

THE HEART OF PRAYER

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WHAT JESUS TEACHES US

JERRAM BARRS


P U B L I S H I N G
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To my three sons: Peter, Paul, and Philip, and to my seven (so far) grandchildren: James, Ethan, Harry, Eliana, Isaac, Owen, and Jesse. My sons, when you were little children, and you, my grandchildren, have taught me much of what I know about prayer by your example. May your heavenly Father shower his love into your hearts, both now and for all eternity to come.

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INTRODUCTION

As will become clear to you when you read this book, I have never thought of myself as an expert, either in the practice of prayer, or in reflection on the theology of prayer. “Why, then,” you may ask very reasonably, “have you written a book on prayer?” There is a simple answer to this which I hope and pray will satisfy, you, the reader. I have found Jesus’ teaching on prayer, and the example of his prayers, so personally encouraging to me that, like a little child who discovers something especially interesting or beautiful, I want to share with others what I have been learning from the Lord.

My primary thanks for anything helpful in this book must go to the Lord Jesus himself. The mistakes and anything unhelpful are my responsibility only, and I ask him for his forgiveness for these errors.

In addition to thanking the Lord, I also wish to thank my sons and grandchildren for all they have taught me about prayer. Especially in prayer it seems to me that the Scripture is fulfilled which says: “A little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6), and that Jesus’ words are particularly applicable when he prays, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will” (Luke 10:21). The honesty,

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directness, and simplicity of the prayers of little children catch much of the spirit of Jesus' teaching on prayer. As adults we are too aware of what others may be thinking about our prayers and of the impression we might be making on the Lord and on those around us. Consequently we lose very easily the heart of prayer, the heart that a child grasps so readily.

My thanks are due to Edith Schaeffer, whose teaching on prayer was deeply helpful, and to my colleagues on the faculty at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, whose teaching, example, and friendship is a daily joy to me.

I also wish to thank my dear wife, Vicki, whose love and encouragement are my constant companion, help, comfort, and support. Without her this book and all my teaching would simply never have happened.

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I

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Luke 11:1–4

A PERSONAL CONFESSION

I think all Christian believers who are honest with themselves and with each other will acknowledge that we are not very spiritual people, that we do not find prayer easy, and that our prayer life is not strong. And yet many of us have read books or heard sermons and talks that claim to teach us how to have a great prayer life, or how we might become prayer warriors. Some teachers even claim that their methods and approaches to prayer will guarantee spiritual experience and rich blessing from God. Some of their books become extraordinarily popular—examples are unnecessary, since everyone is familiar with them. If we pay attention to the particular teacher’s approach, we are promised that such obedience will ensure our steady growth in a deep devotional life, or that God will certainly do amazing things for us—that he will “enlarge our territory” and give us answers of health, prosperity, or some other

great blessing. Sometimes when I hear such messages on prayer and the spiritual life, or when I read these kinds of books about prayer, I find that I go away feeling worthless and hopeless because my personal history of devotion and my practice of prayer looks very inadequate compared with what I hear and read.

Because of this sense of poverty in my prayer life, I have shied away from teaching on the subject of prayer for most of my years in ministry, first as a pastor and then as a seminary professor. What could I share when I myself was such a poor example? Some time ago, however, the dean of students at Covenant Theological Seminary, where I teach, asked me to give a talk on prayer at one of our regular days of prayer and fasting. So I thought, "Well, I had better try to come up with something." Over the past few years I had been doing a series of studies on Jesus the Greatest Evangelist, and I had found his teaching and example on this subject to be so helpful and freeing that I thought to myself: "Why not just look at what Jesus teaches about prayer? Maybe I will find the same help and freedom in Jesus' teaching on prayer that I have discovered in his teaching on evangelism."

That was exactly what I did find. As I began to look at Jesus' teaching on prayer, I found what he has to say to be the clearest, the most uplifting, and the most healing thoughts on this subject that I had ever read. I did not have the response of feeling inadequate and worthless when I studied the message of the Lord himself. What is remarkable about this to me is that the Lord knows full well how inadequate and weak my prayer life is, and he sees my cold heart and lack of zeal; yet I find that his words on prayer are a solace and support to me, rather than a condemnation and rebuke.