



A Heart Set on God

For Christians prayer is like breathing. You don't have to think to breathe because the atmosphere exerts pressure on your lungs and forces you to breathe. That's why it is more difficult to hold your breath than it is to breathe. Similarly, when you're born into the family of God, you enter into a spiritual atmosphere wherein God's presence and grace exert pressure, or influence, on your life. Prayer is the normal response to that pressure. As believers we have all entered the divine atmosphere to breathe the air of prayer. Only then can we survive in the darkness of the world.

Unfortunately many believers hold their spiritual breaths for long periods, thinking brief moments with God are sufficient to allow them to survive. But such restricting of their spiritual intake is caused by sinful desires. The fact is, every believer must be continually in the presence of God, constantly breathing in His truths to be fully functional.

Because ours is such a free and prosperous society, it is easier for Christians to feel secure by presuming on instead of depending on God's grace. Too many believers become satisfied with physical blessings and have little desire for spiritual blessings. Having become so dependent on their physical resources, they feel little need for spiritual resources. When programs, methods, and money produce impressive results, there is an inclination to confuse human success with divine blessing. Christians can

actually behave like practical humanists, living as if God were not necessary. When that happens, passionate longing for God and yearning for His help will be missing—along with His empowerment. Because of this great and common danger, Paul urged believers to “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18) and to “devote yourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2). Continual, persistent, incessant prayer is an essential part of Christian living and flows out of dependence on God.

THE FREQUENCY OF PRAYER

Jesus’ earthly ministry was remarkably brief, barely three years long. Yet in those three years, as must have been true in His earlier life, He spent a great amount of time in prayer. The Gospels report that Jesus habitually rose early in the morning, often before daybreak, to commune with His Father. In the evening He would frequently go to the Mount of Olives or some other quiet spot to pray, usually alone. Prayer was the spiritual air that Jesus breathed every day of His life. He practiced an unending communion between Himself and the Father.

He urged His disciples to do the same. He said, “Keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place” (Luke 21:36).

The early church learned that lesson and carried on Christ’s commitment to continual, unceasing prayer. Even before the Day of Pentecost, the 12 disciples gathered in the Upper Room “with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). That didn’t change even when 3,000 were added to their number on the Day of Pentecost (2:42). When the apostles were led to structure the church so that ministry could be accomplished effectively, they said, “We will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word” (6:4).

Throughout his life, the Apostle Paul exemplified this commitment to prayer. Read the benedictions to many of his epistles and you’ll discover that praying for his fellow believers was his daily practice. To the Roman believers he said, “God ... is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request” (Rom. 1:9–10; cf. 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 5:20; Phil. 1:4; Col. 1:3; 1 Thes. 1:2; 2 Thes. 1:3, 11;

Phile. 4). His prayers for believers often occupied him both “night and day” (1 Thes. 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:3).

Because he prayed for them so continually, Paul was able to exhort his readers to pray that way as well. He urged the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:17). He commanded the Philippians to stop being anxious and instead, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (4:6). He encouraged the Colossians to “devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (4:2; cf. Rom. 12:12). And to help the Ephesians arm themselves to combat the spiritual darkness in the world around them, he said, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18). Unceasing, incessant prayer is essential to the vitality of a believer’s relationship to the Lord and his ability to function in the world.

A Way of Life

As a child I used to wonder how anyone could pray without ceasing. I pictured Christians walking around with hands folded, heads bowed, and eyes closed, bumping into everything. While certain postures and specific times set aside for prayer have an important bearing on our communication with God, to “pray at all times” obviously does not mean we are to pray in formal or noticeable ways every waking moment. And it does not mean we are to devote ourselves to reciting ritualistic patterns and forms of prayer.

To “pray without ceasing” basically refers to recurring prayer, not nonstop talking. Thus it is to be our way of life—we’re to be continually in an attitude of prayer.

Famous nineteenth-century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon offers this vivid picture of what praying at all times means:

Like the old knights, always in warfare, not always on their steeds dashing forward with their lances in rest to unhorse an adversary, but always wearing their weapons where they could readily reach them, and always ready to encounter wounds or death for the sake of the cause which they championed. Those grim warriors often slept in their armour; so even when we sleep, we are still to be in the spirit of prayer, so that if

perchance we wake in the night we may still be with God. Our soul, having received the divine centripetal influence which makes it seek its heavenly centre, should be evermore naturally rising towards God himself. Our heart is to be like those beacons and watchtowers which were prepared along the coast of England when the invasion of the Armada was hourly expected, not always blazing, but with the wood always dry, and the match always there, the whole pile being ready to blaze up at the appointed moment. Our souls should be in such a condition that ejaculatory prayer should be very frequent with us. No need to pause in business and leave the counter, and fall down upon the knees; the spirit should send up its silent, short, swift petitions to the throne of grace ...

A Christian should carry the weapon of all-prayer like a drawn sword in his hand. We should never sheathe our supplications. Never may our hearts be like an unlimbered gun, with everything to be done to it before it can thunder on the foe, but it should be like a piece of cannon, loaded and primed, only requiring the fire that it may be discharged. The soul should be not always in the exercise of prayer, but always in the energy of prayer; not always actually praying, but always intentionally praying (The Parables of Our Lord [Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1979], 434–35).

I think of praying at all times as living in continual God-consciousness, where everything we see and experience becomes a kind of prayer, lived in deep awareness of and surrender to our Heavenly Father. It is something I share with my Best Friend—something I instantly communicate with God. To obey this exhortation means that, when we are tempted, we hold the temptation before God and ask for His help. When we experience something good and beautiful, we immediately thank the Lord for it. When we see evil around us, we ask God to make it right and to allow us to help accomplish that, if it is according to His will. When we meet someone who does not know Christ, we pray for God to draw that person to Himself and to use us to be a faithful witness. When we encounter trouble, we turn to God as our Deliverer. Thus life becomes a continually ascending prayer: all life's thoughts, deeds, and circumstances become an opportunity to commune with our Heavenly Father. In that

way we constantly set our minds “on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2).

Fellowship with God

Since the ultimate purpose of our salvation is to glorify God and to bring us into intimate, rich fellowship with Him, failure to seek God in prayer is to deny that purpose. “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also,” says the Apostle John, “that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Imagine spending an entire workday with your best friend at your side. You would no doubt acknowledge his presence throughout the day by introducing him to your friends or business associates and talking to him about the various activities of the day. But how would your friend feel if you never talked to him or acknowledged his presence? Yet that’s how we treat the Lord when we fail to pray. If we communicated with our friends as infrequently as some of us communicate with the Lord, those friends might soon disappear.

Our fellowship with God is not meant to wait until we are in heaven. God’s greatest desire, and our greatest need, is to be in constant fellowship with Him now, and there is no greater expression or experience of fellowship than prayer.

In one of his classic works on prayer, *Purpose in Prayer*, nineteenth-century pastor E.M. Bounds provides us with this reminder of how we must cultivate our fellowship with the Lord:

Prayer is not a meaningless function or duty to be crowded into the busy or the weary ends of the day, and we are not obeying our Lord’s command when we content ourselves with a few minutes upon our knees in the morning rush or late at night when the faculties, tired with the tasks of the day, call out for rest. God is always within call, it is true; His ear is ever attentive to the cry of His child, but we can never get to know Him if we use the vehicle of prayer as we use the telephone, for a few words of hurried conversation. Intimacy requires development. We can never know God as it is our privilege to know Him, by brief and fragmentary and unconsidered repetitions of intercessions that are requests for personal favors and nothing more. That is not the

way in which we can come into communication with heaven's King. "The goal of prayer is the ear of God," a goal that can only be reached by patient and continued and continuous waiting upon Him, pouring out our heart to Him and permitting Him to speak to us. Only by so doing can we expect to know Him, and as we come to know Him better we shall spend more time in His presence and find that presence a constant and ever-increasing delight ([Chicago: Moody, n.d.], 53–54).

The Ways and Means of Prayer

In Ephesians 6:18 Paul says we are to pray with "all prayer and petition." The Greek word translated "prayer" (also in 1 Thes. 5:17) is the most common New Testament word for prayer and refers to general requests. The word translated "petition" refers to specific prayers. Paul's use of both words suggests our necessary involvement in all kinds of prayer, every form that is appropriate.

The Posture

To pray all the time necessitates being in various positions because you will never be in the same position all day. In the Bible, people prayed standing (Gen. 24:12–14), lifting up their hands (1 Tim. 2:8), sitting (Jud. 20:26), kneeling (Mark 1:40), looking upward (John 17:1), bowing down (Ex. 34:8), placing their heads between their knees (1 Kings 18:42), pounding on their breasts (Luke 18:13), and facing the temple (Dan. 6:10).

The Circumstances

While some people today think prayer ought to be very formal, the Bible documents that people prayed in many different circumstances. They prayed wearing sackcloth (Ps. 35:13), sitting in ashes (Job 1:20–21; 2:8), smiting their breasts (Luke 18:13), crying tears (Ps. 6:6), throwing dust on their heads (Josh. 7:6), tearing garments (1 Kings 21:27), fasting (Deut. 9:18), sighing (Ezra 9:4–15), groaning (Ps. 6:4–6), crying out loud (Heb. 5:7), sweating blood (Luke 22:44), agonizing with broken hearts (Ps. 34:18), making a vow (Acts 18:18), making sacrifices (Ps. 20:1–3), and singing songs (Acts 16:25).

The Place

The Bible records people praying in all sorts of places as well: in battle (2 Chron. 13:14–15), in a cave (1 Kings 19:9–10), in a closet (Matt. 6:6), in a garden (Matt. 26:36–44), on a mountainside (Luke 6:12), by a river (Acts 16:13), by the sea (Acts 21:5–6), in the street (Matt. 6:5), in the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53), in bed (Ps. 4:3–4), in a home (Acts 9:39–40), in the stomach of a fish (Jonah 2:1–10), on a housetop (Acts 10:9), in a prison (Acts 16:23–26), in the wilderness (Luke 5:16), and on a cross (Luke 23:33–34, 46). In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul said, “I want the men in every place to pray” For the faithful, Spirit-filled Christian, every place becomes a place of prayer.

The Time

At a pastors’ conference I attended some years ago, one man preached on the subject of morning prayer. To support his point, he read various passages that show people praying in the morning. As he did, I looked up all the Scriptures that show people praying three times a day (Dan. 6:10), in the evening (1 Kings 18:36), before meals (Matt. 14:19), after meals (Deut. 8:10), at the ninth hour (3 P.M.; Acts 3:1), at bedtime (Ps. 4:4), at midnight (Acts 16:25), day and night (Luke 2:37; 18:7), often (Luke 5:33), when they’re young (Jer. 3:4), when they’re old (Dan. 9:2–19), when they’re in trouble (2 Kings 19:3–4), every day (Ps. 86:3), and always (Luke 18:1; 1 Thes. 5:17).

Prayer is fitting at any time, in any posture, in any place, under any circumstance, and in any attire. It is to be a total way of life—an open and continual communion with God.

After having embraced all the infinite resources that are yours in Christ, don’t ever think you’re no longer dependent on the moment by moment power of God.

Coincidental Attitudes

Throughout his life the believer senses his insufficiency, thus he lives in total dependence on God. As long as you feel that insufficiency and dependence, you’ll pray without ceasing. At the same time, you also know you are the beneficiary of tremendous blessings from God. That’s why Paul instructed the Thessalonians to “rejoice always” and “give thanks” in everything in their unceasing prayers (1 Thes. 5:16–18). That

reflects a beautiful balance in our communion with God. While we offer specific petitions for our needs and the needs of others, at the same time we can rejoice and give thanks—not just for His specific answers, but also for the abundant blessing He pours out to us each and every day.

MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1995). *Alone with God* (pp. 13–20). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.