

The Mind of Prayer

“Pray without ceasing.” **IN THE FOUR GOSPELS OF**
—I Thessalonians 5:17 the New Testament, there are many instances in which it is recorded that Jesus prayed

to his Heavenly Father. It might seem to some that since Jesus, in his prehuman existence as the *Logos*, was with God since the beginning of creation, he would know the Father sufficiently so as not to need to pray to him during his relatively short time upon earth. However, such was not the case at all. As a human being, physically apart from God for a period of time, Jesus saw the necessity of approaching the Almighty in prayer in order to maintain the close communion which he had previously enjoyed with the Father.

Jesus' habit of going to the Father often in prayer came about because his mind was “stayed” on God at all times. (Isa. 26:3) He sought continually to do the will of his Father, and realized that prayer was an all important part of determining that will. Likewise it must be with Jesus' footstep followers, as we seek to do God's will and to develop the “mind of Christ.”

Prayer is one of the blessed privileges enjoyed by every true disciple of Christ. It is, in fact, a necessity if we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. Prayer can be thought of as the life-giving breath of a child of God. Just as from the natural standpoint it is essential to breathe in order to live, so as New Creatures in Christ Jesus, we need to pray daily to remain spiritually healthy and alive.

To “pray without ceasing,” as cited in our opening text, does not imply the necessity of being on our knees continually. It means, rather, that prayer will be one of the regular habits of our lives as New Creatures, and that we will go daily to the throne of heavenly grace, there to “obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. 4:16) More than that, it means that whenever the need arises, regardless of how many times in the day it may be, our hearts will turn to God in prayer.

This thought is brought to us in the parable of the importunate widow. (Luke 18:1-8) The lesson Jesus taught in this parable was that the disciples “ought always to pray, and not to faint.” (vs. 1) The thought is that when trials are severe, and the way is rough—when the road is dark, and the direction uncertain—when the burden is heavy, and we become weary with its weight—instead of “fainting” and giving up, we should pray. Paul expressed a similar thought when he wrote, “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.”—Rom. 12:12

PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING

Prayer may be thought of from two general standpoints. There are prayers of praise and thanksgiving,

and there are prayers which are in the nature of requests—prayers in which we petition the Lord in one way or another. It is appropriate to thank the Heavenly Father for all the benefits which he daily showers upon us. The very act of going to him with thanks in our hearts and upon our lips increases our appreciation of the marvelous privilege we have of being his children.

The psalmist wrote, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.” (Ps. 103:2) To go to God with thanksgiving will surely help us to remember his benefits. On account of our imperfect fallen minds, we cannot remember all the Lord’s benefits, but how tragic it would be to forget them all. We will not forget them all, if daily we think of what God is doing for us, and go to him with prayers of thanksgiving for the many ways in which he showers his love upon us.

In another place, David wrote, “I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. . . . O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.” (Ps. 34:1,3) Paul, who agreed with David, wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.” (Phil. 4:4) The follower of the Master who daily goes in prayer to the Heavenly Father with lips of praise and thanksgiving will be a rejoicing Christian. We cannot habitually recall his goodness to us without being made glad.

PETITIONS

Our petitions to God are equally important, and it is essential to give consideration to what we may properly request from him. While petitions which are to be considered by our Heavenly Father and

favorably answered must be sincere, they must also be in harmony with his will. Throughout the ages there have been many whose hearts' desires have been sincere, but their prayers have not been acceptable to God.

The Bible teaches us that the heart can be very sincere, but its desires quite out of harmony with the will and plan of God. We doubt not that when Saul of Tarsus was persecuting the brethren in the Early Church, he sought God's blessing upon his efforts, and sincerely so. However, he was wrong—terribly wrong—and this has been true with many others, even professed Christians.

James wrote, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts [desires]." (James 4:3) This is another way of saying that prayers which are selfish, and those requests made for things merely to satisfy the desires of the flesh, will not be favorably answered. Such prayers are "amiss" in the eyes of the Lord.

An expression frequently used is: "Prayer changes things." This is quite true with respect to one's own attitude toward God and toward his overruling providences in our lives. If, perchance, we have become discouraged by severe trials which the Heavenly Father has permitted, and are possibly a little resentful, our whole attitude will likely be changed by going to the Lord in sincere prayer and asking him to help us to bear the trials, and, if it is his will, to show us the divine purpose regarding them.

Perhaps we are becoming embittered toward those who may be opposing us, our "enemies," when we know that we should love them. If we follow the instructions of the Bible and pray for those who

despitefully use us, this also will “change things,” for we will find that love is developing in our hearts toward those for whom we pray. We cannot continue to hate those whom we ask God to bless.

Indeed, sincere prayer many times changes our own attitudes, and our own ways of thinking, but it does not change God’s plan. God does not depend upon our prayers as a way of learning the manner in which he should bless us. Things are chaotic in the world today, but how much worse they would be if God answered favorably all the petitions that are made to him by sincere and well-meaning people. Even among God’s specially chosen people there are often conflicting petitions expressed in prayer.

CLAIMING GOD’S PROMISES

All acceptable prayers must be in harmony with God’s will, and all the blessings which the Heavenly Father “wills” to bestow upon his people are comprehended in the many “exceeding great and precious promises” of his Word. (II Pet. 1:4) Therefore we could say that prayer is the claiming of God’s promises. Has God promised the blessings which we request of him? This is a test upon which we can determine whether or not our prayers will be favorably answered.

There are proper and improper ways of approaching God in prayer. Our Lord’s model prayer opens with the statement, “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.” (Matt. 6:9) This suggests the necessity of a reverential approach to God in prayer, a proper recognition of his sanctity and glory. The glory of God should be the principal motive inspiring all our prayers. We should ever have in

mind the question: Will the blessing I am requesting be to the glory of God? Certainly, if it is within the range of those good and perfect gifts which he assures us he is glad to bestow upon his children, we know that it will bring glory to his hallowed name.

If we properly hallow our Heavenly Father's name we will heed the instructions of his beloved Son, Christ Jesus, as to the only way we can approach him in prayer. That way is through the name of Christ and through the merit of his shed blood. (John 15:16; Rom. 3:24,25) Jesus said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."—John 14:13

Jesus also said that if we abide in him, and his Word abides in us, we may ask what we will, and our request shall be granted. (John 15:7) This is a sweeping promise, but by no means unconditional. If we abide in Christ, and his teachings abide in us, then we will ask only for those blessings which are in harmony with the Father's will. What we "will" to request should be only what we believe to be the Father's "will" to give us. Thus, our petitions should always be subject to the statement: "If it be thy will."

MANY PROMISES

Praying within the limits of God's promises gives much latitude, for his promises are vast, far-reaching, and varied. We are reminded of many of them in our Lord's prayer. First in this prayer is the request, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) Throughout the Old and New Testaments, by implication and direct statements, through types and symbols, God

has promised the kingdom. First, he has promised the kingdom of Christ to put down all rebellion against the divine will, and then the operation of God's sovereign authority and power throughout the earth.—I Cor. 15:24-28

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are requesting that which God has promised. Our prayers do not furnish God with the idea and incentive to establish a kingdom. Rather, it is by our prayers for his kingdom of promise that we manifest our harmony with, and interest in, his glorious kingdom plan, and the hope we have of a share in its operation.

We want God's kingdom to come because we want to see his will done throughout the earth. We know that when his will is done the people will be blessed, because they will be walking in the light of his countenance and in the knowledge of his ways. Therefore, our prayer, "Thy kingdom come," is in reality an unselfish prayer, because it is on behalf of the whole world of mankind.

In presenting the petition, "Thy kingdom come," we are also asking for God's blessing upon all of his arrangements through which the kingdom will come. We have been privileged to be of those that God has called out from the world to be associated with Christ as "kings and priests" in his kingdom. Indirectly, therefore, whatever blessings we need as we are being trained for the kingdom are comprehended in the request, "Thy kingdom come." Our petition for the kingdom to soon come, with the hope of being part of its administration, would be empty and meaningless if we were not yielding wholeheartedly to the rule of God's will in our own hearts and lives.

“DAILY BREAD”

The first request in our Lord’s prayer for personal blessings is, “Give us this day our daily bread.” (Matt. 6:11) The primary application of this is to our spiritual needs, although our Heavenly Father is not unmindful of our physical needs, and will supply them in keeping with his knowledge of what is best for our spiritual interests.

The spiritual “bread” promised in the Scriptures is, first of all, Christ himself. Jesus said to his disciples, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35) In this same discourse Jesus also spoke of “eating” his flesh and “drinking” his blood. (vs. 53) To the disciples this was a “hard saying,” so Jesus explained, “It is the spirit that quickeneth [giveth life]; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (vss. 60,63) It is not the literal flesh of Jesus that we eat. This would profit us nothing. However, as Jesus explained, it is his words, his teachings, and his example, of which we partake. The teachings of Jesus embrace the entire structure of truth contained in the Word of God, and are in complete harmony with it. Thus, it is through the study of the Truth, and the application of its principles in our lives, that we feed upon Christ. It is in this way that we partake of our “daily bread.”

It is through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to comprehend the Truth in such a manner that it becomes life-giving bread to us as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. The Heavenly Father gave us a reassuring promise through Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit. He said, “Ask, and it shall

be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"—Luke 11:9-13

In a similar statement by Jesus, appearing in Matthew 7:7-11, his conclusion is: "How much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" The "good things" mentioned by Jesus are all those blessings which are promised to New Creatures in Christ Jesus through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They include the Spirit-revealed truths of the Word of God which constitute our daily spiritual bread. Thus, in praying, "Give us this day our daily bread," we are claiming the promises of God to supply us with all necessary spiritual food. Surely every truly consecrated follower of the Master can testify as to how bountifully the Lord daily fulfills these particular promises.

ASKING FORGIVENESS

As we make use of our Lord's model prayer, we also request our Heavenly Father to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matt. 6:12) As followers of the Master we know that God has promised forgiveness to his people. Through the merit of Christ he has made provision to cover our

imperfections, to fellowship with us as though we were perfect, and to give us life. How reassuring it is that we can go to the throne of heavenly grace and “obtain mercy.”—Heb. 4:16

However, there is a condition attached to this provision. If we are to receive forgiveness from our Heavenly Father, we must extend it to those who trespass against us. (Matt. 6:14,15) What a wise and just condition this is. How unworthy we would be to obtain forgiveness and mercy from our Heavenly Father if in our own hearts we were harboring ill will and resentment toward others. The spirit of mercy on God’s part is reflected in the fact that “while we were yet sinners” he made provision through Christ for our reconciliation. (Rom. 5:8) If we are truly godlike, we, too, will have the spirit of mercy in our hearts, and will be glad to extend forgiveness at the first indication that it is desired by those who have trespassed against us.

DELIVERANCE PROMISED

In order to be understood clearly, the closing petition in our Lord’s prayer should be considered as a whole. It reads, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” (Matt. 6:13) Here we are reminded of additional aspects of God’s wonderful promises. The phrase “Lead us not into temptation” in no way implies that the Heavenly Father ever has any inclination to direct his people toward temptation and sin.

There are many wonderful things which God has promised to do. He has promised the kingdom, and we pray for it. He has promised our daily bread, and we pray for that. He has promised to forgive

us, and we ask his forgiveness. Our asking for these blessings does not imply the possibility that God might fail to fulfill his promises. There are some things which God has promised not to do, such as to tempt us, so in our prayers we also claim these promises. James wrote, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man."—James 1:13

We can take this as an assurance from God that he will not lead us into temptation. We rejoice in this assurance and by prayer, claim it for ourselves, coupling with it the remainder of the petition, "but deliver us from evil." God does not lead into temptation, but delivers from evil, and how precious are his many promises along this line.

Sometimes we are aware of the fact that God has delivered us from evil, and other times we are not. Doubtless every day there are situations from which God delivers us, of which we are not aware—circumstances which would result in grave injury to us as New Creatures if we were not delivered. We may not know in detail just how the Lord protects and delivers. However, we remember that one of his precious promises is that "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Ps. 34:7) We rejoice in this assurance, and in the many similar promises of God's Word. Thus with confidence we pray, "Deliver us from evil."

Additionally, we understand that there will be the final and glorious deliverance of each member of the body of Christ into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The hope of

this deliverance is today an especially vital one. Referring to the troublous conditions in the world with which we are presently surrounded, Jesus said, “When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption [deliverance] draweth nigh.”—Luke 21:28

That will be a complete and everlasting deliverance from evil, and from this “present evil world,” or age. More than that, it will mean that although “sown in weakness,” we will be “raised in power,” exalted to “glory and honour and immortality,” to live and reign with Christ. (I Cor. 15:43; Rom. 2:7) We rejoice, too, that the deliverance and exaltation of Christ’s body members into the glory of the Messianic kingdom will be followed by the deliverance of all mankind from sin and death, and the complete “restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”—Acts 3:21

WISDOM PROMISED

James wrote, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.” (James 1:5,6) This is not a promise that God will give his people worldly wisdom. It pertains, rather, to the “wisdom that is from above.” This heavenly wisdom is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”—James 3:17

God’s answer to our petition for heavenly wisdom is for the purpose of leading us to purity in thought, word, and deed. It will make us more peaceable and

gentle, and “easy to be intreated.” It will fill our hearts with mercy and all the good fruits of the Holy Spirit. It will make us impartial in our judgment of, and dealings with, others, and it will cleanse us from hypocrisy.

When we ask God for this heavenly wisdom, we must make room in our hearts and lives for what the answer implies. We must want to be all that the “wisdom from above” will lead us to be. We must be emptied of self and self-will if we truly want the Holy Spirit of wisdom to fill and control our lives. God will fulfill his promises in this regard only if we do our part.

In summary, while we are to pray without ceasing, we are also to cooperate unceasingly with God in harmony with our prayers. We should also be prepared for whatever experiences the Lord may permit to come to us in order that our prayers might be favorably answered. If we pray, “Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:5), we may well expect to be providentially given an experience which tests our faith. If we pray for patience, we may be sure that our patience will be thoroughly tried. If we pray for mercy and forgiveness, we will need to search our hearts to make sure that we are harboring no ill will toward others.

Prayer, therefore, is not only claiming the promises of God, but to be effective it must be associated with sincere efforts on our part to comply with all the conditions attached to those promises. If we are fully surrendered to the Lord—if we want his will done in our lives more than we want anything else—if we are daily searching his Word to learn his will, and to receive strength to do it—only then may we

go to the Heavenly Father in prayer to ask for the fulfillment of his promises. By so doing, however, God will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing to us so abundantly that “there shall not be room enough to receive it.”—Mal. 3:10 ■