

The Privilege of Prayer

“He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.”

—Luke 18:1, New American Standard Bible

ONE OF THE GREAT privileges which the Word of God offers is that of personal communion with our Heavenly Father. When we consider how great and how exalted God

is, we are awed by the wonder that he regards our low estate. The psalmist wrote, “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man, that You care for him?” (Ps. 8:3,4, *NASB*) We are also told, “The LORD is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens,” and yet he “humbles Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in the earth.”—Ps. 113:4,6, *NASB*

In all his vast universal domain there is nothing hidden from God. He “does not become weary or tired” by its care. (Isa. 40:28, *NASB*) His eye never slumbers nor sleeps. The smallest thing does not escape his notice, not even a sparrow’s fall. The

very hairs of our head are all numbered.—Ps. 121:4; Luke 12:6,7

We are the creations of God's hand, "fearfully and wonderfully made," and under divine love and care. The psalmist writes, "O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?"—Ps. 139:1-7,14, *NASB*

Although we have fallen far from the human perfection which Adam had when he was created, God demonstrated "his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) It is because he loves us that, through Christ, he extends to us the gracious favor of coming to him as children to a father. (Ps. 103:13,14) How wonderful is the love and favor of God!

PRAY AT ALL TIMES AND DO NOT LOSE HEART

In coming to God we should have no fear that he is too busy with other matters of greater importance, nor that he is weary of our approaching him repeatedly with things which seem of small importance. To assure us of this, Jesus gave a parable which the writer Luke introduces with our opening verse: "At all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart." In the parable a widow was finally heard and answered by a judge in a certain city because

of her persistence. (Luke 18:2-7) The widow's perseverance is emphasized, the lesson for the Lord's followers being that we should pray at all times and never lose heart or become weary in approaching God.

In so doing we demonstrate the earnestness of our desires and faith, leaving all matters in the Father's hands. The answer to our prayers may be delayed because time is an important element in God's providences. For example, three times Paul asked the Lord that a "thorn in the flesh" might "depart" from him. Finally the reply came indicating that this "thorn" would remain with him, but with the assurance from the Lord: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."—II Cor. 12:7-10

Indeed, we can see how much our Heavenly Father, the Creator and Master of the universe, is to be revered! However, unlike earthly rulers, he allows us to come directly to him at any time, through his Son, Christ Jesus our Lord.

SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES FOR PRAYER

The Word of God provides explicit principles regarding how we should pray. Jesus said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) On another occasion Jesus gave an illustration of the manner in which we should pray to our Father in heaven, in what is commonly referred to as the Lord's Prayer. (Matt. 6:9-13) It was not given as a prayer which must necessarily be memorized and repeated word-for-word each time we approach God. Instead, it is a model, or example, of the principles which should guide us when we pray.

The illustration Jesus gave teaches us several key points about our prayers to God:

1. As consecrated believers, through faith in Christ, we have been adopted as sons of God, and may therefore confidently address him as “Our Father.”—Rom. 8:15

2. We should have adoration for our Heavenly Father and profound reverence for his glorious character attributes: “Hallowed be thy name.”

3. We should express full sympathy with his plan for a coming kingdom of righteousness on earth which will be according to his will: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” This should also reflect our attitude of heart towards righteousness and our being fully submissive to God’s will and purpose.

4. We should express in plain and simple language our dependence upon God for our daily needs, both spiritual and temporal, with the same confidence that children have in their earthly fathers: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

5. We should acknowledge our specific daily sins and shortcomings, asking for God’s forgiveness, while also recognizing the obligation which we have to forgive those who sin against us: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

6. We should have a humble craving for God’s guidance and protection, seeking to guard ourselves against temptations, and desiring to be fortified by the Father’s abounding grace against all the wiles of the Adversary: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

We note that both the Sinaitic and Vatican manuscripts omit the words, “For thine is the kingdom,

and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” from Matthew 6:13.

In short, for our prayers to be acceptable, they must express confident faith, loving esteem and reverence, and full sympathy with God’s eternal plan and purpose. Such are the principles which should guide our attitude of mind and heart when we pray to our Father in heaven.

ABIDING PRESENCE OF GOD

The meek and contrite in heart have the promise of the abiding presence of both the Father and of his Son, our Lord Jesus. Speaking to his disciples and to us, Jesus said, “If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.” (John 14:23) The word “abode” in this verse has the meaning of “staying” or “residence.” Thus, we are promised not merely an occasional hearing by the Father and his son Jesus, but rather the continual, abiding presence of both the Father and the Son, with their thought, care, and interest constantly upon us. Peter expresses the same idea, writing, “The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers.”—I Pet. 3:12

We are urged to be “instant in prayer” and to “pray without ceasing.” (Rom. 12:12; I Thess. 5:17) That is, we are to be constantly in an attitude of prayer throughout each day, looking to the Lord for guidance in all the affairs of life. We should pray for strength to overcome our weak, imperfect flesh, to develop more and more of the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit, to use godly wisdom in dealing with ourselves and others, to apply the Word of God,

and to develop the spirit of the truth. We should pray that God's attitude, mind, and will, may be the same as our own to the greatest extent possible.

Concerning God's great mercy and lovingkindness, the psalmist writes: "As the heavens are exalted over the earth, His lovingkindness hath prevailed over them who revere him; As far as East from West, Hath he put far from us, our transgressions; Like the compassion of a father for his children, ... for them who revere him. For, he, knoweth how we are formed, He is mindful that dust, we are. ... His righteousness, [is] to children's children:—To such as keep his covenant, And remember his precepts, to do them."—Ps. 103:11-14,17,18, *Rotherham Emphasized Bible*

SEEKING FORGIVENESS FOR SIN

Although we greatly desire to love God, keep his commandments, and recognize his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus, as the only way of access to the Father, yet we fall short on many occasions. When we sin or are overtaken in a fault, whether in our thoughts, words or actions, if we repent—that is, if we resolve to think and act differently—and seek forgiveness, let us remember that we have an "advocate," or helper, in our relationship with the Father. Our advocate is "Jesus Christ the righteous," who is the satisfaction for our sins."—I John 2:1,2

The Apostle Paul urges us to stay faithful, despite our weaknesses, saying, "Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been

tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”—Heb. 4:14-16, *NASB*

Jesus was a perfect man, and we are redeemed with the “precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” (I Pet. 1:18,19) As for us, we are imperfect and have sins and shortcomings. Yet the scriptures admonish us to be viewed by God “without spot, and blameless,” and we are told to keep his commandments “without spot, unrebukeable,” and to keep ourselves “unspotted from the world.”—II Pet. 3:14; I Tim. 6:14; James 1:27

How can we possibly be “without spot,” while being imperfect? The only way is by daily confessing our sins in prayer to our Heavenly Father and seeking forgiveness through the merit of Jesus’ shed blood. This requires both humility as well as a close self-examination of our thoughts, words and actions throughout each day. Thus, when we pray each day, we should acknowledge our specific sins and shortcomings, and ask forgiveness, based upon the atoning value of Jesus’ redemptive sacrifice.

“ONCE FOR ALL”

In so doing, we are not at all asking for an additional, fresh sacrifice of Jesus. The Scriptures clearly indicate that Christ was offered “once for all” and then entered “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He would offer Himself often ... Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of

the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. ... having been offered once to bear the sins of many,” and “He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.”—Heb. 9:12,24-28; 10:12, *NASB*

The Apostle John writes, “If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (I John 1:7-9, *NASB*) We confess our sins by acknowledging them in prayer to our Heavenly Father, and by asking for his forgiveness through the one offering of Jesus’ shed blood, which is all-sufficient to cover our shortcomings.

The Apostle Paul states that “Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised [from the dead], who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us,” by applying on our behalf a sufficiency of his own merit to cover all our sins and shortcomings.—Rom 8:34, *NASB*

With such urgent and loving invitations, let us not hesitate to come to God often and tarry long in communion and fellowship with him. It is our privilege to enter our “closet,” symbolically speaking, shut the door and pray to our Father who “seeth in secret.” (Matt. 6:6) At any instant during problems and perplexities, we may turn our prayerful thoughts to God for wisdom, strength, Christian fortitude, and for comfort and consolation. Although we hear no responding voice, if we are attentive to God’s

providences, we will eventually see the shaping of events and circumstances for our eternal spiritual good in answer to such prayers. All of the Lord's faithful followers have found this to be true, whether in perplexity, tribulation, affliction, persecution, bereavement, temptation or trial.

“EVERYTHING BY PRAYER”

The Apostle Paul writes, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Phil. 4:6, *NASB*) “In everything” signifies that our Heavenly Father is deeply interested in all things that relate to us. There is nothing too small for his notice because he is the one who numbers even the very hairs of our head. (Luke 12:7) Therefore, in the cares and concerns of today, whether we be at home, at work, or in any location or circumstance, we may aloud or in our thoughts, ask for his loving sympathy and help.

If a parent's counsel and wisdom seem inadequate to restrain and guide the wayward course of an impetuous and over-confident child, they may bring their concerns and issues to the Lord. When their children approach the threshold of adulthood and encounter temptations from the world, divine wisdom and providence may be called upon by asking for God's help. Thus, circumstances and surroundings may be permitted, according to the Lord's will, to show them the way that is sure and safe, and expose the foolishness of pursuing other courses.

When we have problems at work or at home which may perplex us, let us remember Jesus' instruction to not let our hearts be weighed down with the “cares

of this life.” (Luke 21:34) Let us call to mind the apostle’s admonition: “Godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. ... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” —I Tim. 6:6,7,11,12, *NASB*

As we remember these things we can come to God’s throne of heavenly grace in prayer, asking for wisdom and direction as to how we might adjust our earthly life, so as not to be overly burdened with its cares. It is right to be attentive regarding our temporal affairs, and also to be diligent that we “may be found of him in peace.” (I Tim. 5:8; Rom. 12:11; II Pet. 3:14) However, excessive concern is to be avoided because it may lead to worry or anxiety, which will interfere with our peace of mind and communion with God.

Does the possibility of financial loss cause us anxious thought? We can take that also to the Lord in prayer. Then, while diligently using all opportunities to provide things decent and honest, we should wait patiently and confidently, watching for the indications of God’s providence. Quoting in part from Luke 12:22-32, *NASB*, Jesus instructed his followers, saying, “Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!” Additionally, “If God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith!”

LIVING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

During all the trials and various experiences in our life, whether bereavements, disappointments, calamities, distresses, or our personal failures and shortcomings, we may take them all to God in prayer and receive the strength, sympathy, consolation and help which we so much need in those circumstances.

Let us live each day in the presence of the Father and the Son, who have promised to abide with us. It will sweeten our days, comfort our nights, ease our burdens, lighten our cares, brighten our hopes, and lift us up above the world into a higher, spiritual atmosphere. We can do this by appreciating and availing ourselves of the privilege of prayer.

We are assured that the “effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” (James 5:16) We are urged also to come to God in faith. Jesus said, “If you have faith and do not doubt, ... all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.” (Matt. 21:21,22, *NASB*) On another occasion Jesus stated, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. (John 15:7) Here Jesus stipulates two conditions which must be true regarding our prayers. First, we must “abide” in him, and second, his words, teachings and instructions, must “abide” in us. The Apostle John states that the one who keeps God’s “commandments abides in Him.” (I John 3:24, *NASB*) Since these words were addressed to Jesus’ footstep followers, we realize that our prayers are subject to God’s wisdom rather than our own. Therefore, the answer to our prayers might be in a way we do not expect, but it will always be for our eternal spiritual good.

PRAYERS WITH THE BRETHREN

While personal prayer is the blessed privilege of every child of God and one without which our spiritual life cannot be sustained, it is also the privilege of Christians to unite their petitions at the throne of grace. This feature of the privilege of prayer is especially commended by the Lord. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”—Matt. 18:20

What a blessed promise! If the number of brethren in the group with whom we meet is diminishing over time, let us not be discouraged or downcast. Instead, let us claim this precious promise, that even if the size of our assembly becomes only “two or three” who are gathered together, the Lord is in our midst. On the other hand, we should be careful not to be overly confident, simply because the number of brethren with whom we meet is large.

ANSWERS TO OUR PRAYERS

The Prophet Daniel wrote that while he was speaking and praying and confessing his sin and the sins of Israel before the Lord, the answer came by the hand of an angel who said, “O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you insight with understanding. At the beginning of your supplications the command was issued, and I have now come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.”—Dan. 9:20-23, *NASB*

On another occasion, after Daniel had mourned three weeks, fasting and praying because of his inability to understand, an angel of the Lord came and said, “Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were

heard, and I have come in response to your words.” (Dan. 10:2,3,12, *NASB*) Thus it is also with us. At the beginning of our prayers, God starts to set in operation influences and to shape the circumstances which are designed to work out the intended blessing for us.

We are encouraged by the parable which Jesus gave that “at all times” we ought to pray and not “lose heart.” The Heavenly Father knew how vital to our spiritual life this communion with him would be, and how much we need the care, comfort, and consolation which his presence and sympathy give.

What a blessed favor the disciples of Jesus have to be “instant in prayer.” Let us count it a privilege to pray always, and to lift our hearts and minds to God at any time and in any place, realizing that each day, even at every moment of the day, both the Heavenly Father and our dear Lord Jesus continually abide with us. When the active duties of the day have been performed under his all-wise eye and supervision, or at any time when we realize the necessity, how precious is the privilege of entering into our closets and there, alone with God, unburdening our hearts in prayer. ■