1. WHY IS PRAYER IMPORTANT?

There are many aspiring sportsmen and women who would like to bend a ball like Beckham, drop kick like Jonny Wilkinson or run a marathon as fast as Paula Radcliffe. And the lesson they will learn along the way is that to be that good takes a lot of practice.

There is a story told about Paderewski, the Polish pianist and composer, whose hours of practice were legendary. He played before a delighted Queen Victoria who greeted his performance with the words: ‘Mr Paderewski, you are a genius!’ He modestly responded, ‘Perhaps, your majesty, but before that I was a drudge!’

What is true in the natural world applies in the spiritual realm, too; to become accomplished at anything takes time, skill and practice. Prayer is an important part of a healthy spiritual life. Anyone who displays a rich spirituality will say that prayer plays a vital role.

The fact that many of us find prayer difficult reveals how important it is.

Prayer by its simplest definition means having a conversation with God. Most of us don’t find conversation difficult because we do it all the time. Research has shown that on average a man uses 2,000 words a day, whilst a woman employs 7,000 – which explains why women, generally speaking, are better at forming and developing relationships than men. Words are important building-blocks of communication.

But prayer is more than talking to God, it also involves cultivating the ability to listen as He speaks to us – it is a two-way street. And the more effort we put into it, the greater the reward that follows.
It is about growing in our relationship with God and discovering more of His purpose for our lives. This is how one writer describes the part that prayer plays in this:

Prayer is the conversation of friends. It is not a mere convenience for letting God know what we are thinking or what we want. Prayer is that for which we were made. It is at the heart of God’s plan of salvation. To understand the tremendous privilege and import of prayer we need to see it in the context of God’s purpose to have a relationship with his people.¹

THE FIRST BIG PRAYER IN THE BIBLE

Genesis is the first book in the Bible and is all about beginnings. We read the account of creation and the Fall, and then on to the stage of history steps Abraham, who became known as the friend of God. In the middle of the Genesis story of Abraham and God’s dealings with him there is a record of the first full-scale prayer recorded in the Bible (see Gen. 18:20–33).

Abraham and his wife Sarah were old and childless – but God promised that an heir would be born to them in their old age. At this point in the story, God set a date for the promise to be fulfilled within twelve months. The announcement was made by the Lord in a personal visit to Abraham at his tent in Mamre. (See Gen. 18:1. This is what is known as a theophony – an appearance of the Lord Jesus before His birth on earth as a baby in Bethlehem. The other two visitors were angels; compare 18:16 with 19:1.)

At the end of the meeting the Lord decided to take Abraham into His confidence and reveal what He was about to do. There were two cities close to where Abraham
lived – Sodom and Gomorrah – and they were infamous. God announced to Abraham His intention to see for Himself the truth or otherwise of their reputation for evil. The two angels were sent as heavenly emissaries while Abraham and the Lord engaged in earnest conversation.

What follows next in the Bible is an account that, at first reading, appears confusing and strange. Abraham asks God if He will really destroy the two cities if, say, fifty righteous people can be found there. He poses the question based on his understanding that God in His very character is upright and true: ‘Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ (Gen. 18:25). If this is the case, how could God lump the righteous in with the wicked and leave them both to the same fate?

This dialogue continues with Abraham whittling away in his debate with God, reducing the number of righteous people who might be found in the cities; from forty-five down to the final figure of ten, Abraham bargains back and forth on no less than six occasions. Sounding like a Middle-Eastern market trader, Abraham negotiates the Lord down to the bottom-line figure of ten righteous people. The deal is done; if just ten are found the cities will be spared the impending judgment.

This conversation poses two immediate problems. First, we are uncomfortable with the idea of a God who judges people. Our modern Western minds are conditioned to think of a kind God who loves everyone so much that He could never be cross with them. Second, the thought of Abraham bargaining with God seems foreign to our ears. Is God to be bartered with? Is prayer nothing more than some spiritual negotiation ploy with a reluctant deity? Can judgment be bought off?
We misunderstand Scripture by hastily reaching such conclusions. The Bible talks equally of God’s righteous standards and His redeeming grace. Reading about the state of affairs in Sodom and Gomorrah, it is obvious that the last shreds of human decency had been stripped away and anarchy ruled. Genesis 19 gives a graphic account of the total breakdown of the rule of law in the two cities.

When we read of Abraham pleading with God for the cities to be spared for the sake of ten righteous people it is important to recall who initiated the conversation in the first place. Abraham didn’t stumble upon God’s plan – it was graciously revealed to him. This whole incident was a part of God’s training for Abraham as a man of faith and the father of those who would be children of faith. God was drawing Abraham in close to His heart.

WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER?

Abraham’s lesson in faith teaches us two truths about prayer and explains why it is so important in developing a healthy spiritual life.

It is based on our relationship with God

God revealed His intentions to Abraham because of his place in His overall purposes. Abraham would become the father of all those who believe (see Rom. 4:11), and as such needed to understand that the promise of a child was bound up within a bigger plan. Abraham’s ‘blessing’ was not something merely personal but something through which God would touch the world. Abraham would be blessed – but in turn he would be a blessing. Genesis 12:1–3 records God’s original promise to Abraham when He called him to leave his home comforts and securities.
WHY IS PRAYER IMPORTANT?

The pathway to that blessing lay in Abraham’s obedience to God’s call. At various points in his story Abraham’s obedience was tested as his faith was refined.

The Sodom and Gomorrah incident must be read in the light of God’s training programme for Abraham’s life. He is nurturing in him a concern for others – a concern that is evidenced by standing in the place of others and interceding on their behalf. This is described as the first intercessory prayer in the Bible because it shows Abraham interceding for a city facing judgment and pleading for God’s mercy for the sake of a few righteous people.

Here is God letting Abraham in on His plans, including him in His programme and training him in His ways. As one writer has expressed it:

As with Abraham, so with us, God wants to develop this personal relationship for the benefit of others. We are never the end of the line. He has other people he wants us to direct into his ways, for we each have unique circles of contact and influence. We should not see prayer as a duty, one of the ingredients of the Christian package which we have to accept. Rather, prayer is the means by which our living contact with God is deepened and enriched, and because we love him we want to know him better, to be more effective for him in the world, to count for God here and now. All that happens as we pray for other people.²

It is based on our partnership with God

We can indulge in many philosophical questions about prayer. Here are a few for starters:

• If God has already decided what to do, then what is the point of praying?
What you always wanted to know about prayer

• How can prayer change the mind of an all-powerful, all-knowing God?
• If prayer can change God’s mind – then what sort of God are we dealing with in the first place?
• Isn’t prayer simply a release for our inner emotions and desires – more a personal comfort blanket than an actual force for change?

Strange as it may seem to our ears, the Bible instructs us that God has chosen to involve us in His plans. A crucial key to understanding how prayer works is bound up in the single word *partnership*.

The very prayers we pray are inspired by God Himself; it is He who plants the seeds of prayer in our hearts. Romans 8:26–7 speaks of the Holy Spirit of God inspiring and directing our prayers. Abraham’s intercession led to the deliverance of his nephew Lot from the destruction that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, and the postscript that is recorded declares: ‘… God … remembered Abraham …’ (Gen. 19:29).

When we were small, perhaps we took delight in volunteering to help Mum in the kitchen or Dad in the garden. How often must our parents or guardians have thought it would be quicker and easier to tackle the job without our youthful enthusiasm!

But what of those occasions when we heard them say, ‘I really need your help today’? How many of us learned to do what we do now with skill because a parent or another adult took time to be with us?

When we ask the question: ‘Why is prayer important?’ two answers stare us in the face from the pages of