The Gift of Prayer

"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints."
—Ephesians 6:18

IN THIS SIXTH PART OF the "Treasures of the Truth" series, the importance of prayer will be considered as it is relates to the development of the New Creature in Christ Jesus. Prayer is one of the most valuable of all gifts from our Heavenly Father and is a special treasure that the Lord's consecrated people enjoy. It is associated in a very special way with the spiritual life of the Christian's faith. Prayer is an index of the heart condition and has been said to be the soul's sincere desire, whether uttered or unexpressed.

OLD TESTAMENT PRAYER

Prayer was regularly practiced during the world's early history. In one of the psalms of David, he speaks of praying several times a day. He wrote, "As for me, I will call upon God; and the LORD shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice."—Ps. 55:16,17

By the time of Israel's long captivity in Babylon, we learn that the habit of praying three times a day at stated and specific hours had become a well-accepted practice. In proof of this, we read in the scriptural record that a conspiracy was underway among the Prophet Daniel's enemies who wanted to entrap him. They had influenced King Darius to establish a decree under his signature that would forbid anyone from making a petition to God or to any man. (Dan. 6:4-9) The prophet's response to the decree is also given in the account. "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God."—vss. 10,11

The introduction of synagogue worship soon after the return from Babylonian captivity served to confirm the custom of saying all prayers in public which in the rabbinical schools were often very lengthy. This practice, however, developed into a ritualistic religious system which ultimately resulted in being condemned by the Lord.

PRIVATE OR PUBLIC PRAYER

During our Lord Jesus' earthly ministry, he referred to this practice of prayer. He said, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their

reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."—Matt. 6:5,6

To the devout Jew, timeworn custom necessitated the repetition of certain forms of prayer at least three times a day. For the sake of modesty and true devotion to God, most Jews chose to observe these occasions for prayer in the privacy of one's own home. The Pharisees deliberately left their homes for the sake of being seen publicly in the synagogue. Publicity often encourages hypocrisy, and consequently such outward manifestations of piety became overdone, which resulted in our Lord's plainly spoken words in connection with such actions.

In our modern western world, the tendency may be more along the lines to conceal, rather than to outwardly display, such personal and private devotions. As a consequence, there is a greater risk in offending our Lord by not praying at all, rather than by praying in an overly conspicuous manner. According to the Master's direction, we should endeavor to make our prayers, whether public or private, as brief, to the point, and as reverential as possible.

We are further instructed to pray in the proper spirit of the Truth. Jesus said, "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."—John 4:23,24

WHAT CONSTITUTES PRAYER

Proper prayer may be regarded as a childlike utterance from one's own heart that suggests a total dependence upon God and of reverence and thanksgiving to him. The Jews, who were accustomed to reciting over and over again the same words, did so because they had come to attach merit, or value, to the mere act of praying. They no longer saw prayer as a simple and humble childlike request, but as an outward display of religion which was valuable in itself. True prayer is viewed as one soul's petition to God, and is of its own nature a private and personal matter. Its value lies in its being heard and accepted by God. If we pray only because we are in need, telling the Heavenly Father what it is we are in need of, prayer continues to be a matter which lies between the petitioner and the giver. We are to remember that, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."—James 1:17

Our Heavenly Father, who is in secret, appreciates being the one who has been called upon to share in the intimacy of each heart among his children that seek to know and to do his will. In our preference for him, and the trustfulness which compels us to reveal our innermost feelings to him, is the childlikeness which makes one cry out to him. In all of this, the Father surely delights, and thus rewards openly in the growth of Christlikeness in our consecrated lives.

FOR WHAT SHALL WE PRAY

In James' epistle, he writes, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it

upon your lusts [pleasures, *Marginal Translation*]." (James 4:3) Jesus had instructed his disciples that it was essential to abide in him, and to take care that his words abide in us if we would have our prayers answered. He said, "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) From these wonderful words of the Master, we learn that if our petitions are to be answered they must be directed according to the will of God.

Our prayers must be along higher, or more spiritual, lines and not of a temporal nature. We are privileged to pray for those things that God is willing to give us, such as more of his Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes from above. Also, we may pray for his guidance in the workings of our consecrated lives in full submission to his will.

THE ATTITUDE OF PRAYER

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Pray without ceasing." (I Thess. 5:17) God has not commanded us to pray, but perhaps these words are better understood with the thought in mind that we should cease not to pray, and that we remain in an expectant attitude as we wait upon the most high God. Thus, if we have made a proper petition that is worth asking for, then we believe that it is also worth waiting for the answer. The child of God is encouraged to pray frequently, with regularity, and with the attitude of heart that looks to him for guidance in every experience of life. The atmosphere of prayer should surround God's consecrated people continually. Those who rejoice in the Truth cannot neglect the wonderful privilege

of prayer and should go to our Heavenly Father many times during the day.

PRAYER STRENGTHENS FAITH

One of the most important lessons that the consecrated child of God learns during his consecrated walk is to develop an absolute faith and trust in God. This humble and Christian characteristic is cultivated by our prayers, whether they are petitions for ourselves, or on behalf of our brethren who may have asked for an interest in our prayers on their behalf. We believe that these kinds of prayers will help to cultivate and strengthen our faith. God is abundantly able to overrule in any matter so that he can give the needed blessings to his children.

ABIDING IN HIM

Jesus taught his followers, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me."—John 15:4

From our Lord's words, we realize that there are two conditions to be met if our prayers are to be answered. We must first accept Jesus as our Savior, and then have made a full and unreserved consecration to God according to his will. When these two steps have been taken, the child of God is accepted by the Heavenly Father in our Lord Jesus and we become New Creatures in him. It is to the New Creature that God's wonderful provisions apply. To abide in Christ means to remain in harmony with God and his Word of Truth. Those who are abiding in him may ask in prayer for those things that would benefit their consecrated walk in the narrow way.

PRAYERS OF THE NEW CREATURE

Throughout the present Gospel Age, the Lord has been dealing with his people as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. All of his promises and blessings are directed to the consecrated child of God, and prayers to him are acceptable on this basis alone. They are not directed to our fleshly nature, except as certain matters may benefit in some way for the proper development of the New Creature. We must learn to put our trust in God and accept whatever he sees necessary for our spiritual growth and development. Thus by studying our Lord's character as shown in his Word, and striving day by day to be conformed into his image, we are changed from glory to glory by the Holy Spirit of God.

PRAY AND NOT FAINT

In Luke's Gospel, he records an important lesson that our Lord Jesus taught to his disciples. The account states, "He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint." (Luke 18:1) This lesson points to the growth of the New Creatures in Christ, and emphasizes the necessity for them to exercise persistence when praying and making petition to God. As the Spirit begotten sons of God, they understand the relationship of being his sons and what are the rights and privileges of consecrated Christians. It is to these faithful ones of the consecrated class of Christians to which our Heavenly Father is ready, willing, and able to give his rich spiritual blessings.

PRAYER FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

One of the most important petitions that the New Creature may make during these closing years of

this Gospel Age harvest is the request for a greater measure of the Holy Spirit and an understanding of our commitment of consecration. This is a most valuable and essential gift that our loving Heavenly Father is willing to give to his people who humbly ask him for it. We may be assured that God is especially pleased when his children ask for those things of the Spirit that can only come from him above.

"This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him." (I John 5:14,15) To pray with the assurance that we will be heard by the great God of the universe requires faith, and to trust that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him. The blessings for which we pray are included in the promises of God with respect to his willingness to grant them to those who are faithful to him and his Word. In this sense, it would be proper to say that when we pray and put our trust and confidence in him, we are rightfully claiming the promises that he is willing to give us.

PRAYERS PLEASING TO GOD

Prayers that would be pleasing to God should first of all recognize and acknowledge our Heavenly Father's great glory. All other matters, concerning our interest for others and then for ourselves, should be in keeping with the general plans and purposes of God. Having thus approached our Father, we should take to heart the wonderful words recorded for our admonition in Matthew's Gospel.

"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."—Matt. 7:7,8

These words assure us that God will answer our prayers, but our faith in this blessed assurance must be based on the grounds that our petitions and requests for his guidance are in complete harmony with his will and purpose. Matthew further writes, "What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"—vss. 9-11

Here Jesus is teaching us that it is only natural and proper for our children to ask for bread, or for fish. When they do this a loving father will respond to their requests. It would be unthinkable to substitute stones or serpents on such an occasion and this is the vital point of the lesson. Our loving Heavenly Father would surely respond to his child's request associated with a deeper appreciation and understanding of the spiritual gifts that come from above. Matthew then says, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."—vs. 12

OUR SPIRITUAL NEEDS

As followers of our Lord and as New Creatures in Christ Jesus, we have certain spiritual needs that are basic to our growth in grace and in knowledge.

These we may request in our prayers and be therefore assured that our Heavenly Father will provide for us. The spiritual blessings which he gives his people reach us through the power of the Holy Spirit, so it is proper that we pray for a greater infilling of that Spirit.

To be filled with the Holy Spirit means that we will seek to be used as a blessing to others, and especially those of like precious faith. In this connection, John wrote, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death." (I John 3:14) Love for our brethren is an indication of spiritual growth and development. "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." (vs. 16) It is proper and pleasing to God that we should pray for the indwelling of his Spirit.

NOT ALL PRAYERS ANSWERED

On one occasion, the Apostle Paul through prayer sought God's power to be exercised in the removal of a symbolic thorn in the flesh, evidently concerning his poor eyesight that had resulted from the marvelous purpose of God concerning him. We read, "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."—II Cor. 12:7

Paul acknowledges that he prayed three times to have this 'thorn' removed, as we read, "For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." (vs. 8) The importance of this

scriptural record pertains to the fact that God's will concerning him was to be manifest otherwise. "He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (vs. 9) How graciously the apostle accepted God's will concerning the answer to his prayers, when he said, "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (vs. 10) This is a powerful lesson for each one of the Lord's children to watch for an indication of God's answer to their prayers.

On another occasion, Paul explained that the Spirit may help our infirmities in connection with our prayers, helping us to understand the will of our Heavenly Father as expressed through his written Word. He said, "The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." (Rom. 8:26) It is important to keep in mind that the Holy Spirit of God is the unlimited power of God.

The apostle further reiterates, "He that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." (vs. 27) God's children should not become discouraged when they find it difficult to express their thoughts in proper language when they approach God in prayer, for all things will work together for their Christian growth.

A REST OF FAITH

The Apostle Paul explains that our rest of faith is necessary in the Christian's walk when he says, "Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." (Heb. 4:1) Jesus, during his earthly ministry, never became discouraged, nor did it hold him back from the work God had given him to do. His rest of faith was based on his close relationship to the Father, and it engendered a watchfulness and care, a circumspection of his walk in life that he might be wholly pleasing to the doing of the Father's will.

It is necessary for us also to watch and pray, and, in these closing years of the Gospel Age harvest, we should be careful regarding spiritual matters of our faith, by seeking to know and please our Heavenly Father. By so doing, he will strengthen us in the faith. As the children of faith we learn to wait upon him, as we read, "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."—Isa. 40:31

THE PEACE OF GOD

In his letter to the brethren at Philippi, Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice." (Phil. 4:4) To rejoice in the Lord indicates one of the most important marks of the New Creature in Christ Jesus. The apostle then said, "Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand." (vs. 5) It has been said that our lives are as an open book, and perhaps the only means

by which others may recognize our walk in newness of life.

Next we read, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." (vs. 6) The word 'careful' in this verse means 'to be anxious' [3309, *Strong's Bible Concordance*], and is better translated 'be anxious for nothing.' This is in accordance with the instructions of the Spirit of God, and suggests the attitude that we should all have when approaching the Heavenly Father in prayer. The reason becomes more apparent when the apostle says, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (vs. 7) God promises that his peace will keep us from falling. We may receive this peace through our prayers to him.

PRAYER AVAILETH MUCH

Concerning the vital importance of prayer in the life of the New Creature in Christ Jesus, James wrote, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that he may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."—James 5:13-16, *New American Standard Bible*

If our loving Heavenly Father so wills, the New Creature in Christ may be healed of his spiritual sickness by the actions and fervent prayers of the elders of the church. Prayers are of great value, and we are encouraged to pray for one another. ■