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STEPS TO CHRIST

E. G. WHITE



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TO
CHRIST

BY
MRS. E. G. WHITE

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THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

Through nature and revelation, through his providence and by the influence of his Spirit, God speaks to us. But these are not enough; we need also to pour out our hearts to him. In order to have spiritual life and energy, we must have actual intercourse with our Heavenly Father. Our minds may be drawn out toward him; we may meditate upon his works, his mercies, his blessings; but this is not, in the fullest sense, communing with him. In order to commune with God, we must have something to say to him concerning our actual life.

Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary, in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to him.

When Jesus was upon the earth, he taught his disciples how to pray. He directed them to present their daily needs before God, and to cast all their care upon him. And the assurance he gave them that their petitions should be heard, is assurance also to us.

Jesus himself, while he dwelt among men, was often in prayer. Our Saviour identified himself with our needs and weaknesses, in that he became a suppliant, a petitioner, seeking from his Father fresh supplies of strength, that he might come forth braced for duty and trial. He is our example in all things. He is a brother in our infirmities, "in all points tempted like as we are;" **Hebrews 4:15**, but as the sinless one, his nature recoiled from evil; he endured struggles and torture of soul in a world of sin. His humanity made prayer a necessity and a privilege. He found comfort and joy in communion with his Father. And if the Saviour of men, the Son of God, felt the need of prayer, how much more should feeble, sinful mortals feel the necessity of fervent, constant prayer.

Our Heavenly Father waits to bestow upon us the fullness of his blessing. It is our privilege to drink largely at the fountain of boundless love. What a wonder it is that we pray so little! God is ready and willing to hear the sincere prayer of the humblest of his children, and yet there is much manifest reluctance on our part to make known our wants to God. What can the angels of heaven think of poor helpless human beings, who are subject to temptation, when God's heart of infinite love yearns toward them, ready to give them more than they can ask or think, and yet they pray so little, and have so little faith? The angels love to bow before God; they love to be near him. They regard communion with God as their highest joy; and yet the children of earth, who need so much the help that God only can give, seem satisfied to walk without the light of his Spirit, the companionship of his presence.

The darkness of the evil one incloses those who neglect to pray. The whispered temptations of the enemy entice them to sin; and it is all because they do not make use of the privileges that God has given them in the divine appointment of prayer. Why should the sons and daughters of God be reluctant to pray, when prayer is the key in the

hand of faith to unlock heaven's storehouse, where are treasured the boundless resources of Omnipotence? Without unceasing prayer and diligent watching, we are in danger of growing careless and of deviating from the right path. The adversary seeks continually to obstruct the way to the mercy-seat, that we may not by earnest supplication and faith obtain grace and power to resist temptation.

There are certain conditions upon which we may expect that God will hear and answer our prayers. One of the first of these is that we feel our need of help from him. He has promised, "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground." **Isaiah 44:3**. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who long after God, may be sure that they will be filled. The heart must be open to the Spirit's influence, or God's blessing cannot be received.

Our great need is itself an argument, and pleads most eloquently in our behalf. But the Lord is to be sought unto to do these things for us. He says, "Ask, and it shall be given you." And "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?" **Matthew 7:7; Romans 8:32**.

If we regard iniquity in our hearts, if we cling to any known sin, the Lord will not hear us: but the prayer of the penitent, contrite soul is always accepted. When all known wrongs are righted, we may believe that God will answer our petitions. Our own merit will never commend us to the favor of God; it is the worthiness of Jesus that will save us, his blood that will cleanse us; yet we have a work to do in complying with the conditions of acceptance.

Another element of prevailing prayer is faith. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." **Hebrews 11:6**. Jesus said to his disciples, "What things soever ye desire when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." **Mark 11:24**. Do we take him at his word?

The assurance is broad and unlimited, and he is faithful who has promised. When we do not receive the very things we ask for, at the time we ask, we are still to believe that the Lord hears, and that he will answer our prayers. We are so erring and shortsighted that we sometimes ask for things that would not be a blessing to us, and our Heavenly Father in love answers our prayers by giving us that which will be for our highest good,—that which we ourselves would desire if with vision divinely enlightened we could see all things as they really are. When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very way and for the particular thing that we desire, is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly. Then do not fear to trust him, even though you do not see the immediate answer to your prayers. Rely upon his sure promise. "Ask, and it shall be given you." **Matthew 7:7**.

If we take counsel with our doubts and fears, or try to solve everything that we cannot see clearly, before we have faith, perplexities will only increase and deepen. But if we come to God, feeling helpless and dependent, as we really are, and in humble, trusting faith make known our wants to him whose knowledge is infinite, who sees

everything in creation, and who governs everything by his will and word, he can and will attend to our cry, and will let light shine into our hearts. Through sincere prayer we are brought into connection with the mind of the Infinite. We may have no remarkable evidence at the time that the face of our Redeemer is bending over us in compassion and love; but this is even so. We may not feel his visible touch, but his hand is upon us in love and pitying tenderness.

When we come to ask mercy and blessing from God, we should have a spirit of love and forgiveness in our own hearts. How can we pray, "Forgive us our debts, *as* we forgive our debtors," **Matthew 6:12**, and yet indulge an unforgiving spirit? If we expect our own prayers to be heard, we must forgive others in the same manner, and to the same extent, as we hope to be forgiven.

Perseverance in prayer has been made a condition of receiving. We must pray always, if we would grow in faith and experience. We are to be "instant in prayer," "to continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving." **Romans 12:12; Colossians 4:2**. Peter exhorts believers to be "sober, and watch unto prayer." **1 Peter 4:7**. Paul directs, "In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." **Philippians 4:6**. "But ye, beloved," says Jude, "praying in the Holy Ghost, keep yourselves in the love of God." **Jude 20, 21**. Unceasing prayer is the unbroken union of the soul with God, so that life from God flows into our life; and from our life, purity and holiness flow back to God.

There is necessity for diligence in prayer; let nothing hinder you. Make every effort to keep open the communion between Jesus and your own soul. Seek every opportunity to go where prayer is wont to be made. Those who are really seeking for communion with God, will be seen in the prayer-meeting, faithful to do their duty, and earnest and anxious to reap all the benefits they can gain. They will improve every opportunity of placing themselves where they can receive the rays of light from heaven.

We should pray in the family circle; and above all we must not neglect secret prayer; for this is the life of the soul. It is impossible for the soul to flourish while prayer is neglected. Family or public prayer alone is not sufficient. In solitude let the soul be laid open to the inspecting eye of God. Secret prayer is to be heard only by the prayer-hearing God. No curious ear is to receive the burden of such petitions. In secret prayer the soul is free from surrounding influences, free from excitement. Calmly, yet fervently, will it reach out after God. Sweet and abiding will be the influence emanating from him who seeth in secret, whose ear is open to hear the prayer arising from the heart. By calm, simple faith, the soul holds communion with God, and gathers to itself rays of divine light to strengthen and sustain it in the conflict with Satan. God is our tower of strength.

Pray in your closet; and as you go about your daily labor, let your heart be often uplifted to God. It was thus that Enoch walked with God. These silent prayers rise like precious incense before the throne of grace. Satan cannot overcome him whose heart is thus stayed upon God.

There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition to God. There is nothing that can prevent us from lifting up our hearts in the spirit of

earnest prayer. In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God, and plead for divine guidance, as did Nehemiah when he made his request before the King Artaxerxes. A closet of communion may be found wherever we are. We should have the door of the heart open continually, and our invitation going up that Jesus may come and abide as a heavenly guest in the soul.

Although there may be a tainted, corrupted atmosphere around us, we need not breathe its miasma, but may live in the pure air of heaven. We may close every door to impure imaginings and unholy thoughts by lifting the soul into the presence of God through sincere prayer. Those whose hearts are open to receive the support and blessing of God will walk in a holier atmosphere than that of earth, and will have constant communion with Heaven.

We need to have more distinct views of Jesus, and a fuller comprehension of the value of eternal realities. The beauty of holiness is to fill the hearts of God's children; and that this may be accomplished, we should seek for divine disclosures of heavenly things.

Let the soul be drawn out and upward, that God may grant us a breath of the heavenly atmosphere. We may keep so near to God that in every unexpected trial our thoughts will turn to him as naturally as the flower turns to the sun.

Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden him; you cannot weary him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of his children. "The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy." **James 5:11.** His heart of love is touched by our sorrows, and even by our utterance of them. Take to him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for him to bear, for he holds up worlds, he rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of his children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our Heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which he takes no immediate interest. "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds." **Psalms 147:3.** The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul for whom he gave his beloved Son.

Jesus said, "Ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loveth you." "I have chosen you, . . . that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you." **John 16:26, 27; 15:16.** But to pray in the name of Jesus is something more than a mere mention of that name at the beginning and the ending of a prayer. It is to pray in the mind and spirit of Jesus, while we believe his promises, rely upon his grace, and work his works.

God does not mean that any of us should become hermits or monks, and retire from the world, in order to devote ourselves to acts of worship. The life must be like Christ's life,--between the mountain and the multitude. He who does nothing but pray will soon cease to pray, or his prayers will become a formal routine. When men take themselves out of social life, away from the sphere of Christian duty and cross-bearing;

when they cease to work earnestly for the Master, who worked earnestly for them, they lose the subject-matter of prayer, and have no incentive to devotion. Their prayers become personal and selfish. They cannot pray in regard to the wants of humanity or the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom, pleading for strength wherewith to work.

We sustain a loss when we neglect the privilege of associating together to strengthen and encourage one another in the service of God. The truths of his word lose their vividness and importance in our minds. Our hearts cease to be enlightened and aroused by the sanctifying influence, and we decline in spirituality. In our association as Christians we lose much by lack of sympathy with one another. He who shuts himself up to himself is not filling the position that God designed he should. The proper cultivation of the social elements in our nature brings us into sympathy with others, and is a means of development and strength to us in the service of God.

If Christians would associate together, speaking to each other of the love of God, and of the precious truths of redemption, their own hearts would be refreshed, and they would refresh one another. We may be daily learning more of our Heavenly Father, gaining a fresh experience of his grace; then we shall desire to speak of his love; and as we do this, our own hearts will be warmed and encouraged. If we thought and talked more of Jesus, and less of self, we should have far more of his presence.

If we would but think of God as often as we have evidence of his care for us, we should keep him ever in our thoughts, and should delight to talk of him and to praise him. We talk of temporal things because we have an interest in them. We talk of our friends because we love them; our joys and our sorrows are bound up with them. Yet we have infinitely greater reason to love God than to love our earthly friends, and it should be the most natural thing in the world to make him first in all our thoughts, to talk of his goodness and tell of his power. The rich gifts he has bestowed upon us were not intended to absorb our thoughts and love so much that we should have nothing to give to God; they are constantly to remind us of him, and to bind us in bonds of love and gratitude to our heavenly Benefactor. We dwell too near the low-lands of earth. Let us raise our eyes to the open door of the sanctuary above, where the light of the glory of God shines in the face of Christ, who "is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him." **Hebrews 7:25.**

We need to praise God more "for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men." **Psalm 107:8.** Our devotional exercises should not consist wholly in asking and receiving. Let us not be always thinking of our wants, and never of the benefits we receive. We do not pray any too much, but we are too sparing of giving thanks. We are the constant recipients of God's mercies, and yet how little gratitude we express, how little we praise him for what he has done for us.

Anciently the Lord bade Israel, when they met together for his service, "Ye shall eat before the Lord your God, and ye shall rejoice in all that ye put your hand unto, ye and your households, wherein the Lord thy God hath blessed thee." **Deuteronomy 12:7.** That which is done for the glory of God should be done with cheerfulness, with songs of praise and thanksgiving, not with sadness and gloom.

Our God is a tender, merciful Father. His service should not be looked upon as a

heart-saddening, distressing exercise. It should be a pleasure to worship the Lord and to take part in his work. God would not have his children, for whom so great salvation has been provided, act as if he were a hard, exacting taskmaster. He is their best friend; and when they worship him, he expects to be with them, to bless and comfort them, filling their hearts with joy and love. The Lord desires his children to take comfort in his service, and to find more pleasure than hardship in his work. He desires that those who come to worship him shall carry away with them precious thoughts of his care and love, that they may be cheered in all the employments of daily life, that they may have grace to deal honestly and faithfully in all things.

We must gather about the cross. Christ and him crucified should be the theme of contemplation, of conversation, and of our most joyful emotion. We should keep in our thoughts every blessing we receive from God; and when we realize his great love, we should be willing to trust everything to the hand that was nailed to the cross for us.

The soul may ascend nearer heaven on the wings of praise. God is worshipped with song and music in the courts above, and as we express our gratitude, we are approximating to the worship of the heavenly hosts. "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth God." **Psalm 50:23**. Let us with reverent joy come before our Creator, "with thanksgiving, and the voice of melody." **Isaiah 51:3**.