

## Revivals And Church History :: LECTURE IV - PREVAILING PRAYER by Charles Finney

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### LECTURE IV - PREVAILING PRAYER

by Charles Finney

TEXT. --*The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*--JAMES V. 16.

THE last lecture referred principally to the confession of sin. To-night my remarks will be chiefly confined to the subject of intercession, or prayer. There are two kinds of means requisite to promote a revival; one to influence men, the other to influence God. The truth is employed to influence men, and prayer to move God. When I speak of moving God, I do not mean that God's mind is changed by prayer, or that his disposition or character is changed. But prayer produces such a change in us and fulfils such conditions as renders it consistent for God to do as it would not be consistent for him to do otherwise. When a sinner repents, that state of mind makes it proper for God to forgive him. God has always been ready to forgive him on that condition, so that when the sinner changes his mind towards God, it requires no change of feeling in God to pardon him. It is the sinner's repentance that renders his forgiveness proper, and is the occasion of God's acting as he does. So when Christians offer effectual prayer, their state of mind renders it proper for God to answer them. He was always ready to bestow the blessing, on the condition that they felt right, and offered the right kind of prayer. Whenever this change takes place in them, and they offer the right kind of prayer, then God, without any change in himself, can answer them. When we offer effectual fervent prayer for others, the fact that we offer such prayer renders it consistent for him to do what we pray for, when otherwise it would not have been consistent.

Prayer is an essential link in the chain of causes that lead to a revival; as much so as truth is. Some have zealously used truth to convert men, and laid very little stress on prayer. They have preached, and talked, and distributed tracts with great zeal, and then wondered that they had so little success. And the reason was, that they forgot to use the other branch of the means, effectual prayer. They overlooked the fact, that truth by itself will never produce the effect, without the Spirit of God, and that Spirit is given in answer to earnest prayer.

Sometimes it happens that those who are the most engaged in employing truth, are not the most engaged in prayer. This is always unhappy.--For unless they, or somebody else have the spirit of prayer, the truth by itself will do nothing but harden men in impenitence. Probably in the day of judgment it will be found that nothing is ever done by the truth, used ever so zealously, unless there is a spirit of prayer somewhere in connection with the presentation of truth.

Others err on the other side. Not that they lay too much stress on prayer. But they overlook the fact that prayer might be offered for ever, by itself, and nothing would be done. Because sinners are not converted by direct contact of the Holy Ghost, but by the truth, employed as a means. To expect the conversion of sinners by prayer alone, without the employment of truth, is to tempt God.

The subject of discourse this evening, is

#### PREVAILING PRAYER.

I. I propose to show what is effectual or prevailing prayer.

II. State some of the most essential attributes of prevailing prayer.

III. Give some reasons why God requires this kind of prayer.

IV. Show that such prayer will avail much.

**I. I proceed to show what is prevailing prayer.**

1. Effectual, prevailing prayer, does not consist in benevolent desires merely. Benevolent desires are doubtless pleasing to God. Such desires pervade heaven, and are found in all holy beings. But they are not prayer. Men may have these desires as the angels and glorified spirits have them. But this is not the effectual, prevailing prayer, spoken of in the text. Prevailing prayer is something more than this.

2. Prevailing, or effectual prayer, is that prayer which obtains the blessing that it seeks. It is that prayer which effectually moves God. The very idea of effectual prayer is, that it effects its object.

**II. I will state some of the most essential attributes of prevailing prayer. I cannot detail in full all the things that go to make up prevailing prayer. But I will mention some things that are essential to it; some things which a person must do in order to prevail in prayer.**

1. He must pray for a definite object. He need not expect to offer such prayer, if he prays at random, without any distinct or definite object. He must have an object distinctly before his mind. I speak now of secret prayer. Many people go away into their closets, because they must say their prayers. The time has come that they are in the habit of going by themselves for prayer, in the morning, or at noon, or at whatever time of day it may be. And instead of having any thing to say, any definite object before their mind, they fall down on their knees, and pray for just what comes into their minds, for everything that floats in their imagination at the time, and when they have done, they could not tell hardly a word of what they have been praying for. This is not effectual prayer. What should we think of any body who should try to move a legislature so, and should say, "Now it is winter, and the legislature is in session, and it is time to send up petitions," and should go up to the legislature and petition at random, without any definite object? Do you think such petitions would move the legislature?

A man must have some definite object before his mind. He cannot pray effectually for a variety of objects at once. The mind of man is so constituted that it cannot fasten its desires intensely upon many things at the same time. All the instances of effectual prayer recorded in the Bible were of this kind. Wherever you see that the blessing sought for in prayer was attained, you will find that the prayer which was offered was prayer for that definite object.

2. Prayer, to be effectual, must be in accordance with the revealed will of God. To pray for things contrary to the revealed will of God, is to tempt God. There are three ways in which God's will is revealed to men for their guidance in prayer.

(1.) By express promises or predictions in the Bible, that he will give or do certain things. Either by express promises in regard to particular things, or promises in general terms, so that we may apply them to particular things. For instance, there is this promise: "Whatsoever things ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them."

(2.) Sometimes God reveals his will by his providence. When he makes it clear that such and such events are about to take place, it is as much a revelation as if he had written it in his word. It would be impossible to reveal every thing in the Bible. But God often makes it clear to those who have spiritual discernment, that it is his will to grant such and such blessings.

(3.) By his Spirit. When God's people are at a loss what to pray for, agreeable to his will, his Spirit often instructs them. Where there is no particular revelation, and providence leaves it dark, and we know not what to pray for as we ought, we are expressly told, that "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities," and "the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered." A great deal has been said on the subject of praying in faith for things not revealed. It is objected, that this doctrine implies a new revelation. I answer, that, new or old, it is the very revelation that Jehovah says he makes. It is just as plain here, as if it were now revealed by a voice from heaven, that the Spirit of God helps the people of God to pray according to the will of God, when they themselves know not what things they ought to pray for. "And he that searcheth the heart knoweth the mind of the Spirit," because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God, and he leads Christians to pray for just those things, with groanings that cannot be uttered. When neither the word nor providence enables them to decide, then let them be filled with the Spirit, as God commands them to be. He says, "Be ye filled with the Spirit." And He will lead their mind to such things as God is willing to grant.

3. To pray effectually, you must pray with submission to the will of God. Do not confound submission with indifference. No two things are more unlike. I once knew an individual come where there was a revival. He himself was cold, and did not enter into the spirit of it, and had no spirit of prayer; and when he heard the brethren pray as if they could not be denied

, he was shocked at their boldness, and kept all the time insisting on the importance of praying with submission; when it was as plain as any thing could be, that he confounded submission with indifference

So again, do not confound submission in prayer with a general confidence that God will do what is right. It is proper to have this confidence that God will do what is right in all things. But this is a different thing from submission. What I mean by submission in prayer, is, acquiescence in the revealed will of God. To submit to any command of God is to obey it. Submission to some supposable or possible, but secret decree of God, is not submission. To submit to any dispensation of Providence is impossible till it comes. For we never can know what the event is to be, till it takes place. Take a case: David, when his child was sick, was distressed, and agonized in prayer, and refused to be comforted. He took it so much to heart, that when the child died, his servants were afraid to tell him the child was dead, for fear he would vex himself still worse. But as soon as he heard that the child was dead, he laid aside his grief, and arose, and asked for food, and ate and drank as usual. While the child was yet alive, he did not know what was the will of God, and so he fasted and prayed, and said, "Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that my child may live?" He did not know but that his prayer and agony was the very thing on which it turned, whether the child was to live or not. He thought that if he humbled himself and entreated God, perhaps God would spare him this blow. But as soon as God's will appeared, and the child was dead, he bowed like a saint. He seemed not only to acquiesce, but actually to take a satisfaction in it. "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." This was true submission. He reasoned correctly in the case. While he had no revelation of the will of God, he did not know but what the child's recovery depended on his prayer. But when he had a revelation of the will of God, he submitted. While the will of God is not known, to submit, without prayer, is tempting God. Perhaps, and for aught you know, the fact of your offering the right kind of prayer, may be the thing on which the event turns. In the case of an impenitent friend, the very condition on which he is to be saved from hell, may be the fervency and importunity of your prayer for that individual.

4. Effectual prayer for an object implies a desire for that object commensurate with its importance. If a person truly desires any blessing, his desires will bear some proportion to the greatness of the blessing. The desires of the Lord Jesus Christ for the blessing he prayed for, were amazingly strong, and amounted even to agony. If the desire for an object is strong, and is a benevolent desire, and the thing not contrary to the will and providence of God, the presumption is, that it will be granted. There are two reasons for this presumption:

(1.) From the general benevolence of God. If it is a desirable object; if, so far as we can see, it would be an act of benevolence in God to grant it, his general benevolence is presumptive evidence that he will grant it.

(2.) If you find yourself exercised with benevolent desires for any object, there is a strong presumption that the Spirit of God is exciting these very desires, and stirring you up to pray for that object, so that it may be granted in answer to prayer. In such a case no degree of desire or importunity in prayer is improper. A Christian may come up, as it were, and take hold of the hand of God. See the case of Jacob, when he exclaimed, in an agony of desire, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Was God displeased with his boldness and importunity? Not at all; but he granted him the very thing he prayed for. So in the case of Moses. God said to Moses, "Let me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven, and I will make of thee a nation mightier and greater than they." What did Moses do? Did he stand aside and let God do as he said? No, his mind runs back to the Egyptians, and he thinks how they will triumph. "Wherefore should the Egyptians say, For mischief did he bring them out." It seemed as if he took hold of the uplifted hand of God, to avert the blow. Did God rebuke him for his interference, and tell him he had no business to interfere? No; it seemed as if he was unable to deny any thing to such importunity, and so Moses stood in the gap, and prevailed with God.

It is said of Xavier, the missionary, that he was once called to pray for a man who was sick, and he prayed so fervently that he seemed as it were to do violence to heaven--so the writer expresses it. And he prevailed, and the man recovered.

Such prayer is often offered in the present day, when Christians have been wrought up to such a pitch of importunity and such a holy boldness, that afterwards, when they looked back upon it, they were frightened and amazed at themselves, to think they should dare to exercise such importunity with God. And yet these prayers have prevailed, and obtained the blessing. And many of these persons, that I am acquainted with, are among the holiest persons I know in the world.

5. Prayer, to be effectual, must be offered from right motives. Prayer should not be selfish, but dictated by a supreme regard for the glory of God. A great deal of prayer is offered from pure selfishness. Women sometimes pray for their husbands, that they may be converted, because they say, "It would be so much more pleasant to have my husband go to meet me," and all that. And they seem never to lift up their thoughts above self at all. They do not seem to think how their husbands are dishonoring God by their sins, and how God would be glorified in their conversion. So it is with parents very often. They cannot bear to think that their children should be lost. They pray for them very earnestly indeed. But if

you go to talk with them, they are very tender, and tell you how good their children are, how they respect religion, and they think they are almost Christians now; and so they talk as if they were afraid you would hurt their children if you should tell them the truth. They do not think how such amiable and lovely children are dishonoring God by their sins; they are only thinking what a dreadful thing it will be for them to go to hell. Ah! unless their thoughts rise higher than this, their prayers will never prevail with a holy God. The temptation to selfish motives is so strong, that there is reason to fear a great many parental prayers never rise above the yearnings of parental tenderness. And that is the reason why so many prayers are not heard, and why so many pious, praying parents have ungodly children. Much of the prayer for the heathen world seems to be based on no higher principle than sympathy. Missionary agents, and others, are dwelling almost exclusively upon the six hundred millions of heathens going to hell, while little is said of their dishonoring God. This is a great evil; and until the church have higher motives for prayer and missionary effort than sympathy for the heathen, their prayers and efforts will never amount to much.

6. Prayer, to be effectual, must be by the intercession of the Spirit. You never can expect to offer prayer according to the will of God without the Spirit. In the first two cases, it is not because Christians are unable to offer such prayer, where the will of God is revealed in his word, or indicated by his providence. They are able to do it, just as they are able to be holy. But the fact is, that they are so wicked, that they never do offer such prayer, without they are influenced by the Spirit of God. There must be a faith, such as produced by the effectual operation of the Holy Ghost.

7. It must be persevering prayer. As a general thing, Christians who have backslidden and lost the spirit of prayer, will not get at once into the habit of persevering prayer. Their minds are not in a right state, and they cannot fix their minds, and hold on till the blessing comes. If their minds were in that state, that they would persevere till the answer comes, effectual prayer might be offered at once, as well as after praying ever so many times for an object. But they have to pray again and again, because their thoughts are so apt to wander away, and are so easily diverted from the object to something else. Until their minds get imbued with the spirit of prayer, they will not keep fixed to one point, and push their petition to an issue on the spot. Do not think you are prepared to offer prevailing prayer, if your feelings will let you pray once for an object, and then leave it. Most Christians come up to prevailing prayer by a protracted process. Their minds gradually become filled with anxiety about an object, so that they will even go about their business, sighing out their desires to God. Just as the mother whose child is sick, goes round her house, sighing as if her heart would break. And if she is a praying mother, her sighs are breathed out to God all the day long. If she goes out of the room where her child is, her mind is still on it; and if she is asleep, still her thoughts are on it, and she starts in her dreams, thinking it is dying. Her whole mind is absorbed in that sick child. This is the state of mind in which Christians offer prevailing prayer.

What was the reason that Jacob wrestled all night in prayer with God? He knew that he had done his brother Esau a great injury, in getting away the birthright a long time ago. And now he was informed that his injured brother was coming to meet him, with an armed force altogether too powerful for him to contend against. And there was great reason to suppose he was coming with a purpose of revenge. There were two reasons then why he should be distressed. The first was, that he had done this great injury, and had never made any reparation. The other was, that Esau was coming with a force sufficient to crush him. Now, what does he do? Why, he first arranges everything in the best manner he can to meet his brother, sending his present first, then his property, then his family, putting those he loved most farthest behind. And by this time his mind was so exercised that he could not contain himself. He goes away alone over the brook, and pours out his very soul in an agony of prayer all night. And just as the day was breaking, the angel of the covenant said, "Let me go;" and his whole being was, as it were, agonized at the thought of giving up, and he cried out, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." His soul was wrought up into an agony, and he obtained the blessing, but he always bore the marks of it, and showed that his body had been greatly affected by this mental struggle. This is prevailing prayer.

Now, do not deceive yourselves with thinking that you offer effectual prayer, unless you have this intense desire for the blessing. I do not believe in it. Prayer is not effectual unless it is offered up with an agony of desire. The apostle Paul speaks of it as a travail of the soul. Jesus Christ, when he was praying in the garden, was in such an agony, that he sweat as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. I have never known a person sweat blood; but I have known a person pray till the blood started from the nose. And I have known persons pray till they were all wet with perspiration, in the coldest weather in winter. I have known persons pray for hours, till their strength was all exhausted with the agony of their minds. Such prayers prevailed with God.

This agony in prayer was prevalent in President Edwards' day, in the revivals that then took place. It was one of the great stumbling blocks in those days, to persons who were opposed to the revival, that people used to pray till their bodies were overpowered with their feelings. I will read a paragraph of what President Edwards says on the subject, to let you see that this is not a new thing in the Church, but has always prevailed wherever revivals prevailed with power. It is from his Thoughts on Revivals.

"We cannot determine that God never shall give any person so much of a discovery of himself, not only as to weaken their bodies, but to take away their lives. It is supposed by very learned and judicious divines, that Moses' life was taken away after this manner; and this has also been supposed to be the case with some other saints. Yea, I do not see any solid, sure grounds any have to determine, that God shall never make such strong impressions on the mind by his Spirit, that shall be an occasion of so impairing the frame of the body, and particularly that part of the body, the brain, that persons shall be deprived of the use of reason. As I said before, It is too much for us to determine, that God will not bring an outward calamity in bestowing spiritual and eternal blessings: so it is too much for us to determine, how great an outward calamity he will bring. If God give a great increase of discoveries of himself, and of love to him, the benefit is infinitely greater than the calamity, though the life should presently after be taken away; yea, though the soul should not immediately be taken to heaven, but should lie some years in a deep sleep, and then be taken to heaven; or, which is much the same thing, if it be deprived of the use of its faculties, and be inactive and unserviceable, as if it lay in a deep sleep for some years, and then should pass into glory. We cannot determine how great a calamity distraction is, when considered with all its consequences, and all that might have been consequent, if the distraction had not happened; nor indeed whether (thus considered) it be any calamity at all, or whether it be not a mercy, by preventing some great sin, or some more dreadful thing, if it had not been. It were a great fault in us to limit a sovereign, all-wise God, whose judgments are a great depth, and his ways past finding out, where he has not limited himself, and in things concerning which he has not told us what his way shall be. It is remarkable, considering in what multitudes of instances, and to how great a degree, the frame of the body has been overpowered of late, that persons' lives have, notwithstanding, been preserved, and that the instances of those that have been deprived of reason, have been so very few, and those, perhaps all of them, persons under the peculiar disadvantage of a weak, vapory habit of body. A merciful and careful Divine hand is very manifest in it, that in so many instances where the ship has begun to sink, yet it has been upheld, and has not totally sunk. The instances of such as have been deprived of reason are so few, that certainly they are not enough to cause us to be in any fright, as though this work that has been carried on in the country was like to be of baneful influence; unless we are disposed to gather up all that we can to darken it, and set it forth in frightful colors.

"There is one particular kind of exercise and concern of mind, that many have been overpowered by, that has been especially stumbling to some; and that is, the deep concern and distress that they have been in for the souls of others. I am sorry that any put us to the trouble of doing that which seems so needless, as defending such a thing as this. It seems like mere trifling, in so plain a case, to enter into a formal and particular debate, in order to determine whether there be any thing in the greatness and importance of the case that will answer and bear a proportion to the greatness of the concern that some have manifested. Men may be allowed, from no higher a principle than common ingenuity and humanity, to be very deeply concerned and greatly exercised in mind at seeing others in great danger of no greater a calamity than drowning, or being burnt up in a house on fire. And if so, then doubtless it will be allowed to be equally reasonable, if they saw them in danger of a calamity ten times greater, to be still much more concerned; and so much more still, if the calamity was still vastly greater. And why, then, should it be thought unreasonable, and looked upon with a very suspicious eye, as if it must come from some bad cause, when persons are extremely concerned at seeing others in very great danger of suffering the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God to all eternity? And besides, it will doubtless be allowed that those that have very great degrees of the Spirit of God, that is, a spirit of love, may well be supposed to have vastly more of love and compassion to their fellow creatures, than those that are influenced only by common humanity. Why should it be thought strange that those that are full of the Spirit of Christ should be proportionably, in their love to souls, like to Christ? who had so strong a love to them and concern for them as to be willing to drink the dregs of the cup of God's fury for them; and at the same time that he offered up his blood for souls, offered up also, as their high priest, strong crying and tears, with an extreme agony, when the soul of Christ was, as it were, in travail for the souls of the elect; and, therefore, in saving them, he is said to see of the travail of his soul. As such a spirit of love to and concern for souls was the spirit of Christ, so it is the spirit of the church; and, therefore, the church, in desiring and seeking that Christ might be brought forth in the world and in the souls of men, is represented, Rev. xii., as 'a woman crying, travelling in birth, and pained to be delivered.' The spirit of those that have been in distress for the souls of others, so far as I can discern, seems not to be different from that of the apostle, who travailed for souls, and was ready to wish himself accursed from Christ for others. And that of the Psalmist, Psalm cxix. 53, 'Horror hath taken hold upon me, because of the wicked that forsake the law.' And v. 136, 'Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.' And that of the prophet Jeremiah, Jer. iv. 19, 'My bowels! my bowels! I am pained at my very heart; My heart maketh a noise in me: I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard. O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war!' And so, chap. ix. 1, and xiii. 17, and Isa. xxii. 4. We read of Mordecai, when he saw his people in danger of being destroyed with a temporal destruction, Esther iv. 1, that he rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry. And why, then, should persons be thought to be distracted, when they cannot forbear crying out at the consideration of the misery of those that are going to eternal destruction?" (Edwards' Works. vol. iv. p. 85. New York edition)

I have read this to show that this thing was common in the great revivals of those days. It has always been so in all great revivals, and has been more or less common in proportion to the greatness, and extent, and depth of the work. It was so in the great revivals in Scotland, and multitudes used to be overpowered, and some almost died, by the depth of their agony.

9. If you mean to pray effectually, you must pray a great deal. It was said of the apostle James, that after he was dead it was found his knees were callous like a camel's knees, by praying so much. Ah! here was the secret of the success of those primitive ministers. They had callous knees.

10. If you intend prayer to be effectual, it must be offered in the name of Christ. You cannot come to God in your own name. You cannot plead your own merits. But you can come in a name that is always acceptable. You all know what it is to use the name of a man. If you should go to the bank with a draft or note, endorsed by John Jacob Astor, that would be giving you his name, and you know you could get the money from the bank just as well as he could himself. Now, Jesus Christ gives you the use of his name. And when you pray in the name of Christ, the meaning of it is, that you can prevail just as well as he could himself, and receive just as much as God's well-beloved Son would if he were to pray himself for the same things. But you must pray in faith. His name has all the virtue in your lips that it has in his own, and God is just as free to bestow blessings upon you, when you ask in the name of Christ, and in faith, as he would be to bestow them upon Christ, if he should ask.

11. You cannot prevail in prayer, without renouncing all your sins. You must not only recall them to mind, but you must actually renounce them, and leave them off, and in the purpose of your heart renounce them all for ever.

12. You must pray in faith. You must expect to obtain the things you ask for. You need not look for an answer to prayer, if you pray without an expectation of obtaining it. You are not to form such expectations without any reason for them. In the cases I have supposed, there is a reason for the expectation. In case the thing is revealed in God's word, if you pray without an expectation of receiving the blessings, you just make God a liar. If the will of God is indicated by his providence, you ought to depend on it, according to the clearness of the indication, so far as to expect the blessing if you pray for it. And if you are led by his Spirit to pray for certain things, you have just as much reason to expect the thing to be done as if God had revealed it in his word.

But some say, "Will not this view of the leadings of the Spirit of God lead people into fanaticism?" I answer, that I know not but many may deceive themselves in respect to this matter. Multitudes have deceived themselves in regard to all the other points of religion. And if some people should think they are led by the Spirit of God, when it is nothing but their own imagination, is that any reason why those who know that they are led by the Spirit should not follow? Many people suppose themselves to be converted when they are not. Is that any reason why we should not cleave to the Lord Jesus Christ? Suppose some people are deceived in thinking they love God, is that any reason why the pious saint who knows he has the love of God shed abroad in his heart, should not give vent to his feelings in songs of praise? So I suppose some may deceive themselves in thinking they are led by the Spirit of God. But there is no need of being deceived. If people follow impulses, it is their own fault. I do not want you to follow impulses. I want you to be sober minded, and follow the sober, rational leadings of the Spirit of God. There are those who understand what I mean, and who know very well what it is to give themselves up to the Spirit of God in prayer.

### **III. I will state some of the reasons why these things are essential to effectual prayer. Why does God require such prayer, such strong desires, such agonizing supplications?**

1. These strong desires strongly illustrate the strength of God's feelings. They are like the real feelings of God for impenitent sinners. When I have seen, as I sometimes have, the amazing strength of love for souls that has been felt by Christians, I have been wonderfully impressed with the amazing love of God, and his desires for their salvation. The case of a certain woman, of whom I read, in a revival, made the greatest impression on my mind. She had such an unutterable compassion and love for souls, that she actually panted for breath almost to suffocation. What must be the strength of the desire which God feels, when his Spirit produces in Christians such amazing agony, such throes of soul, such travail--God has chosen the best word to express it--it is travail--travail of the soul.

I have seen a man of as much strength of intellect and muscle as any man in the community, fall down prostrate, absolutely overpowered by his unutterable desires for sinners. I know this is a stumbling block to many; and it always will be as long as there remain in the church so many blind and stupid professors of religion. But I cannot doubt that these things are the work of the Spirit of God. Oh that the whole church could be so filled with the Spirit as to travail in prayer, till a nation should be born in a day!

It is said in the word of God, that as soon "as Zion travailed, she brought forth." What does that mean? I asked a professor of religion this question once. He was making exceptions about our ideas of effectual prayer, and I asked him what he supposed was meant by Zion's travailing. "Oh," said he, "it means that as soon as the church walk together in the fellowship of the Gospel, then it will be said that Zion travels! This walking together is called travelling." Not the same term, you see. So much he knew.

2. These strong desires that I have described, are the natural results of great benevolence and clear views of the danger of sinners. It is perfectly reasonable that it should be so. If the women who are in this house should look up there, and see a family burning to death in the fire, and hear their shrieks, and behold their agony, they would feel distressed, and it is very likely that many of them would faint away with agony. And nobody would wonder at it, or say they were fools or crazy to feel so much distressed at such an awful sight. They would think it strange if there were not some expressions of powerful feeling. Why is it any wonder, then, if Christians should feel as I have described, when they have clear views of the state of sinners, and the awful danger they are in? The fact is, that those individuals who never have felt so, have never felt much real benevolence, and their piety must be of a very superficial character. I do not mean to judge harshly, or to speak unkindly. But I state it as a simple matter of fact; and people may talk about it as they please, but I know that such piety is superficial. This is not censoriousness, but plain truth.

People sometimes wonder at Christians having such feelings. Wonder at what? Why, at the natural, and philosophical, and necessary results of deep piety towards God, and deep benevolence towards man, in view of the great danger they see sinners to be in.

3. The soul of a Christian, when it is thus burdened, must have relief. God rolls this weight upon the soul of a Christian, for the purpose of bringing him near to himself. Christians are often so unbelieving, that they will not exercise proper faith in God, till he rolls this burden upon them, so heavy that they cannot live under it, and then they must go to God for relief. It is like the case of many a convicted sinner. God is willing to receive him at once, if he will come right to him, with faith in Jesus Christ. But the sinner will not come. He hangs back, and struggles, and groans under the burden of his sins, and will not throw himself upon God, till his burden of conviction becomes so great that he can live no longer; and when he is driven to desperation, as it were, and feels as if he was ready to sink into hell, he makes a mighty plunge, and throws himself upon God's mercy as his only hope. It was his duty to come before. God had no delight in his distress, for its own sake. It was only the sinner's obstinacy that created the necessity for all this distress. He would not come without it. So when professors of religion get loaded down with the weight of souls, they often pray again and again, and yet the burden is not gone, nor their distress abated, because they have never thrown it all upon God in faith. But they cannot get rid of the burden. So long as their benevolence continues it will remain and increase, and unless they resist and quench the Holy Ghost they can get no relief, until at length, when they are driven to extremity, they make a desperate effort, roll the burden off upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and exercise a child-like confidence in him. Then they feel relieved; then they feel as if the soul they were praying for would be saved. The burden is gone, and God seems in kindness to soothe down the mind to feel a sweet assurance that the blessing will be granted. Often, after a Christian has had this struggle, this agony in prayer, and has obtained relief in this way, you will find the sweetest and most heavenly affections flow out--the soul rests sweetly and gloriously in God, and rejoices, "with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

Do any of you think now, that there are no such things in the experience of believers? I tell you, if I had time, I could show you from President Edwards, and other approved writers, cases and descriptions just like this. Do you ask why we never have such things here in New York? I tell you, it is not at all because you are so much wiser than Christians are in the country, or because you have so much more intelligence or more enlarged views of the nature of religion, or a more stable and well regulated piety. I tell you, no; instead of priding yourselves in being free from such extravagances, you ought to hide your heads, because Christians in New York are so worldly, and have so much starch, and pride, and fashion, that they cannot come down to such spirituality as this. I wish it could be so. Oh that there might be such a spirit in this city, and in this church! I know it would make a noise, if we had such things done here. But I would not care for that. Let them say, if they please, that the folks in Chatham Chapel are getting deranged. We need not be afraid of that, if we could live near enough to God to enjoy his Spirit in the manner I have described.

4. These effects of the Spirit of prayer upon the body are themselves no part of religion. It is only that the body is often so weak that the feelings of the soul overpower it. These bodily effects are not at all essential to prevailing prayer, but only a natural or physical result of highly excited emotions of the mind. It is not at all unusual for the body to be weakened and even overcome by any powerful emotion of the mind, on other subjects besides religion. The door-keeper of Congress in the time of the revolution, fell down dead on the reception of some highly cheering intelligence. I knew a woman in Rochester, who was in a great agony of prayer for the conversion of her son-in-law. One morning he was at an anxious

meeting, and she remained at home praying for him. At the close of the meeting, he came home a convert, and she was so rejoiced that she fell down and died on the spot. It is no more strange that these effects should be produced by religion than by strong feeling on any other subject. It is not essential to prayer, but the natural result of great effort of the mind.

5. Doubtless one great reason why God requires the exercise of this agonizing prayer is, that it forms such a bond of union between Christ and the Church. It creates such a sympathy between them. It is as if Christ came and poured the overflowings of his own benevolent heart into his church, and led them to sympathize and to co-operate with him, as they never do in any other way. They feel just as Christ feels--so full of compassion for sinners that they cannot contain themselves. Thus it is often with those ministers who are distinguished for their success in preaching to sinners; they often have such compassion, such overflowing desires for their salvation, that it shows itself in their speaking, and their preaching, just as though Jesus Christ spoke through them. The words come from their lips fresh and warm, as if from the very heart of Christ. I do not mean that he dictates their words; but he excites the feelings that give utterance to them. Then you see a movement in the hearers, as if Christ himself spoke through lips of clay.

6. This travail in birth for souls creates also a remarkable bond of union between warm-hearted Christians and the young converts. Those who are converted appear very dear to the hearts that have had this spirit of prayer for them. The feeling is like that of a mother for her first-born. Paul expresses it beautifully, when he says, "My little children!" His heart was warm and tender to them. "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again." They had backslidden, and he has all the agonies of a parent over a wandering child. "I travail in birth again, till Christ be formed in you, the hope of glory." In a revival, I have often noticed how those who have had the spirit of prayer, love the young converts. I know this is all algebra to those who have never felt it. But to those who have experienced the agony of wrestling, prevailing prayer, for the conversion of a soul, you may depend upon it, that soul, after it is converted, appears as dear as a child is to the mother who has brought it forth with pain. He has agonized for it, and received it in answer to prayer, and can present it before the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, "Here, Lord, am I, and the children thou hast given me."

7. Another reason why God requires this sort of prayer is, that it is the only way in which the church can be properly prepared to receive great blessings without being injured by them. When the church is thus prostrated in the dust before God, and is in the depth of agony in prayer, the blessing does them good. While at the same time, if they had received the blessing without this deep prostration of soul, it would have puffed them up with pride. But as it is, it increases their holiness, their love, their humility.

**IV. I am to show that such prayer as I have described will avail much. But time fails me to go into a particular detail of the evidence which I intended to bring forward under this head.**

Elijah the prophet mourned over the declensions of the house of Israel, and when he saw that no other means were likely to be effectual, to prevent a perpetual going away into idolatry, he prayed that the judgments of God might come upon the guilty nation. He prayed that it might not rain, and God shut up the heavens for three years and six months, till the people were driven to the last extremity. And when he saw that it was time to relent, what does he do? See him go up to the mountain and bow down in prayer. He wished to be alone; and he told his servant to go seven times, while he was agonizing in prayer. The last time, the servant told him there was a little cloud appeared, like a man's hand, and he instantly arose from his knees--the blessing was obtained. The time had come for the calamity to be turned back. "Ah, but," you say, "Elijah was a prophet." Now do not make this objection. They made it in the apostle's days, and what does the apostle say? Why he brought forward this very instance, and the fact that Elijah was a man of like passions with ourselves, as a case of prevailing prayer, and insisted that they should pray so too.

John Knox was a man famous for his power in prayer, so that bloody Queen Mary used to say she feared his prayers more than all the armies of Europe. And events showed that she had reason to do it. He used to be in such an agony for the deliverance of his country that he could not sleep. He had a place in his garden where he used to go to pray. One night he and several friends were praying together, and as they prayed, Knox spoke and said that deliverance had come. He could not tell what had happened, but he felt that something had taken place, for God had heard their prayers. What was it? Why the next news they had was, that Mary was dead!

Take a fact which was related, in my hearing, by a minister. He said, that in a certain town there had been no revival for many years; the church was nearly run out, the youth were all unconverted, and desolation reigned unbroken. There lived in a retired part of the town, an aged man, a blacksmith by trade, and of so stammering a tongue, that it was painful to hear him speak. On one Friday, as he was at work in his shop, alone, his mind became greatly exercised about the state of the church, and of the impenitent. His agony became so great, that he was induced to lay by his work, lock the shop door, and spend the afternoon in prayer.



He prevailed, and on the Sabbath called on the minister, and desired him to appoint a conference meeting. After some hesitation, the minister consented, observing, however, that he feared but few would attend. He appointed it the same evening, at a large private house. When evening came, more assembled than could be accommodated in the house. All was silent for a time, until one sinner broke out in tears, and said, if any one could pray, he begged him to pray for him. Another followed, and another, and still another, until it was found that persons from every quarter of the town were under deep conviction. And what was remarkable was, that they all dated their conviction at the hour when the old man was praying in his shop. A powerful revival followed. Thus this old stammering man prevailed, and, as a prince, had power with God. I could name multitudes of similar cases, but, for want of time, must conclude with a few.

**REMARKS.**

1. A great deal of prayer is lost, and many people never prevail in prayer, because, when they have desires for particular blessings, they do not follow them up. They may have had desires, benevolent and pure, which were excited by the Spirit of God; and when they have them, they should persevere in prayer, for if they turn off their attention to other objects, they will quench the Spirit. We tell sinners not to turn off their minds from the one object, but to keep their attention fixed there, till they are saved. When you find these holy desires in your minds, take care of two things:

(1.) Do not quench the Spirit.

(2.) Do not be diverted to other objects.

Follow the leadings of the Spirit, till you have offered that effectual fervent prayer that availeth much.

2. Without the spirit of prayer, ministers will do but little good. A minister need not expect much success, unless he prays for it. Sometimes others may have the spirit of prayer, and obtain a blessing on his labors. Generally, however, those preachers are the most successful who have the most of a spirit of prayer themselves.

3. Not only must ministers have the spirit of prayer, but it is necessary that the church should unite in offering that effectual fervent prayer which can prevail with God. You need not expect a blessing, unless you ask for it. "For all these things will I be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it."

Now, my brethren, I have only to ask you, in regard to what I have preached to-night, "Will you do it?" Have you done what I preached to you last Friday evening? Have you gone over with your sins, and confessed them, and got them all out of the way? Can you pray now? And will you join and offer prevailing prayer, that the Spirit of God may come down here?

**Re: LECTURE IV - PREVAILING PRAYER by Charles Finney - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2004/6/24 13:40**

This lecture has already blessed me and I am intending to listen to it again and follow along with the text. If we truly are honest with ourselves and listen and read these lectures with a desire to see revival I am sure God the Holy Ghost will impress on us things we need to change and do.