of the truth as God knows it. So the real answer to prayer is God's response to our spiritual attitude, and that response is as complete and continuous as the attitude will allow it to be. The end of prayer is not to win concessions from Almighty Power, but to have communion with Almighty Love.

"Cause me to hear"; make a reverent, responsive, receptive silence in my heart, take me out beyond my pleadings into the limitless visions and the fathomless satisfactions of communion with Thyself. Speak to me. That is true prayer.

In the quietness of life,
When the flowers have shut their eye,
And a stainless breadth of sky
Bends above the hill of strife,
Then, my God, my chiefest Good,
Breathe upon my loneliness:
Let the shining silence be
Filled with Thee, my God, with Thee.

¹All Scripture references are to the King James translation of the Bible.



Percy C. Ainsworth was a graduate of Didsbury College in Manchester, England, and pastor of Wesley Chapel in Birmingham. This article is from his book, *The Threshold Grace: Meditations in the Psalms*, and has been slightly edited for contemporary language. Ainsworth died of typhoid fever in 1909 at the age of thirty-six.

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