

Pray Without Ceasing

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (I Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Perhaps prayer falls more appropriately under the heading of worship, because it is through prayer that we communicate directly with our Almighty God—our Creator. However, I believe that prayer is also an important part of our daily walk because it should be an expression of both our humility and our love, which are central to a worthy walk.

(Please note that I have the study **Prayer** on the Bible Studies page of our website, and I encourage you to read it. Also on the website is the article **Testimony of Grace**, that describes the role that prayer played in transforming my life through a greater understanding of the word of God. Certain aspects of prayer are particularly applicable to this study, so I will briefly summarize them.)

Regarding a worthy walk, let us first examine how prayer represents, or should represent, our humility. Fundamentally, prayer is an acknowledgment that God is in control. Unfortunately, our prayers and our reasons for praying often reveal that we think that God is subject to our will. That is, many of us expect that God will answer our prayers according to our requests. Also, our tendency is to pray often about a particular request to get or keep God's attention, sometimes getting as many people as possible to share our prayer so our request is presented to God on a 24-hour basis (e.g., a prayer chain). Brethren, God is much greater than that. He is not deaf; furthermore, the old adage *the squeaky wheel gets the grease* is manmade and does not apply to God.

Contrary to the prayer promises in the gospel accounts (Matthew through John), which were given specifically to the disciples by Jesus to equip them as they preached the gospel of Israel's prophesied kingdom (Matthew 7:7-8; 18:19-20; 21:21-22; John 14:13-14; 15:7), God has not promised to give us what we request. Please consider the following passage from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome.

In the same way the [Holy] Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He [God] who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He [the Spirit] intercedes for the saints [believers] according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God [believers], to those who are called [by God] according to His purpose. (Romans 8:26-28)

How can we expect to get what we pray for if God says that we do not know how to pray as we should? We do not know what is best for us or what the will of God is for a particular situation. The disciples of Jesus who later were apostles, as well as the Apostle Paul, could pray according to the will of God because they had the gift of knowledge through the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 16:17-18; John 20:21-23; Acts 2:1-4; 5:1-11). This gift was later rescinded when God blinded and set Israel and its promises aside and as demonstrated by Paul's loss of the ability to perform miracles despite his desire and prayers that his friends and coworkers be healed (I Corinthians 13:8-13; Philippians 2:25-27; I Timothy 5:23; and II Timothy 4:20). Brethren, the Holy Spirit does not work in us as He did prior to the full revelation of the dispensation of the grace of God through Paul. We are not promised to have, nor do we have, spiritual gifts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, our prayers should be from the heart and should acknowledge that God is in control and that He is working everything out according to His purpose (Philippians 2:12-13). We should also pray with thanksgiving with this knowledge in mind, as well as realizing that we are able to approach God in prayer because of what Christ accomplished for us at the cross (I Timothy 2:5-6). Things may or may not turn out as we initially hoped, but we have a promise that I believe is far greater than getting what we ask for—the promise of knowing or experiencing the peace of God. If we pray with humility, then perhaps it is more likely that we will walk in humility as we ought to do.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard [keep] your hearts and your minds in [through] Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Our prayers to God should also be an expression of our love for God and our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as our love for others. Paul often mentioned what he prayed about in his letters to believers. He requested the prayers of the brethren to whom he ministered, usually for their spiritual support of his ministry for God and his Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:30-32; II Corinthians 1:8-11; Philippians 1:12-20; Colossians 4:2-4; I Thessalonians 5:25; II Thessalonians 3:1-2). Furthermore, as a demonstration of his love for those he worked with and to whom he ministered, he often prayed for them.

We know that Paul was concerned for the physical needs of others (e.g., Philippians 2:25-28; I Timothy 5:23), but it appears that he was far more attentive to their spiritual needs. Through numerous references we see that he thanked God for their salvation and for their fellowship with him, and prayed that God would open their minds to His truth and that Christ would work through them (e.g., Romans 1:8-10; Ephesians 1:15-21; Philippians 1:3-5, 9-11; Colossians 1:9-12; I Thessalonians 2:13; II Thessalonians 2:13-15; II Timothy 1:3-4). It is very likely that *all* his many exhortations to the brethren regarding their spiritual understanding and daily walk in Christ were accompanied by prayers to God. If we truly love others, then we should keep them in our prayers to God.

To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling [suffering because of your salvation], and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus [Christ] will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (II Thessalonians 1:11-12).

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father [of our Lord Jesus Christ], from whom every family [of whom the whole family] in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He [God] would grant you [fellow brethren], according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints [believers] what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him [God] who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works within us, to Him [God] be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21)

But what does it mean to pray without ceasing? Are we to pray all the time? There are disciples of some religions that spend most of their waking hours in prayer to their god or gods, but we have no examples of anyone in the Bible praying all the time. I was taught that praying without ceasing must mean that we

should always have an attitude of prayer regardless of what we are doing. I recall believing this explanation at first but, at some point, practicalities set in. Many (nearly all?) of the things we do require our full attention and cannot be done while having an attitude of prayer that requires our full attention to God (Colossians 4:2). What else could it mean?

Think about something that is important to you, such as a person you know who needs salvation, someone who is going through personal difficulties, an existing or upcoming situation that is weighing on your mind, etc. If it is something important, we usually think about it often, or at least we should think about it often. God wants us to be humble and unselfish concerning the people around us and be attentive to their needs (Philippians 2:3-4; Galatians 6:2). God wants us to pray to Him about them and their needs, as well as our own needs and concerns (Philippians 4:6). He wants us to do so with sincerity and devotion and with thanksgiving. We should not give up on prayer or stop praying when things are not turning out as hoped. Instead of ceasing, we should continue in prayer because this is God's will for us.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints [*believers*], practicing hospitality. (Romans 12:9-13)