

Praying Always (Part Six)

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A major purpose of this series has been to describe how praying always reaches into every corner of our Christian lives. God gives us this tool so that we can be in constant contact with Him and bring every thought into captivity, under His and our control (II Corinthians 10:5). As we conclude, we will see a few other areas that continual prayer affects.

In Romans 8:30, justification comes before glorification. Justification is getting right with God through His calling. From there, we then begin developing a right relationship—the process of sanctification—that leads to glorification, being in God's Kingdom.

How do we build this vital relationship, the one on which our salvation depends? It is not difficult: We use the same process we use to build relationships with people. What do we do? We spend time with them, converse with them, and experience various activities with them. By that process, we come to know them better.

Is it any different with God? No! Talking to, spending time with, and experiencing life with God are how we get to know God. Moreover, knowing God is everything, as John 17:3 shows: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

What is a key element in coming to know God? Prayer! Prayer *is* contact with God, a major tool He provides us to develop our relationship with Him and our knowledge of Him. A thorough and deep knowledge of God—both intellectual and experiential—will go far in avoiding the deceptive traps of the Devil, our nature, and this evil age. When we truly understand the reality of God—who and what He is, how He thinks, what He does, what He purposes—we will be able to discern what motivates a statement or action.

Our relationship with God is our protection against deception, even the self-deception that a Laodicean is susceptible to, as Daniel 11:32 indicates: "He will flatter those who have violated the covenant and win them over to his side. But the people who *know* their God will be strong and will resist him" (*New Living Translation*, NLT, emphasis ours throughout). The surest way to develop this relationship, protecting us from deception, is through praying always.

The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:33, "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits.'" Instead, we can choose to fellowship with the very best company in the entire universe—our heavenly Father. That relationship comes through prayer. We talk to Him and He talks to us by the thoughts He inspires. By building this relationship, we develop the mind of God (Philippians 2:5), the mind that will help us see through the strong delusion promised to occur at the end of this age (II Thessalonians 2:11).

Fellowship

As mentioned above, fellowship—spending time with someone—is how human beings build relationships. The quality and quantity of that fellowship demonstrates the strength of the relationship, and it works similarly in the relationship between Christians and God and Christ, as I John 1:3 shows:

What we have seen and [ourselves] heard, we are also telling you, so that you too may realize *and* enjoy fellowship as partners *and* partakers with us. And [this] fellowship that we have [which is a distinguishing mark of Christians] is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (the Messiah). (*The Amplified Bible*)

Someone who is guilt-ridden and conscience-stricken because of sin, rather than seeking fellowship with God, will shy away from Him just as Adam and Eve did. After their sin, they ran, not *to* Him, but *from* Him—they hid from God (Genesis 3:8-10). Is there a more powerful act that we, as Christians, can do to demonstrate our desire to run to God rather than from Him—to demonstrate the strength of our desire to fellowship—than to pray always?

A lack of desire to fellowship with God and Christ is a distinctive trait of a Laodicean (Revelation 3:18-20). We live in an era when people are apathetic about having a true relationship with God. No professing Christian would admit that he would not care to eat a meal with and fellowship with Jesus Christ, yet He reports that in His own church, some will not rouse themselves to fellowship with Him, though they know that He knocks at the door. By their inaction, they choose *not* to fellowship with Him.

In fact, they are so far from Him that they do not even see their need! A terrible cycle of cause-and-effect is created: no awareness of need, no desire; no desire, no prayer; no prayer, no relationship; no relationship, no awareness of need. It runs in a vicious circle.

God offers us, not just endless life, but even more—eternal, close fellowship with Him. That is part of our reward as firstfruits (Revelation 3:12, 21). But how does God know if we want to fellowship with Him forever? How can He determine about us, as He said about Abraham in Genesis 22:12: "Now I *know*"? Simply, if we are earnestly seeking fellowship with Him *right now*, in this life, our actions prove—just as Abraham's actions were proof—that we sincerely desire to fellowship with Him forever.

What is the major way God gives us to show our desire for eternal fellowship with Him? Prayer! Through prayer, especially praying always, we are consciously deciding to place ourselves in God's presence—to have fellowship with Him and to acknowledge our vital need for Him.

As an example of this, David writes in Psalm 27:8: "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek.'" *The Amplified Bible* expands the idea of "seek My face" as "inquire for and require My presence as your vital need." In *everything* we say or do, we are to acknowledge His presence in our lives and give thanks for it (Colossians 3:17). Our praying always should also include thanksgiving to God for the many blessings He provides to sustain us, prosper us, and perfect us.

Considering this idea of eternal fellowship, it should come as no surprise that by striving to pray always we are in training to do now what we will be doing for eternity—closely fellowshiping with God. It is one reason why we have been called and elected by God—that we might have fellowship with the Father and the Son (Revelation 3:12, 21; John 17:24).

The book of Revelation does not give the first five eras of the church the same promise of proximity as the last two. That is how important our close fellowship now is in preparing us for our place in God's Kingdom. If we do not strive to prove our desire to fellowship with Him now, we have rejected one of the very purposes of our calling.

Government

Daniel 7:27 promises rulership to the saints in God's government, which is why an essential decision in our lives revolves around government. Government is the overriding issue in the Bible. Who will rule in our lives, God or Satan? It is that simple.

Israel rejected God's rule. When Israel desired a king, it was because they did not want God to rule them (I Samuel 8:7). Will we do the same? That is the critical issue that must be resolved in our lives. How can we reject God's rule? By insisting on being our own general—by putting ourselves, not God, at the forefront of the battles we fight every day. We simply do not allow Him to be our King and Commander.

The examples of the first and second Adam prove how vital the subject of government is. In the Garden of Eden, the test that Adam and Eve failed was the test of government. To whose rule would they submit—God's or Satan's? The Devil's temptation of Christ (Matthew 4; Luke 4) was the same test: Would He submit to God's or Satan's government? Jesus passed the test, rejecting Satan's offers for personal gain. Because God neither changes nor varies, He is a God of patterns. We, then, have the same test to pass. To which government will we submit?

There is a direct connection between prayer and submission to God's government. When we pray, we are prostrating ourselves before Him, calling on His great name, and recognizing His power, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability, wisdom, mercy, and grace. Interestingly, Jesus called the Temple, in which God dwelt, "a house of prayer" (Luke 19:46). We now are temples of His Holy Spirit in which He dwells (I Corinthians 3:16), so we, too, should be houses of prayer.

Prayer is a spiritual blessing God gives to us as a major tool for growth. Prayer at any time is an exercise in humbling ourselves, as it forces us to admit our humanity, inadequacy, dependence, and need. It is an admission that we are not self-sufficient. Those who humble themselves before His sovereignty are those to whom He gives His attention (Isaiah 66:2).

We desperately need a vital relationship with God and all that He will give to us by His grace to achieve His purpose for us. His gifts flow to the humble because they will submit to His government and His will, and for that reason, God will withhold no good gift from them (Romans 8:32; Psalm 84:11). By prayer, and especially by striving to pray always, we are submitting every thought, word, and action to the scrutiny and governance of the great God.

The Israelites did not want God to rule their lives directly; they did not want to submit to His rule. If we are not striving to pray always, we are making the same mistake. Their decision put them in the

position of having to fight their own battles. If we make the same mistake, we get the same results—but worse. Why would God want anyone in His eternal Family who demonstrates an unwillingness to submit to His governance on every occasion?

Fiery Darts

When writing about putting on "the whole armor of God" in Ephesians 6, Paul begins to conclude the passage by repeating the concepts in Luke 21:36—praying always and watching (verse 18). He says in verse 16: ". . . above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one."

Albert Barnes' *New Testament Commentary* explains these fiery darts:

Paul here refers, probably, to the temptations of the great adversary, which are like fiery darts; or those furious suggestions of evil, and excitements to sin, which he may throw into the mind like fiery darts. They are blasphemous thoughts, unbelief, sudden temptation to do wrong, or thoughts that wound and torment the soul. In regard to them, we may observe:

- (1) that they come suddenly, like arrows sped from a bow;
- (2) they come from unexpected quarters, like arrows shot suddenly from an enemy in ambush;
- (3) they pierce, and penetrate, and torment the soul, as arrows would that are on fire;
- (4) they set the soul on fire, and enkindle the worst passions, as fiery darts do a ship or camp against which they are sent.

What happens when these fiery darts hit their target? The answer appears in James 1:13-15 (Contemporary English Version, CEV):

Don't blame God when you are tempted! God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn't use evil to tempt others. We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead.

As Barnes says, these darts "enkindle the worst passions," or as James says, "our desires." Actually, these darts have been flying since the day we were born, doing their damage. Where is it better for us to deal with these darts: at the point of the shield or after they have hit their mark? Of course, at the shield!

II Samuel 22:31 tells us what our shield is: "As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him" (see also Genesis 15:1; Psalm 33:20; Proverbs 2:7). *We* are not the shield. *Our faith* is not the shield. **God** is the shield, using the same faith Jesus Christ had. If we let Him, God will protect us in our battles.

How do we erect this "shield of faith?" Notice these verses:

Matthew 17:19-21: Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

Psalm 18:30 (CEV): Your way is perfect, Lord, and your word is correct. You are a shield for those who run to you for help.

Along with fasting, Christ gives prayer as one of the antidotes to unbelief. David says that running to God for help, which striving to pray always is the essence of, will allow Him to be our shield, our source of power and strength (II Corinthians 3:5; 4:7).

Notice the first part of Matthew 26:41 from the *New Life Bible*: "Watch and pray so that you will not be tempted. . . ." Jesus repeats the instruction in Luke 21:36 but shows that the same process will build the shield of faith to protect us from the fiery darts of temptation.

Peace!

Notice that the shield mentioned in Ephesians 6:16 can quench *all* the fiery darts—not some, not most, but *all*. Consider the great peace we would have if *none* of Satan's fiery darts *ever* reached their intended target! This sheds light on why Christ says in Matthew 11:30: "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." We know He used every spiritual tool God makes available.

Consider the great peace that would fall on the battlefield that is our minds if God were intercepting all these fiery darts. Psalm 119:165 says, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble."

What does "greatpeace" mean? "Peace" automatically suggests an absence of war, no battling, no fighting. Under temptation, a battle always rages, even if we are winning. In such a case, no peace exists, much less "great peace." As an illustration, initially, the U.S. in Iraq won every battle handily, but it was still war. The spiritual war we fight is caused by temptation from Satan, our human nature, and the world. Remove temptation, and war stops. What remains is great peace.

How do we achieve not just peace, but "great peace"? The last half of Psalm 119:165 tells us: "*nothing* causes them to stumble." What causes a human to stumble? Temptation! This means that we have to be sheltered from it. The *American Standard Version* renders this phrase, "they have no occasion of stumbling," *Young's Literal Translation* puts it as "they have no stumbling-block," and the *Rotherham's Emphasized Bible* reads, "nothing to make them stumble." All of these renderings mean that not even the opportunity to stumble is presented. Other scriptures mention protection from stumbling:

Psalm 121:3 (NLT): He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber.

I John 2:10: He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him.

Jude 24: Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. . . .

God through the gift of His Holy Spirit is the only power in the universe that can accomplish such a feat. If God does not place that shield around us, we have no hope of success. Alone, we are powerless in the face of temptation. We overcome it not by our strength, but by God's power, the shield of faith (I John 5:4) given to us as His gift (Ephesians 2:8). It is our only sure defense.

To acknowledge God and to pray always are to be in alignment with one of Christ's most basic principles, a principle found in Matthew 6:33—to "seek first the kingdom of God" in all things. Praying always is stepping out in faith, believing that if we seek God *first*, He will add *all* the things we need (Philippians 4:19), including the strength to overcome, to finish this journey, and to enter His Kingdom.

When faced with the myriad decisions we have to make during each day, if we are not acknowledging God's presence, we have placed ourselves in the position of fighting our battles on our own. Israel made the same mistake, choosing the hard road in their fight, one littered with bodies. We probably all know of some bodies that now litter the spiritual road we have walked. We veterans carry scars from the battles we have lost.

Skirmishes

Our battles to overcome are more like skirmishes than battles. In fact, we experience our most severe temptations and trials in everyday events like eating, conducting business affairs, or relating to others in the family or community. Luke 16:10 acknowledges this: "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much."

What better way to win those little skirmishes than to have an invincible Champion, God, in the van of the battle? Because these skirmishes are in the myriad of details we deal with every day, only striving to pray always during the day gives us that unyielding first line of defense.

Our deceitful human nature has in its arsenal countless ways, reasons, and excuses to avoid confronting the real issue of life—overcoming and allowing God to form and shape us into His image. Just bringing God into the picture unleashes forces that will not only help us to overcome, but will also protect us from the pitfalls that litter our path (Psalm 91:12). It is this striving to pray always that a Laodicean naturally avoids because he feels no need.

Jesus says in Matthew 26:41, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates says the Greek word behind *weak* means "without strength, powerless." "Weak" implies *little* strength, while "without strength, powerless" suggests *no* strength. The difference is significant. God has all the strength, and we have none to fight spiritual battles of any kind. Praying always gives us access to the only strength that works—God's.

In Luke 21:36, Christ tells us who will be counted worthy to escape the troubles ahead and to stand before Him in God's Kingdom. It will be those who depend on God (praying always) to win (overcome) the battles we face. His instruction looks simple, yet as we have seen, implementing it

has far-reaching consequences in every area of our lives. Our Savior presents us with the two "tickets"—the two vital tools—we will need to escape to a place of safety and be with Christ in God's Kingdom. Will we now pay the required price of those two tickets—to put them into practice?