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Importunity In Old Testament Saints

by Andrew Murray

The chief elements of importunity in prayer are perseverance, determination and intensity. It begins with the refusal to accept a denial when the request is not answered the first time it is made. It grows to the determination to persevere, to spare no time or trouble until an answer comes. It rises to the intensity in which the whole being is given to God in supplication, and the boldness comes to lay hold of God's strength. At one time it is quiet and restful; at another passionate and bold. Now it takes time and is patient; then again it claims at once what it desires. In whatever shape, it always means and knows: God hears prayer; I must be heard!

Remember the wonderful instances we have of it in the Old Testament saints. Think of Abraham as he pleads for Sodom (Gen. 18:23-32). Time after time he renews his prayer. He does not cease until he has learned to know God's condescension in each time consenting to his petition, until he has learned how far he can go and then he rests in God's will. And for his sake Lot was saved. "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" (Gen. 19:29). And shall not we, who have a redemption and promises for the heathen which Abraham never knew, begin to plead more with God on their behalf?

Think of Jacob when he feared to meet Esau. The angel of the Lord met him in the dark, and wrestled with him. And when the angel saw that he prevailed not, he said, "Let me go." And Jacob said, "I will not let thee go," and the angel blessed him there. That boldness was so pleasing in God's sight that a new name was there given to Jacob: "Israel, for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (Gen. 32:24-29). God holds Himself back until what is of flesh and self and sloth in us is overcome, and we so prevail with Him that He can and must bless us. Our Lord taught us: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). In other words He is saying what Jacob said: "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me." This is the importunity He teaches, and we must learn to claim and take the blessing.

Moses and Importunity

Think of Moses when Israel had made the golden calf. Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin.... Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written" (Ex. 32:31-32). That was importunity that would rather die than not have his people given him.

God heard him and said He would send His angel with the people. Moses would not be content until, in answer to his prayer that God Himself should go with them, He had said, "I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken" (Ex. 33:17). In answer to Moses' prayer, "Show me Thy glory" (v. 18), God made His goodness pass before him.

As an intercessor Moses used importunity with God and prevailed. He proves that the man who truly lives near to God and with whom God speaks face to face, becomes partaker of that power of intercession which is in Jesus who is at God's right hand and ever lives to pray.

Think of Elijah in his prayer first for fire, and then for rain (1 Kgs. 18). In the former you have the importunity that claims and receives an immediate answer. In the latter Elijah bowing himself down to the earth with his face between his knees sent his servant to look toward the sea seven times and had the message that there was nothing. Here was the importunity of perseverance. He had told Ahab there would be rain; he knew it was coming; and yet he prayed until the seven times were fulfilled. It is of this Elijah and this prayer we are taught to pray for one another. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16ff.). Praise God who draws forth such effectual prayer and hears it! He is still the same! Let His people but believe that He still waits to be inquired of. Faith in a prayer-hearing God will make a prayer-loving Christian.

Marks of the True Intercessor

The marks of the true intercessor are a sense of the need of souls; a Christlike love in the heart; a consciousness of personal impotence; faith in the power of prayer; courage to persevere in spite of refusal; and the assurance of an abundant reward. These are the dispositions that fit a man for being a blessing in the world, that make him a true Christian worker who gets from God the bread of heaven to dispense to the hungry. These are the dispositions that call forth the highest, the heroic virtues of the life of faith.

Shall we who are Christians not be able to face the difficulties that we meet in prayer? It is as we labour and strive in prayer that the renewed will asserts its royal right to claim in the name of Christ what it will, and wields its God-given power to influence the destinies of men. Shall we be such cowards and sluggards as not to fight our way through to the place where we can find liberty for the captives and salvation for the perishing?

Let each servant of Christ learn to know his calling. His King ever lives to pray. The Spirit of the King lives in us to pray. It is from heaven the blessing which the world needs must be called down in persevering, believing prayer. It is from heaven, in answer to prayer, the Holy Spirit will take complete possession of us to do His work through us. Let us acknowledge how vain much of our work has been owing to our little prayer. Let us change our method, and let henceforth more prayer, much prayer, unceasing prayer, be the proof that we look for all to God, and that we believe that He hears us.