

Message Two

A Proper Prayer Life for a Proper Church Life

Scripture Reading: 1 Tim. 2:1-4, 8; Exo. 28:29-30; 31:1-3; Col. 4:2

- I. “I exhort therefore, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercessions, thanks-givings be made on behalf of all men; on behalf of kings and all who are in high position, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all godliness and gravity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of our Savior God”—1 Tim. 2:1-3:**
- A. After speaking of God’s economy and after charging Timothy to war the good war- fare for God’s economy (1:3-4, 18), Paul indicates that a prayer ministry is the prerequisite for the administrating and shepherding of a local church (2:1-3, 8).
 - B. A prerequisite for having a proper church life in the Lord’s recovery today is to have a prayer life; a proper church is a praying church; all in the Lord’s recovery must be prayerful and stand against the sin of prayerless ness—1 Sam. 12:23.
 - C. The elders in the church must take up Paul’s charge to “first of all” pray (1 Tim. 2:1); those who take the lead in the churches must have a prayer life; if we exercise ourselves to have a prayer life, the church will be living and uplifted.
 - D. Instead of talking so much and even instead of working so much, we should pray more; only after we have prayed for a matter thoroughly should we make a decision concerning it, not by ourselves independently, but in oneness with the Lord and according to His leading.
 - E. The Greek word for *intercessions* denotes an approaching of God in a personal and confiding manner, that is, an intervening, an interfering, before God in others’ affairs for their benefit.
 - F. “Recently, my activity was limited for a time so that I could rest and care for my health. When I heard about certain needs, I prayed for them. Perhaps the Lord limited me that He might impress me with the fact that prayer is more important than work. May we all learn the lesson that the way to have a good church life is to pray. This is crucial. If our talking is turned into praying, the church in our locality will be transformed”—*Life-study of 1 Timothy*, second edition, p. 28.
 - G. We should pray on behalf of all men because God our Savior desires all men to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth; our prayer is required for the carrying out of God’s desire—1 Tim. 2:4.
 - H. “I desire therefore that men pray in every place, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and reasoning”—v. 8:
 - 1. Hands symbolize our doings; hence, holy hands signify a holy living, a living that is pious and that belongs to God; such a holy life strengthens our prayer life.
 - 2. If our hands are not holy, our living is not holy and is not for God; we then have no supporting strength to pray, no holy hands to lift up in prayer.
 - 3. Wrath and reasoning kill our prayer; wrath is of our emotion, and reasoning is of our mind.
 - 4. To have a prayer life and pray unceasingly, our emotion and mind must be regulated to be in a normal condition, under the control of the Spirit in our spirit.
- II. In order to be infused with the instruction of God to care for the church, the elders must have much and thorough prayer so that they can enter into the reality of “reading the**

saints,” just as the high priest in the Old Testament read the stones on the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim in the presence of God—Exo. 28:29-30:

- A. After the Urim and the Thummim were put into the breastplate, it became not only a memorial but also a breastplate of judgment—v. 30:
1. *Urim* means “lights,” “illuminators”—v. 30:
 - a. The Urim was an illuminator inserted into the breastplate under the twelve stones; it had the capacity to contain oil for burning, and the fire used to burn the oil came from the altar.
 - b. The Urim had twelve illuminators, one to illuminate each of the twelve transparent precious stones on the breastplate so that they could shine with light (David Baron).
 - c. The Urim typifies Christ as lights, illuminators (John 8:12; Luke 1:78-79), shining through the Spirit (the oil) and the cross (the fire from the altar).
 2. *Thummim* means “perfecters,” “completers”—Exo. 28:30:
 - a. The names on the twelve stones on the breastplate contained only eight-teen of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet; the remaining four letters were put on the Thummim, making it the perfecter and completer (David Baron).
 - b. By the shining of the Urim on the individual precious stones and by the darkening of the stones, the full alphabet of twenty-two letters could be used to spell out words and sentences.
 - c. The Thummim typifies Christ as the perfecter and completer (Heb. 12:2); thus, He is the spiritual alphabet for both inscribing and completing (cf. Rev. 22:13a).
 - d. Together, the Urim and the Thummim typify Christ as God’s witness, God’s testimony (3:14), as the means for God to speak to His people (Heb. 1:2).
 - e. In the New Testament, the reality of the Urim and the Thummim is the mingled spirit—the unveiling Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, indwelling our receiving spirit, our regenerated human spirit—Rom. 8:4, 14, 16; Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10.
- B. According to the Old Testament, the Urim and the Thummim added to the breast-plate were a means for God to speak to His people to indicate to them His leading; thus, we may say that the breastplate of judgment is a “breastplate of leading”— Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8; Josh. 7:16-21; 1 Sam. 23:6, 9-12; 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65.
- C. In spiritual experience, in order to know God’s leading we must judge whatever is of the flesh, the self, the old man, and the world; the fact that God’s speaking as His leading was through the breastplate signifies that God makes His leading known to His people through the church.
- D. The breastplate of judgment for God’s leading was like a heavenly, divine, and spiritual typewriter, and His way of speaking through the breastplate with the Urim and the Thummim is the opposite of what we would expect:
1. God speaks not through the stones that are shining but through the stones that become dark; this means that God speaks through negative situations; because the Lord’s speaking by the breastplate of judgment is through negative situations, that speaking is a judgment.
 2. Normally the twelve stones in the breastplate were under the shining of the Urim; suddenly a piece inscribed with a certain name would become dark; this darkening of a particular stone was God’s instant speaking:

- a. Paul's Epistles and the seven epistles of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2—3) were all written according to this principle; they were written according to the negative situation of the churches, not according to the positive things found in the churches.
 - b. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians according to his reading of the negative situation at Corinth, but although his writing was based on the negative things, in this Epistle he ministered positive things—the riches of Christ—to the church—cf. 1:9.
 - c. The saints in Corinth became the letters used by Paul in the spiritual type setting of his Epistle; in the same way, in a local church the leading ones need to seek the Lord's guidance by reading the actual situation and condition of the saints.
 - d. The problem among Christians today is that because there is so much darkness, there is no way for God to expose the darkness; in order for the darkness to be made known, there must first be the shining of the light; God speaks through things that become negative in the midst of the shining of the light—cf. Eph. 5:8-9.
 - e. By reading the negative situations in this way, we come to know God's leading, His judgment; then in our locality we will know what God wants us to do, and we should then follow His leading.
- E. The breastplate is the building up of the Body life and the means for us to know God's will concerning His people; by much and thorough prayer, we can experience the reality of the breastplate; then we will receive the Lord's judgment of what we have to do or what we must not do; we will know the Lord's way, and the whole church will go on according to the judgment given by the Lord.
- F. The elders need not only the Bible and the Holy Spirit but also the brothers and sisters as the alphabet; this means that they need to bear the brothers and sisters before God and read the condition of every brother and sister before God; in this way the elders' meeting will become the watchtower of the church, and the elders will know what God wants them to do and what God's present will is in the church life.

III. The leading ones, those who minister the word in the church, should take the lead to have a prayer life; they need to “persevere in prayer, watching in it with thanksgiving”—Col. 4:2; Acts 6:4:

- A. Whether the church is living and fresh and enriched depends on this one thing—that we are being filled continuously with the Spirit; in order to be filled continuously with the Spirit, we need to be those who are willing, empty, and praying—Phil. 2:13; Matt. 5:3, 8; Luke 1:53; Eph. 5:18.
- B. The wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and skill for the noble work of building up the church must be God Himself as the Spirit to us; only the Spirit of God can build His own dwelling place through us—Exo. 31:1-3; Zech. 4:6.
- C. Because the elders are short of prayer, they are short of the Spirit; it is when we are fully condemned in our prayer under the shining of the light of the Lord's indwelling presence that we receive wisdom and the real understanding of the Lord concerning the situation, concerning people, and concerning the church.
- D. If all the saints in all the churches persevere in prayer, the recovery will be greatly enriched and uplifted; furthermore, the saints will enjoy the Lord, His presence, and His instant and constant anointing; all day long they will enjoy the smile of the Lord's face, and the living person of Christ will become their experience and enjoyment.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT THROUGH PRAYER

“Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom and with understanding and with knowledge and with all kinds of workmanship, to fashion skillful designs, to work in gold and in silver and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for setting and in the carving of wood, to work in all kinds of workmanship. And now, I Myself have appointed with him Oholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the heart of all who are wise in heart I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded you” (Exo. 31:1-6).

These verses, which we covered in a recent life-study on Exodus, have a good point for us to consider. I would especially like to talk about verse 3.

THE NEED TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD

The elders or the leading ones in the church responsibility are those most in need of the constant infilling of the Spirit of God. No need to say to build the New Testament church, even to build the Old Testament tabernacle, the record in Exodus stresses strongly the infilling of the Spirit of God. Yes, there is a difference between the New and the Old Testaments, yet in the reality of God’s economy there is no difference. What we need today, they needed in ancient times.

THE SPIRIT—GOD REACHING US

Actually, the tabernacle was designed by God Himself. Yet—here is a basic principle— the tabernacle was not built by Him directly. It was built by His people who were filled with Him, that is, with His Spirit.

The Spirit of God is God Himself. Do not think of God as in the heavens and sending His Spirit down to earth to enter into the designers to do the work. It was not that way. Whenever God reached man, He was the Spirit. Even today what is the Spirit of God? It is God reaching us. When He reaches us, the very reaching God is the Spirit.

THE BURDEN

What I would like to share with you brothers is this: To take the lead in the church life requires the infilling of God Himself. We need the infilling of the Triune God. As you know, the Spirit today is much, much richer than the Spirit of God in Old Testament times; but the principle is the same.

A WILLING HEART

You may say that in the case of Bezalel and Oholiab, God initiated the matter of filling them with Himself. It may be so, but I have a doubt. I believe these two dear ones had a seeking heart. When they learned that God was going to have a dwelling place built on this earth, I believe that they began to have a heart to seek for wisdom to design what would be needed. No doubt Moses saw every part while he was on the mountain; the Bible says that God showed him the pattern (Exo. 25:40; Heb. 8:5). He saw the things, and he took down a record of the measurements. Even Moses himself, strange to say, did not have the wisdom to design what he had seen, what he had been charged with. It was Bezalel and Oholiab who received the wisdom to make the designs. I think their designs must have been checked by Moses. He must have said, “Yes, that’s it! That’s the same as I saw on the mount.”

The two of them, I believe, began to have a heart of willingness to work for God’s dwelling place and therefore sought the wisdom to design what was needed. In principle, it is the same today in the church life. If you do not have a heart to seek after the Lord’s mind, to pick up the burden for the church life, God has no way to initiate anything with you. God’s initiation begins with your willingness.

This is why 1 Timothy 3:1 says, “If anyone aspires to the overseership, he desires a good work.” This aspiring is no doubt the initiation God has worked out within you.

ABANDONING YOUR NATURAL CAPABILITY

But suppose you are Bezalel: you have the willingness to do something for God's building, but you must realize that your natural capability has to be altogether abandoned. Your willingness is worthwhile, but your ability is worthless. God treasures your willingness, which He initiated, but your capability—what you can do, what you know—in God's estimation means nothing. If you will reject your ability, this abandonment will give God the ground to come in and fill you. First you need the willingness; then God needs your openness.

According to my observation, some of the elders by the Lord's mercy have had the willingness. But in the eldership they brought in their capability, their knowledge, their education, and their strength. This damages the entire job. On the one hand, willingness is really valuable; but on the other hand, the natural capability must be discounted, even entirely abandoned.

THE EXAMPLE OF MOSES

When Moses was young, he had the willingness to be used by God to do something for his people, who were under the tyranny of Pharaoh. Moses' willingness was initiated by God, perhaps while he was still a teenager. But when he grew up, he went out and by his own hand killed an Egyptian. He acted from his own ability. God could not use him. Why? He had the willingness, but he did not have the openness. God, as we all know, spent forty years to empty or unload him, until he was fully deprived by God and was absolutely empty. He became just a shepherd in the wilderness, thinking he did not know anything and could not do anything. But God came in. God came in to give the unique vision. As you know, he saw a bush burning but not consumed. That bush was Moses. The vision meant that God would use him but that He would not burn the fire with Moses' fuel. Whatever you have, God will not use.

EMPTYING YOURSELF

God will use only you, not what you have or can do. Therefore, you must empty yourself. To empty yourself means to have an absolute openness to God. The real openness to God means emptiness. You may say that you are open, but you are filled. A jar may be open, but it may be filled with sand. You may say that you are open to the Lord. You may be open, but you are not empty. There has never been an unloading. What part of you needs to be unloaded? Your capability, your knowledge, your wisdom, your education. It is only when you are empty that God can come in to fill you. When God fills you, it is His Spirit who fills you.

We in the leadership of the church life do have the willingness. There is no problem with this point. The problem is that we are not emptied and therefore cannot be filled with the Triune God as the filling Spirit today. The problem is our education, our knowledge, our experience. Some of you have been in the leadership for over fifteen years; you have had many experiences. But even real experiences of the church life have to be emptied out. Every day, all the time, you and I in the leadership of the churches need to be freshly filled with the Triune God.

Do you believe that the Spirit of God filled Bezalel and Oholiab just once for all? I believe that all the time, every minute, they were being filled. In other words, they were really one with God. God cannot build His dwelling place by Himself; He can do it only through willing and empty vessels. Whether the church is living and fresh and enriched depends on this one thing: that we are being filled continuously with the Triune God. For this, dear brothers, we need first the willingness and second the emptiness.

PRAYING CONTINUOUSLY

The third thing that we need is the instant, constant prayer. We must pray. If we are able to do things, we do not need to pray much. We have confidence, we have knowledge, we have a way, we have ability, we have strength: we are certain we can handle the situation. We need to empty ourselves, knowing that whatever we can do is not counted; it is not only rejected but even condemned by God. Whatever the old

man can do is condemned by God. We have to realize this. Then we will see our need of God and will pray constantly and instantly.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Elders in the church are not a special class; they do not have a special rank. They are normal believers. They are not leaders, but they take the lead. They are patterns of all believers. In organized Christianity, in both Catholicism and Protestantism, bishops are considered to be of extraordinary rank; then elders and deacons are considered to be of lower rank. Such ranking is wrong. But this kind of human thought may have invaded us already; we may have in our understanding the thought that we have the rank of elders, that we are a special class. No! Elders are just normal believers; they simply set a pattern for the rest of the believers to follow.

Thus, when the Bible tells us that all believers should pray unceasingly (1 Thes. 5:17), the elders should set an example. All that the New Testament charges the believers to do, the elders should do. Not all believers can fulfill all the charges, but the elders should. Since you are taking the lead, you should carry out all that is commanded by God; all believers may not be able to do this, but you should.

WILLING, EMPTY, PRAYING

Do not think that your teaching in itself will help others. Nor can I trust in my teaching to help you. If you are short of willingness, short of emptiness, short of prayer, I cannot help you. Nor can you be of help to others. We all need these three things. We should pray, "Lord, by Your mercy I am willing. In Your grace I am empty. I am open to You with utter emptiness. I do not want to hold on to anything of my past experiences. I want to be fresh." All the time, unceasingly, pray to be filled with Him. Then you will experience wisdom, understanding, and knowledge coming to you like a tide. You will be under the flooding of divine wisdom, divine understanding, and divine knowledge. You will know how to contact the saints with the divine nature, how to supply them with Christ, how to build them up with the redemption of Christ and with God's judgment. You will also have an inner ability to build up the saints in transformation and in the church life; not just to build them in character but to build them up as a dwelling place for God.

If talks like this are to be of help, they only avail when you are willing and empty and praying. If you are short of this constant prayer, I assure you that you will be very poor in the leadership. To be rich in the leadership, we need a willingness, an emptiness, and continuous prayer.

MANY THINGS TO BE DROPPED

We have brought many things into the leadership that we need to get rid of. The longer we have been in the leadership, the more of these things we unconsciously have. Yet we do not realize that those things need to be condemned. If, however, we are willing to bear responsibility for the building of God's dwelling place, and if we open to the Lord with complete emptiness and pray continuously, God will surely fill us up. Then we will discover all these things, and we will be enabled to let them go. We need a further, wider, deeper evacuation.

One of these things, which you have picked up through the years and which you must drop, is the way you are related to others. Your fellowship with the saints is not even. You have your choice, your preference: you like to fellowship with this one, and you avoid having fellowship with that one. Thus, your fellowship is biased, unhealthy, not genuine. Your personal taste, your personal preference, is hidden there. That is honey, which in typology was not to be added to the meal offering (Lev. 2:11). Sooner or later it will corrupt your leadership or the church life. What is needed is salt (v. 13).

In a doctrinal way it is easy to understand these things, but in practice it is only as you are open with complete emptiness to the Lord and praying continuously, that you will recognize how much honey you have brought in. You must put an end to that. Then you will know how much salt you need to add, and you

will be able by exercising in a strong way to add the right amount of salt. Then your leadership will be pure, or purified, and there will be no corruption in it. Teaching cannot help much with this; only the very God who fills you can do this work.

I believe we have all had some experience of this. Whenever we have been emptied and are in a prayerful spirit, if we stand up in the church meeting, we are aware, and all the other saints are also aware, that we are living, fresh, and rich. Other times we may stand up and share a lot, but the congregation has the feeling that it is from the old man, that it is empty. When we contact others, we may speak the same word, talk about the same point, but sometimes there is a result, and other times it is lifeless. It is when we are willing and empty and continuously praying that we have the wisdom to work in the divine nature and to minister to the needy ones the very Christ they need, not just to minister in a general way.

FELLOWSHIP OR DISCUSSION?

When the elders come together, they should pray, not just discuss things. You like to call it fellowship, but maybe it is only a discussion. The elders need to pray: to pray their mind, their different understandings, into the oneness. Rightly speaking, you should pray yourselves into the spirit. When you are praying in the spirit, you have one mind; you are in oneness. Whenever you meet together, you should pray yourselves into the spirit.

Even in shepherding, in visiting either the unsaved or the saints, we should be constantly in prayer. We have all experienced that if we pray continuously, when we go, we do not speak what we thought we would. We find ourselves saying things we had no intention to say; what we say is new. By being in continuous prayer, our spirit is released, and we will find that we speak from our spirit.

SHORT OF PRAYER—SHORT OF THE SPIRIT

The crucial lack is this continuous prayer on the part of all the elders, whatever the locality. You are short of prayer, so you are short of the Spirit. It is when you are fully condemned in your prayer that you receive wisdom and the real understanding of the Lord concerning the situation, concerning people, and concerning the church.

The Christian life is a life of prayer. Elders are not extraordinary Christians. To be a proper elder is to be a normal Christian. Many Christians are abnormal. Thus, the elders should set up a normal pattern, giving the saints a normal lead. In this way the church can be built up. Try to practice this, looking to the Lord for His mercy and grace. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1983*, vol. 1, "Practical Talks to the Elders," pp. 71-77)