

ON PRAYER



*From the book Unseen Warfare,
edited by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain &
Revised by Theophan the Recluse*

Although lack of reliance on yourself, trust in God and constant efforts are quite essential in our spiritual warfare, as has been shown already, yet the most important of all is prayer, the fourth weapon in this war, as we have said in the beginning (end of first chapter). For it is through prayer that the first three weapons are acquired and gain full force, and that all other blessings are obtained. Prayer is the means of attracting and the hand for receiving all the blessings, so richly poured on us from the inexhaustible source of God's infinite love and goodness towards us. In spiritual warfare, by prayer you put your battle-axe into God's hand, that He should fight your enemies and overcome them. But in order that prayer should manifest its full power in you, it is needful that it stay constantly in you, as a natural function of your spirit; and you should protect and inspire it by cultivating the following attitudes.

- (1) You should keep always a lively striving to serve only God in all things you do, and serve Him in such way as is acceptable to Him. In order to make and keep this tendency alive, you must have the conviction, and always hold it in mind, that every reasoning creature should render the Lord worship, praise and service, if only because of His wondrous qualities: His goodness, greatness, wisdom and His numberless and immeasurable other perfections. When you add to this a constant remembrance of the fact that in an indescribable way He Himself served and profited you by the dispensation of His incarnation, redeemed you, freed you of the great curse, ministered to the wounds caused by the poison of sin and healed them, not with wine or oil, not with any kind of poultices, but with the priceless blood which flowed from His most holy side, and with His holy flesh tortured by scourgings, thorns, and nails; if you remember all this, how can you fail zealously to dedicate to His service alone every moment of your life by word, thought and deed? Moreover, you must not forget the profit we ourselves gain from such a service, since it makes us masters of ourselves, conquerors of the devil and sons of God.
- (2) You must possess a warm and living faith that, in His great mercy and loving kindness, God Himself wishes and is ready to give you all that is needed for you to serve Him rightly, and to bestow upon you every blessing you need. Such faith and such trust will become for you a vessel, which God in His infinite mercy will fill with the treasures of His blessings. And the bigger and more capacious your vessel, the richer the gifts with which your prayer will each time come back to what is deepest within you. How can one think that the Almighty and Unchanging God, Who commanded us to pray to Him and promised to give us the blessings we ask, should refuse them to us, and should not send us His Spirit, if with diligent and patient prayer we beg them from Him? Has He not said: 'How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' (Luke xi.13). And has He not promised: 'And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive' (Matt. xxi. 22).
- (3) You must approach prayer with an attitude such that you desire only the Divine Will, and not your own, alike in asking and in receiving what you have asked for. In other words, you should be moved to prayer because God wishes it, and you should wish to be heard,

again as He desires it. In a word, let it be in your mind and heart completely to unite your will with the will of God, to obey it in everything, and in no way to desire to incline God's will towards your own.

Why should this be so? Because your will is always mixed with self-love, is very often mistaken and does not know what it should wish for. But the will of God is always good, wise, just, beneficent and can never err. Since God's will is an immutable law for all that is and will be, to obey its rule must be the will of all reasoning creatures and the queen of their desires, whom they must submissively follow in all things.

Thus you must always desire, ask for and seek only what is acceptable to God. If ever you are in doubt as to whether one thing or another is acceptable to Him, seek it and ask for it with the thought that you wish to do or have this, if God too desires it. As to things, which you are sure are acceptable to God, such as virtues, you should seek them and ask for them only in order to please God more and to serve Him better, and for no other purpose, be it even spiritual.

(4) Further, you should come to prayer bringing deeds corresponding to your petition, and after prayer work still harder to become worthy to receive the grace and virtue you ask for. Thus the work of prayer should be accompanied by the effort of self-compulsion and of exerting all your strength towards what we ask, for here, in the order of spiritual life, asking for something and seeking it by your own efforts follow one another in alternation. But if a man prays God for some virtue, and at the same time gives himself up to negligence, acquiring no definite means to gain this virtue, and making no efforts towards it, truly this man tempts God, rather than prays. Thus the divine James says: 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much' (James v. 16). What avails to make prayer effective, according to St. Maximus, is when, besides begging a saint to pray for him about something, the man also prays about it himself and with all diligence does everything necessary for obtaining his request.

(5) You should combine in your prayer the four actions of which St. Basil the Great writes: first, glorify God, then give thanks to Him for the mercies He has shown you, then confess to Him your sins and trespasses of His commandments, and finally ask Him to grant you what you need, particularly in relation to your salvation. In accordance with this you may, for example, pray thus:

'O Lord my God! I sing and praise Thy ineffable glory and Thy infinite greatness.- I thank Thee that, by Thy goodness alone, Thou hast given me to exist and to share in the life-saving blessings of Thy dispensation by incarnation, that Thou hast often saved me, even without my knowledge, from calamities which threatened me, and delivered me from the hands of my unseen foes, - I confess to Thee that countless times have I stifled my conscience and fearlessly transgressed Thy holy commandments, and so shown myself ungrateful for Thy many and varied bounties. O my most merciful Lord, let not my ingratitude be too great for Thy mercy, but overlook my sins and trespasses, look with

kindness on the tears of my contrition, and according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies, help me even now, grant me what is needful for my salvation, and guide my life towards pleasing Thee, so that, unworthy as I am, I too may glorify Thy holy name.'

At the end of this prayer you can enumerate all your present needs, those of the spirit, those of the soul and those of the body: and if at that time you are exercising yourself in some special virtue, mention it too and pray for God's help to make progress towards perfection in it. If you are troubled by the impulses of some passion, pray for help in resisting and vanquishing it. If you suffer some injustice or injury, some loss or affliction, do not forget to give thanks for it to God, since, being sent in accordance with God's will, which is always good, it is visiting you for your own benefit.

- (6) In order that your prayer should be effective before God and should attract His benevolence, adorn it and give it wings by a firm faith not only in God's measureless bounty and in the immutable truth of His promise to hear us when we call to Him, even before our prayer is ended (Isaiah lviii, 9), but most of all in the power of the special dispensation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who assumed flesh for our sakes, suffered death on the cross, was resurrected, ascended to heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father, where He ceaselessly intercedes for us; since 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' (Rom. viii. 32).

In order to be heard, offer also the intercession of the Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, who prays for us day and night, and of all the saints, of archangels and angels, apostles and prophets, shepherds and teachers, together with the martyrs, holy fathers and mothers and those who have pleased God in every possible way, of your guardian angel and your patron saint whose name you bear, and the saint to whom is dedicated the Churches in which you were baptized, and always pray. By prefacing your prayer with these intercessions, you preface it with your humility, which of all things is most pleasing to God, since He looks upon no man with more lovingkindness than a man who is meek and humble. 'A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise' (Ps. li. 17).

- (7) You should always say your prayers with tireless diligence, as the Apostle directs, saying: 'Continue in prayer, and watch in the same' (Col. iv. 2). For humble patience, tirelessness and persistence in prayer conquer the unconquerable God and incline Him to mercy. According to the Lord's parable, the importunity of the widow inclined a wicked and unjust judge to grant her petition. The Lord gave this parable for a special purpose- to teach us not to faint, but to pray patiently, as we read in the Gospels: 'And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint' (Luke xviii. 1). If, as I say, an unjust judge was persuaded to grant the petition of the widow because she importuned him, how can God fail to incline His ear to our prayers, if we persist in imploring Him since He is the essence of lovingkindness? Therefore, when you beg God to grant you something, and He is slow in hearing you, continue to pray, keeping firm trust in His help alive in your heart. For diligent prayer is never left by Him

unrewarded and He is always ready to pour out rich blessings in return, much exceeding the expectations of those who pray, if they have no inner obstacles and are not in a state when it is better for them that their petition should remain unfulfilled. In this case, instead of what they ask, God sends them some other good, more profitable to them, whether they are aware of it or not. In this sense the conviction that prayer never remains unheard is quite justified; all that happens is that, when we ask and are not aware that what we ask is unprofitable to us, God does not send what we ask, and what He does send remains unseen, because to see it is not without danger to him who receives. So always be patient in prayer, and convinced that prayer never remains without fruit. If you do not receive what you ask, believe that you are receiving or will receive another good in its place. If you do not see it or come to see it, do not try to find out why this is so, but turn to your unworthiness and fill your soul with humble thoughts and feelings. If you provoke and make firm such thoughts in yourself, as a consequence of prayer, then even if you receive absolutely nothing, whether visibly or invisibly, accept these feelings themselves as the fruit of prayer, both salutary for yourself and most pleasing to God.

Hear what St. John Chrysostom says: 'Prayer is a great blessing if practiced in a right inner state and if we teach ourselves to give thanks to God, both when we receive what we ask and when we do not receive it. For when He gives, and when He does not give, He does it for your good. Thus when you receive what you ask, it is quite clear that you have received it; but when you do not receive it, you also receive, because you thus do not receive what is undoubtedly harmful for you; and not to receive what is harmful means to be granted what is useful. So, whether you receive what you ask or not, give thanks to God in the belief that God would have always given us what we ask were it not often better for us not to receive it.

So always pray to God with patience and render thanks to Him for all things, believing and professing your belief that He is good to you, and wisely good, and is your loving Benefactor, both when He gives and does not give what you ask. Firm in this faith, remain humbly obedient to divine Providence, meeting gratefully and gladly everything that happens, whether pleasant or unpleasant.