

ARMED AND
DANGEROUS

Praying with Boldness

JANE L. FRYAR

CPH
SAINT LOUIS

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PROLOG

EGRESS OR ACCESS?

The nineteenth century circus king, P. T. Barnum, traveled the United States amazing audiences with his showmanship. Each time the circus came to town, a tent would go up for the sideshow. The bearded lady. The sword-swallower. The fire eater. All were staples of Barnum's sideshows. And so were natural anomalies like two-headed calves and albino pigeons.

As visitors wandered through the tent, they eventually came to a sign with an arrow pointing toward "The Great Egress." As they followed the arrow, many expected to find yet another wonder. Instead they found themselves blinking in the sunlight. Those who hadn't known that *egress* and *exit* are synonyms did know then. Once Barnum had people's money, he didn't mind if they egressed.

Often in life we're more likely to be told how to egress than to receive free access to people or places of

importance. As we think about coming to a holy God in prayer, the first question that should come to mind is this: Will we receive access or be given quick egress?

One of my favorite movies, *Sneakers*, revolves around a group of technical geniuses trying to gain access to a building with better security than the Pentagon. Most doors remain closed to anyone without a security card and a voiceprint on file with the building's computer. Coming to the door, employees say, "My voice is my passport." Recognizing the tone and pitches of a given voice, the computer releases the lock. It's a contemporary version of the "Open Sesame" cavern in which Ali Baba and his 40 thieves hid their loot.

When you and I pray, *our* voice is not our passport. *Our* word does not give us access. But Jesus' voice does. Jesus' word does. Jesus says, "In My cross, you are forgiven." Jesus' word says, "You have received right standing in heaven's throne room because of My death and resurrection." When we come to God, we come as His children. We come as brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus. We can come boldly. We can expect, on the basis of God's promises, to receive access. What a wonderful privilege! What wonderful benefits! What a great God we serve!

As you read more about the access that belongs to you in Jesus, I pray that you will catch a bigger vision for how to use that access. I pray that you will see yourself as, yes, God's child, but also as a warrior in the army of light. I pray that you will realize more fully that God's Word arms you for the spiritual battles of your own life

and for those battles we fight together as the Church Militant here on earth. You see, we *are* armed and dangerous to the forces of evil and of darkness.

In fact, in Jesus, you already now have victory over them. Stand firm in the faith, confident that your prayers are heard in heaven and that the gates of hell will never prevail against us.

ARMED AND DANGEROUS

Breathing anxious, shallow breaths, the woman made her way back to the courtroom. Her hands trembled in fear, and yet her fear pushed her forward. One more time. Maybe if she presented her case one more time, she would get a hearing.

All the neighbors encouraged her to forget it. After all, this judge held his appointment for life. Public opinion meant less than nothing to him. Not even divine opinion mattered. Nothing had moved him so far. Not her logic. Not her tears. Not her pleas for justice.

Even so, she shouldered her way through the crowd until she stood face to face with the only one who could

make her life livable. The buzz of the proceedings in progress stopped. Silence hung in the air like a wet blanket on a cold night. The judge glared at the widow for a long minute. "You again!" he snapped. Then he sighed, shaking his head and curling his lip to form a sneer. She glared back. "Give me justice!" she demanded.

A few minutes later she walked away, her burden gone. The judge had done the right thing. Not for the right reason, but he had done the right thing. That was all that mattered to the widow. "Alright!" he had shouted in frustration. "I'll rule in your favor. Just stop pestering me! I'm sick of hearing it!" The widow thought about his words as she walked back down the dusty street toward home. She smiled.

Perhaps you recognize the thoroughly nasty judge and the determined widow as characters in a parable our Lord Jesus once told (Luke 18:1–8). Someone has called this story "The Widow's Might" (not to be confused with the incident known as "The Widow's Mite"). The meaning of our Savior's parable pivots on the contrast between the unjust judge and our loving, heavenly Father. If someone like this judge, someone so hard of heart and calloused in conscience, would give the widow what she needed simply because she kept asking for it, then how can we expect less from our heavenly Father? How can we sometimes fear that our Father, the one who gave His own Son into death for our sins, might disappoint us?

In fact, that's precisely the point our Lord Jesus drew out for His first hearers: "Hear what the unrighteous

teous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily” (Luke 18:6–8).

Think of it! You and I are “His chosen ones”! Through what our brother, Jesus Christ, did on His cross, we have now become God’s own adopted children. God hears when those whom He has chosen cry out to Him. He acts on our behalf. He acts *speedily* Jesus says.

But then our Lord asks a pointed question: “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” With this question, our Savior puts His index finger directly on one of the problems, perhaps the main problem, we face when we pray. What do we expect from God when we approach Him? How do we view Him? As heartless and unjust—like the judge who kept denying the widow relief? As someone whose idea of goodness, of help, of relief is a distorted parody? If so, that belief can keep us from trusting. And if in our heart of hearts we suspect His motives and doubt His love, how will we ever find the courage to throw ourselves on the mercy of His court? How will we ever pray in bold faith and persist in prayer in a way that honors God?

Come with Every Care

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, our Savior-God coaxes, urges, invites, and even commands us to bring our needs to Him. He makes dozens and dozens of promises to hear and answer our prayers.

As you read a few of these invitations and promises now, think through what they reveal about God's character, God's heart.

Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me. (Psalm 50:15)

It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear. (Isaiah 65:24)

Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. (Jeremiah 29:12)

Call to Me, and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know. (Jeremiah 33:3)

Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7)

What man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matthew 7:9-11)

[Jesus said,] "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. ... Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you

will receive, that your joy may be made full. ... In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you.” (John 14:13–14; 16:24, 26–27)

Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

What truths do you see in these verses? Among other things, these promises prove that our God is no shriveled up Scrooge who peers down from heaven looking for ways to withhold His blessings and His help from us. Our God opens His heart and His hand to His children minute by minute, day by day, generation to generation. So generous are His promises, in fact, that they may sound too good to be true. And yet we know that God does not lie. He has proven Himself true to His Word time and time again.

The eighteenth-century hymn writer and preacher, John Newton, puts it this way:

*Come, my soul, with every care,
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He Himself bids you to pray,
Therefore will not turn away.*

Jesus loves to answer prayer! What’s more, He loves to enlist us, His people, no matter what our situa-

tion in life, in the holy work of prayer. Of course, God can work His will on earth even without our prayers. After all, our God is a powerful God, a loving God, and He delights in bringing hope, salvation, and deliverance to people. But He has in grace chosen to give us the privilege of partnership with Him in that work as we pray.

Because God hears and answers prayer, our prayers impact people's lives. The Bible gives example after example of individuals whose prayers transformed history, whose prayers mattered eternally. While Christians sometimes like to talk about "the power of prayer," we know that prayer in and of itself has zero power. The power released when we pray resides in the One who has invited us so often and so urgently to pray, the One whose death has given us access to the throne of the God of the universe—our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Armed? Dangerous?

Our Lord's invitation to pray and His promises to answer our prayers have armed us for spiritual battle. Whether we know it or not, whether we feel it or not, we are enemies to Satan and his army. They see us as dangerous, or potentially so. The demons know that our prayers are far more than sweet, pious thoughts. We are armed and dangerous in the spiritual battle that rages—invisible—all around us. Notice the way the apostle Paul links prayer with the stand believers take as members of Christ's army of light:

Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. ... For our struggle is not against flesh and

PRAYING THROUGH ANGER AND DISCOURAGEMENT

No one knows what provoked the outburst. Perhaps a sudden disaster had flooded his life, a disaster that threatened to drown him in an ocean of grief. Or, perhaps a dozen minor irritations were nibbling him to death, darting around his head like sand fleas, never leaving him alone, not even in his sleep.

The details of the problem don't matter, not really. What counts is that he ran to God, not away from Him.

And God listened. In fact, He saw fit to record the prayer so you and I could eavesdrop, and so we could use those same words ourselves when we need to. Not when we feel sweet and close to God and pious. But when, like David, we're steamed and frustrated and feel like throwing things. This is the prayer David prayed:

How long, O LORD? Wilt Thou forget me forever?

How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?

How long shall I take counsel in my soul,

Having sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD, my God;

Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

Lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him,"

Lest my adversaries rejoice when I am shaken.

(Psalm 13:1-4)

Brain research stands out as one of the most fascinating fields of study today. As biologists and physiologists continue to map the human brain and to learn more about how it works, it becomes more and more evident that our emotions are key to nearly everything we do. Emotion drives attention. And attention, in turn, drives memory, learning, and problem-solving. We may like to think of ourselves as logical beings whose rationality is sometimes overridden by a surge of emotion during a time of crisis. But most scientists now believe that just the opposite is true, that our emotional system is our default system, the one on which we most rely as we move through our days and our lives.

Of course, none of this research took our Creator

by surprise. He knows the power of emotions in our decisions and in our relationships—especially in our relationship with Him. Perhaps that’s why so much of the Bible is written in the language of emotion—the language of poetry. The Psalms. Isaiah. Job. Micah. Malachi. Jeremiah. Hosea. The list goes on and on. Substantial portions of many Bible books package the truths God intends to convey in powerful images, images designed to provoke emotions—revulsion at sin, peace in God’s pardon, anger at injustice, awe at the majesty of God, and so on.

Now certainly the truths of God remain true, regardless of our feelings at any given moment. (And how glad we can be about that!) But as we enter the throne room of our Lord, we need not check our hearts at the door. Even if we could do that, even if we could consistently come into His presence to pray with dispassion, He would not want us to pray that way. How do we know? For one thing, we can take a long look at the prayers He’s chosen to record for us in the Bible.

David, the “man after God’s own heart” (see Acts 13:22), wrote dozens of prayer-songs that express all the anxiety, all the joy, all the fear, all the awe, all the anger, all the hope, all the discouragement, and all the contentment a human heart can feel. Or, remember King Hezekiah and the prayer he prayed through his tears (Isaiah 38)? Or Hannah—Samuel’s mother—who prayed with such feeling that the priest, Eli, accused her of being drunk (1 Samuel 1:9–18). Or Jesus Himself who prayed through such sorrow and with such intensity that “His sweat

became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44). No, we need not check our hearts at the door when we come to our Lord in prayer.

Still, some emotions, left unresolved, can get in the way of our relationship with God. They can block or stifle our prayers to Him. Let’s look at two of the emotions most likely to do that and think about how to pray when we’re in the throes of anger or discouragement.

Dear God, I’m Angry!

The thought of praying while angry offends some Christians. It frightens others. Even so, anger is a fact of life. God knows this. The Lord warned Cain about the dangers of anger just before Cain killed his brother Abel. God watched as a young Moses fell into a fit of rage, murdered an Egyptian, and buried his victim in a shallow grave. God saw Israel’s first king, Saul, spin out of control in anger as he hurled spears at David and later at his own son, Jonathan. Anger easily leads to rage and from rage to hatred and from hatred to homicide.

On the other hand, not all anger is in and of itself sinful. God Himself gets angry. The Scriptures describe His holy anger at disobedience and injustice. Anger has often motivated God’s people to stand up for the innocent and to right wrongs. The things that anger God should anger us too—violence, useless pain, blasphemy, indifference to God, lovelessness—all these and more are at their core works of Satan, God’s enemy and ours. Satan and his works can rightly evoke our anger, just as they evoke God’s.

That fact lies behind those psalms that puzzle and sometimes embarrass Christians. We call these psalms “imprecatory psalms” because they call down imprecations—curses—on evildoers. These prayers shock those who define Christianity as simply a lifestyle of “being nice” to people and not rocking any boats. But Christians have never worshiped a “nice” God. We worship a God of grace who acts in perfect justice. He sent His own dear Son to suffer the punishment all human beings have earned for themselves by their sins. How glad we are to know that! But those who reject His gift of forgiveness and who refuse to bow to His lordship will one day receive the judgment they deserve. That grieves God, and it grieves us, but it will happen nonetheless.

We shudder when we think of it. But we also shake our heads in disgust as we see the misery Satan and his human allies inflict on the children of God. When we hear about little children being murdered, when we read about Christians who are tortured for the faith, when we watch the bodies of our loved ones being racked by cancer, when we see drugs pull teenagers into the sewer and alcohol amputate moms or dads from their families, when these things and things like them happen, we can and do find ourselves rightly outraged.

A part of the baptismal service used by the church from ancient times onward asked the person being baptized to “renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways.” When we see Satan’s works and recognize his ways playing themselves out in the lives of those we

love, we renew our renunciation of Satan. We not only renounce him, we denounce him as the thief and murderer he truly is (John 10:10).

But God invites us to do more. We can bring the problem, the need to Him. Even if we're angry, even if our anger is all tangled up with the problem, even if we can't find the words to explain ourselves rationally, we can come to our Father with it. Here's His invitation:

*Trust in Him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us. (Psalm 62:8)*

Our Lord wants us to see Him as an ally. He stands squarely on our side and against the works and ways of Satan. He shares our anger at those works and ways. In fact, Satan's work angers Him even more than it angers us. He has done something about it—in Jesus our Savior. And He will keep acting on behalf of His children as we battle the forces of darkness. One day, Satan will find himself flung into the lake of fire God has prepared for him and his angels. On that day, true justice, pure justice will prevail. That fact can comfort us in our anger at earth's misery.

So holy anger can play a rightful part in our prayer lives. But there's another kind of anger too.

Angry at God?

The question is not so much *do* God's children sometimes get angry at Him, the question is what do we do when we are. If you believe God loves you; if you