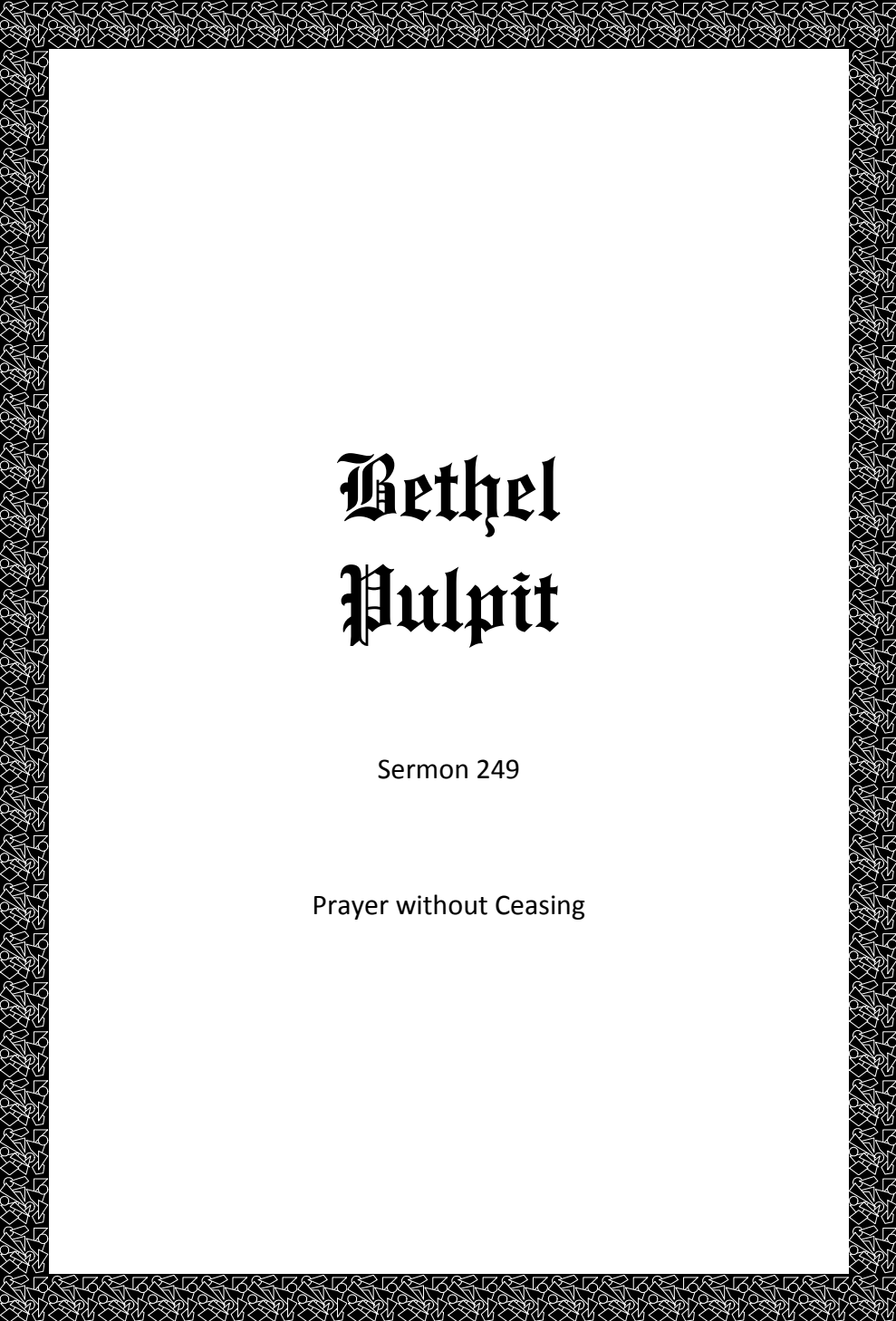




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 249

Prayer without Ceasing

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 5th March, 2006**

Text: *"But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him" (Acts 12. 5).*

Prayer is a most wonderful thing, a most wonderful privilege – that the great God of heaven permits unworthy sinners on earth to come to Him, to speak to Him in prayer, to make their wants and wishes known, and promises graciously to hear and graciously to answer. Now what a privilege! Yet it is a privilege we so often take for granted, so often even despise.

The ground and foundation of prayer is the work of the Lord Jesus, the one Mediator between God and man, the sacrifice that He has offered, His intercession at the Father's right hand in heaven. It is through Him and Him alone that we can come, through Him and Him alone that we can pray, through Him and Him alone that we receive answers. That is why we pray *for Jesus' sake*, meaning that we do not deserve it. If the Lord dealt with us for *our* sake we should not only be unanswered; we should be cut off. But *for Jesus' sake*, on the grounds of what He has done, on the grounds of His mercy, on the grounds of His precious blood.

So this wonderful privilege of prayer, and God even answers the prayers of ungodly men. That is why the Word says, "Men" – all men – "men ought always to pray, and not to faint." For instance Cain, a most ungodly man, but the Lord answered his prayer. That was in providence. But you see the privilege, the throne of grace. "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." The mercy seat sprinkled with blood. The promise: "There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat."

So we have this wonderful privilege of prayer. It is one of the most precious gifts that God has ever given to His people on earth. Yet there are some strange things, and perhaps the strangest is this: we have a sinful aversion to prayer, even the best, even the most eminent of saints. There is that old nature; there is that carnality; there is the flesh. And there is something in us that does not like to pray, that does not find it easy to pray, even the best of God's people. The eminent John Berridge, who of course

was a Bedfordshire man, in the days of the Evangelical Revival said in one of his quaint letters, “I find Bedfordshire people are much better at sitting and listening than they are at kneeling and praying!” It is that sinful aversion to prayer.

But not only that. This wonderful privilege of prayer that God has given, yet there is always this awful temptation and insinuation of Satan (and I have no doubt that a few of you, if not many of you, have known this temptation). We believe God is almighty. We believe He will fulfil His purpose. We believe He will do what is right. We believe everything is ordered. We believe all is for the best. We believe nothing can thwart God’s will – wonderful truth! And Satan says, “Well, why pray? Why pray if God will always do what is right, if God will always do what is best? If it is all fixed, if it is all ordered, why pray?” I think some of you have heard that little whisper in your heart, haven’t you? Well, the simple answer is this: that God has bidden His people to pray and God has promised to answer their prayers. And if all things are ordered and ordained, and they are, God also has ordained and ordered that many of His purposes shall be fulfilled in answer to the poor prayers of His people

O this privilege of prayer, which brings us to another thing: poor prayers – O don’t you feel ashamed of your prayers? Don’t you feel how poor they are? And Satan again whispers, “How can you expect that such poor prayers can be answered?” That is one wonderful thing I believe I have learned in my life, that God often gives wonderful answers to poor prayers. The instance I usually give, the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. “Master, carest Thou not that we perish?” I think that was perhaps the worst prayer in the Bible. But it received a good answer, a blessed answer. There was not much prayer in it, a lot of unbelief in it, and they almost accused the Lord Jesus Himself of not caring. But there is just that grain of faith in it, that they cast themselves on the Lord. It was a poor prayer but it received a very blessed answer. I understand Mr. Popham used to love to quote good Thomas Hardy of Leicester: “Try what your poor prayers can do; try what your hard-hearted prayers can do; try what your prayerless prayers can do.” For God gives wonderful answers oftentimes to poor prayers and He does it for Jesus’ sake, on mercy’s ground.

So this wonderful privilege of prayer. But then of course there is this other problem and difficulty, this question of unanswered prayer. The Lord Jesus said, “Ask, and ye shall receive.” But how many a child of God

and how many a young person and how many a little one has said, “But I have asked the Lord, and I don’t seem to receive an answer”? The deep, deep mystery of prayer. If we ask anything according to God’s will, He will give it. If it is not according to His will, it is better that we do not have it. We are not to pray contrary to Scripture. You can plead and beg and wrestle in prayer, but pray subject to the Lord’s will. The Lord delights to give wonderful answers when His people wrestle with Him, but then it is when they realise that His will is best and when they pray subject to His holy will. It is a great mystery this, prayer and answers to prayer. Take it even in this chapter. We think of it as a wonderful chapter on prayer heard and answered. Peter, a miracle performed, the prayer of the church, the prayer answered, Peter delivered. But there were two people in prison. One was James (verse 2). I am sure the church prayed for James, but James was not delivered; James came to a terrible end. He was beheaded with the sword. He died a martyr’s death. You see the great mystery of divine sovereignty. So again Satan will say, “Why pray?”

But I think you will find one thing. If you seek to pray and the Lord gives you a spirit of access and liberty in prayer, you feel He is listening to you, you do not feel any bar on your conscience, you do not feel anything holding you back, you pray subject to His will, you have the access, then usually those prayers are heard and graciously answered, blessedly answered. And perhaps some of you have known the difference. I have known it in my own life. I have perhaps had a similar circumstance twice in my life, and one time, O the burden and the wrestling and the views of God’s greatness and His ability to answer prayer, His ability to do anything, His ability to do everything, His willingness – the wrestling and the impossible performed. And then another time perhaps you try to pray, but there seems to be the darkness and the bondage and you feel you cannot really urge your case, and then you find it is not the Lord’s will to give you what you want. But, “Pray, if thou canst or canst not speak; but pray with faith in Jesus’ name.” God is not offended. So whatever it is, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.” “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.” “The cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto Me, and I will hear it.” So the Lord is not offended; the Lord is not grieved. Bring your case before Him, beg for Him to appear, wrestle with Him, wait upon Him, continue in prayer. For He delights to hear and answer prayer. Pray subject to His

holy will, but press your case, urge your case, and the Lord will not be offended.

Old John Warburton of Southill was going to preach once and he was so tried. He could not get a text. I rather think it was on the Saturday on Biggleswade station. He was walking backwards and forwards almost in despair. He did not know what to preach about. Suddenly he let out a shout: "When was God pleased with disobedience?" What a question! He had one or two friends with him who were seeing him off. They said, "Whatever do you mean, Mr. Warburton?" He said, "The Lord said to Jacob, 'Let Me go,' and Jacob said, 'I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.' I have my text!" And he said, "The Lord was pleased with disobedience then!"

So just a few thoughts on prayer, the privilege of it, the difficulties, but that encouragement to pray and this wonderful example in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 12. Let us be clear, this was not just a difficult case or a hard case; it was an impossibility, and the Holy Ghost in this chapter emphasises the impossibility. "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church." Now then, you girls and boys, there are three Herods in the New Testament. There was the Herod when Jesus was born, and then there was the Herod of the gospels who had John the Baptist beheaded, and then this was the third Herod. "Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church." The Holy Ghost puts it so clearly, lays it on so heavily, the impossibility of the case. He was determined and he was cruel and he would not stay his hand at anything. "He killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also." This is the impossibility. "And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers." So there were sixteen soldiers appointed. Four different watches, they did six hours each and there were four of them looking after Peter. It seems he was chained to two of them and the other two were on guard. What I am trying to emphasise is this is an impossible case. You might think your case tonight is impossible. This is an impossible case.

Herod "*intending* after Easter to bring him forth to the people." God's intention was different from Herod's intention, and what a mercy that is! "Intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people." That

means publicly to put him to death. “Peter therefore was kept in prison.” So far everything is dark, black, impossible. And then we have this beautiful word that I have read to you, one of those wonderful *buts* of holy Scripture. There is a complete change in the chapter after this. Did you notice it as we read it through? A complete change. There is a saying, “Prayer changes things.” Well, it does. “Peter therefore was kept in prison: *but* prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” The margin says, “*Instant and earnest prayer.*” Now seek that. Some of our prayers are terribly half-hearted and we do not really expect them to be answered. Some of our prayers do not really have any prayer in them. Some of our prayers do not go any higher than the roof.

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Instant and earnest prayer. Where do you get it from? We have not got it in our wretched hearts. It must come from God. It must be the Holy Spirit’s work. Ask for it, pray for it, this spirit of prayer. I just warn you on one thing. Do not let Satan tempt you not to pray until you feel you have a spirit of prayer. So often when you venture in all your darkness and wretchedness and unbelief, you try to pray, and then the Lord sweetly enables you to pray. “Instant and earnest prayer.”

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Notice this also, beloved friends, this *without ceasing*. What does it mean? Well, I think the best explanation is that of the importunate widow. She came and she did not get an answer and the judge did not want to listen to her and turned her away, but she kept on and kept on and kept on. We call her “the importunate widow” – importunity. The unjust judge was not kind, was not helpful. He had no sympathy, but he said, “Because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.” So he answered her. The important point: it is not comparing the Lord to an unjust judge; it is contrasting Him. If an unjust judge acts like this, how much more the God of all grace!

“Prayer was made without ceasing.” This is sometimes where we fail and falter and fall. We pray, but it is not without ceasing. In past days at Willenhall there was an ignorant man and old Daniel Matthews the pastor used to speak of being importunate in prayer. I think old Daniel Matthews was probably severe and the poor man dare not ask him what he meant. He said, “Lord, if I need to be importunate in prayer, please, please tell me what it means.” The next Lord’s day Daniel Matthews was

speaking again of being importunate in prayer and (knocking on the pulpit) he said, “Keep on knocking, keep on knocking, that is what it is!” “Prayer indited by the Lord, the Lord will surely hear.”

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” Now this is united prayer. There is personal prayer; there is prayer in secret; and then there is united prayer. Really, that is why we have our prayer meetings. It is united prayer, for the Lord has said, “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven.” That was a good comment on this very point in the hymn we sang just now: “The force of their united cries no power can long withstand.” That is why at our prayer meetings – and we do it at Bethel, I think and I hope – we seek to pray for those things which are the concern for us all. “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing.” If it is something about somebody somewhere and nobody knows who it is, well, it is private prayer really, though it is spoken in public. It is secret prayer though it is in public.

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” It was made by the church. It was united prayer. It is a wonderful privilege. Look, beloved friends, there are a lot of burdens at present, friends with their difficulties, things in the nation, things in the denomination, things with us personally. May we at our prayer meetings like the church here, together, united, without ceasing, bear these matters before the Lord. And in secret. The old hymn says, “Though sundered far, in prayer we meet around one common mercy seat.” It may be tomorrow evening; in our own homes, this one is praying for something, and that one, and someone else, and that one sitting now in the gallery, and there are three or four of you, or perhaps thirty or forty of you. It is not a public meeting, but, “The saints, in prayer, appear as one.” “The force of their united cries no power can long withstand.”

“But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” It is a beautiful word, a wonderful word. Do not forget, it is this same God, this God, the God of Acts 12. “This God is our God for ever and ever.” Now do you believe it?

Now let us look at the outworking of it. “When Herod would have brought him forth” – that means to take his head off, just like James. “When Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains.” The point the

Holy Ghost is emphasising is *the impossibility of the case*. But they used to sing that hymn,

“Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
And looks to God alone;
Laughs at impossibilities,
And says, ‘It shall be done.’”

It is the impossibility of the case. There were two soldiers and he was chained up to them. “And the keepers before the door kept the prison.” It was impossible, impossible for this prayer to be answered. It was impossible, impossible for Peter to escape. “But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.” And, “With God nothing shall be impossible.” Now do you believe it? What about this: “Behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.” Poor Peter thought he was dreaming. We think of the one-hundred-and-twenty-sixth Psalm: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.” Have you ever been like one that dreams, when the Lord answered your prayer and when you thought it was impossible, you thought it could never be? You thought, “Can it really be me? Can it really have happened?” Well, “He ... thought he saw a vision.”

What was the next thing that happened? A wonderful answer to prayer, a wonderful deliverance, a wonderful miracle, and then everything seems to be going wrong. They are going out, and what is it? “They came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city.” I warn you, beloved friends, you will find it sometimes, if the Lord is giving you a glorious answer to your prayer, you will find just as you are rejoicing, that everything seems to go wrong. But, “God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that power belongeth unto God.” So this once, and this twice, this iron gate. A miracle; a deliverance; prayer heard and answered. And now there is this great, iron gate. Well then, “Which opened to them of his own accord.” The church was praying. Do you believe that “prayer can force a passage through iron bars and brazen gates”? Well, it did for Peter that night. The gate “opened to them of his own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street.” And Peter said, “Now I know of a surety, that the

Lord hath sent His angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.”

And what next? Well, there was only one thing to do, and that was to go to the house of some of the Lord’s people. Peter went to the house of Mark’s mother, Mary. Now this is it: “Where many were gathered together praying.” It was the middle of the night. You see, “earnest and instant prayer.” They were still praying in the middle of the night. They were still praying though it was impossible. They were still praying though it was past hope. Then of course we have this interesting account of how Peter knocked at the door and a girl named Rhoda came to hear, and when she knew it was Peter, with joy she did not even open the door, but she ran back to tell them. “And they said unto her, Thou art mad.” They could not believe their prayers were answered.

So there are one or two things. They were not perfect people. There must have been quite a lot of unbelief in them, because though these prayers were so wonderfully heard and answered, in a sense there was unbelief. They were not altogether expecting that they would be heard and answered. It is like the well-known story; I think it was before the war down in the eastern counties. I think it was a Strict Baptist chapel. They had had a most dreadful drought, a terrible drought, and they called a special prayer meeting. It had not rained for weeks. Everything was going wrong for the farmers, and they held this prayer meeting. A poor old lady came along with her umbrella and everyone smiled at her. “Well,” she said, “I thought we were having a prayer meeting to pray that it might rain.” You know what the fault is with us: we pray and we do not expect answers. It is a terrible thing. We pray and we do not expect answers. Yet the mercy of it here, though they were not altogether expecting the answer, they got it. That is where the Lord “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.” “But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished.” And you will be astonished when the Lord hears and answers your poor prayers.

Now one thing struck me that I have never noticed before. Peter, “beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren.” Of course, James the brother of John had been killed with the sword. This was the other James, who is usually spoken of as James the brother of the Lord. But the point

that struck me today: it seems that this wonderful gathering who had this wonderful answer to prayer were just ordinary people. The apostles were not there. James was not there. It was not the important ones; it was not the preachers; it was not the ministers; it was not the apostles; because Peter told them to go as quickly as they could and tell them. That is an encouragement, and doesn't it fit in with what good Joseph Hart says: "Prayer's a weapon for the feeble; weakest souls can wield it best"? "Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren." "Prayer's a weapon for the feeble; weakest souls can wield it best." We talk about *the power of prayer*, and we know what we mean. But really prayer is a terrible sense of our own weakness, to cast ourselves in our weakness into the hands of an almighty God. So in that sense there is not any power in prayer, but there is power sufficient in the God who hears and answers prayer.

Just to hear the whole conclusion of it. Herod was being almost worshipped, being exalted. They were treating him almost as a god. He was arrayed in royal apparel, sitting on a throne, making an oration. "And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory." You know what it is, beloved friends. At the beginning of the chapter, "after Easter" Herod was going to put Peter to death. After Easter Herod was in the grave and Peter was free. You know what the Lord says: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." O the church prayed for Peter, but the Lord gave them double: not only Peter free, but their cruel persecutor slain, and by the hand of almighty God. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

Just a few things in application; may the Holy Ghost apply them. "But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Peter was in prison. He could not deliver himself. There seemed no way of deliverance. The church prayed for him and he was delivered, and God delivered him. I just want to speak of it briefly in closing in two ways. Beloved friends, to speak plainly, I believe there are a few, and I wonder if more than a few this evening who know and fear the Lord, and yet spiritually they are in prison; they are held fast; they are in bondage; they cannot come forth; they cannot set themselves free. "Peter ... was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." So may there be that instant and earnest prayer that the poor

prisoners in the prison house might hear the Lord's voice saying, "Come forth," because the voice of Messiah is to "proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if the church of God here had this spirit of prayer that there was in the days of Peter, and we heard one and another with astonishment declaring how the Lord had loosed their bonds and set them free and delivered them and brought them out of the prison house! Do you believe the Lord can do it? Do you believe in the value of prayer? May the Lord give us a spirit of wrestling prayer.

"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." So prayer for those who are held in prison, in bondage. But secondly, prayer for ourselves, some who perhaps feel they have never been set free. "Turn you to the Strong hold, ye prisoners of hope." He can deliver you; He can set you free.

"Prisoners of hope, to Jesus turn;
He's a Strong-hold, ordained for you;
Gird up your loins, and cease to mourn,
And to the Lamb your way pursue."

And may you sweetly prove, "By the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water."

But then how often those who have been blessed, as they journey on, so often through unbelief, through Satan's temptation, through indifference, through prayerlessness, through many things, they feel brought again into prison. Let us be clear, beloved friends, in the church of God today, there is an awful lot of bondage, an awful lot of darkness. Many of the old saints of God who have professed the Lord's name for many years are not walking in the light and liberty of the gospel. There is the withdrawing of the Spirit. It is not just that we see few new converts, few ministers going out to preach; it is that so many who have feared God for many years seem almost to be held captive by sin and Satan and unbelief. O may we be able to pray for one another. O but may we pray for ourselves, that the prison might be opened, our prison, my prison, your prison, that we might know more of the glorious liberty of the children of God, on mercy's ground, for Jesus' sake, through His precious blood. O pray for it, beloved friends, plead for it, seek that earnest and instant prayer, and, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

“Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.”

* * *

In themselves as weak as worms,
How can poor believers stand,
When temptations, foes, and storms,
Press them close on every hand?

Weak, indeed, they feel they are,
But they know the Throne of Grace;
And the God who answers prayer,
Helps them when they seek His face.

Though the Lord awhile delay,
Succour they at length obtain;
He who taught their hearts to pray,
Will not let them cry in vain.

Wrestling prayer can wonders do;
Bring relief in deepest straits!
Prayer can force a passage through
Iron bars and brazen gates.

For the wonders He has wrought,
Let us now our praises give;
And, by sweet experience taught,
Call upon Him while we live.

J. Newton