

Praying Always (Part Three)

by Pat Higgins

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The previous articles established the importance of the two subjects of Luke 21:36, watching—giving careful attention to overcoming—and praying always. This verse ties these two subjects together and inextricably links the job (overcoming) with the tool to build the faith necessary to do that job (praying always). Before seeing how to apply this information, we need some background about the spiritual battle we face.

Notice Jesus' words in Matthew 11:30: "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Have we found the Christian way either easy or light? In contrast, most of us seem to stagger from trial to trial!

Consider the following questions: If it is God's will that we be saved and grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ—which it is (I Timothy 2:4; II Peter 3:18)—why is it so hard? If God is working with us—which He is (Philippians 2:13)—should we not be more successful? Most of us have some sin or sins that so plague us that we fail miserably to overcome time after time. So, if our salvation is God's will, what is the problem? Why can we not be more successful in overcoming?

Is Christ just exaggerating, speaking in hyperbole, or is He telling it like it can be? Because Christ does not lie, the latter is true. The problem, then, must be with us. Where are we falling short? What are we missing in our efforts to overcome?

One answer is that spiritual Israelites are making the same mistake as their forefathers, the people of physical Israel. Because the Old Testament was written to teach spiritual lessons to those under the New Covenant (I Corinthians 10:11), some interesting implications arise when we apply the examples spiritually.

Notice God's promise in Deuteronomy 1:30: "He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes." God promises to fight Israel's physical battles for them. Egypt's destruction through the ten plagues is an extraordinary example of how God supernaturally fights for His people.

Israel was a slave people in Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth at the time. However, as powerful as Egypt was, it was never a match for God, as He demonstrated by devastating it through supernatural occurrences. God freed Israel without them "firing a shot," as it were. God did the heavy lifting of freeing them from Egypt. Israel had only to walk out. That was it!

In the Exodus from Egypt, not one Israelite had to do physical battle and risk injury, maiming, or death. Could our battle against our Egypt be easier by doing the same, single requirement—that we walk, that is, walk with God? All Israel had to do was flee, walk away from Egypt, a type of sin (I Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; I Timothy 6:11; II Timothy 2:22).

A Promise

Another promise from God along the same lines can be found in Exodus 23:20-30:

Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then ***I will*** be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and ***I will*** cut them off. You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars. So you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And ***I will*** take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; ***I will*** fulfill the number of your days. ***I will*** send My fear before you, ***I will*** cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And ***I will*** send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. ***I will*** not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little ***I will*** drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. (Emphasis ours.)

God offered to play a major role in driving out the inhabitants of the Promised Land: "I will cut them off." At this point, there is no mention of killing the enemy. There would be little need to shed much of their own blood because of God's promises to fight on their behalf. To receive this supernatural help, God gave a condition—obedience. The Israelites had to obey Him (verse 22) and walk in His ways.

Forty years and mostly negative experiences later, Numbers 33:50-53, 55 describes an entirely different picture of Israel's conquest of the land than the one given in Exodus 23:20-30. The people disobeyed and forfeited much of the supernatural help God had offered. Israel now had to use a great deal of their own strength, rather than God's, to do the driving out.

Israel did not obey—they did not submit to God's rule—because they did not believe just how good God is and how much He loved them (Psalm 78:22). Without that faith, they did not have the power to overcome what they could see versus what God said and thus be victorious (I John 5:4).

II Chronicles 16:9 is another example of the fruits of faithlessness: "The Lord's eyes scan the whole world to find those whose hearts are committed to him and to strengthen them. You [Asa] acted foolishly in this matter. So from now on, you will have to fight wars" (God's Word). Are we making the same mistake, having to fight our own battles because we are not faithful and not praying enough to have the right kind of faith (Matthew 17:19-21)?

Even though the wandering Israelites had to fight many of their own battles, God still worked with them, still performed miracles for them, still used them to accomplish His purposes. They were still His people. They had just chosen the more difficult path. Many suffered and died along the way, but it did not have to be that way. It was the result of a bad choice or a series of bad choices. Conquering the Promised Land did not have to be as difficult and bloody a path as they chose. God would have taken care of much of that for them, but instead they chose to fight the battles themselves. They chose the hard way instead of the easy way.

Are we acting foolishly and making the same choices spiritually that they did physically? After all, as the saying goes, the acorn does not fall far from the tree. Most of us are Israelites physically and all of us are Israelites spiritually (Romans 9:6-8). We are cut from the same bolt of cloth. God promised to help physical Israel in its battles, and we can be sure that God will provide that same help to spiritual Israelites in their battles—if *they let Him*. Romans 12:2 gives the same sense: "Don't be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him" (Contemporary English Version).

The Battlefield

Are we letting Him help us? How do we go about getting out of God's way—obeying Him, submitting to His rule—so that He can help us fight our battles? Christ gives us an answer in Luke 21:36: "pray always." Whether we are "praying always" or not "praying always" clearly shows on whom we are relying in our fight. The extent of our overcoming, the outcome or fruit of our spiritual battles, will tell the tale.

If we are going throughout our day with almost no thought of God, as it is all too easy to do, then who is doing battle with all the ungodly influences that are bombarding us? Isaiah 65:2 gives an answer: "I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts." For whatever time during our day we are not conscious of God, we are walking "according to [our] own thoughts," a way that God labels as "not good"! It is not good because we are fighting on our own, having to resort to our human ways and means. II Corinthians 10:3-4 tells us we are not to fight this way: "We are human, but we don't wage war with human plans and methods. We use God's mighty weapons, not mere worldly weapons, to knock down the Devil's strongholds" (New Living Translation).

Psalms 18:2 makes an interesting point: "You are my mighty rock, my fortress, my protector, the rock where I am safe, my shield, my powerful weapon, and my place of shelter" (Contemporary English Version, CEV). God was David's very "powerful weapon." Are we making full use of Him in our spiritual battles? Can we say we are if He is not in the forefront of every battle? Where does that battle take place? In our minds. Our battles are not physical, but rage in our minds, which contain the thoughts, philosophies, and ideas that motivate our behavior.

Since the day we were born, Satan's influences have assailed us, and through them, before our conversion, he was molding our minds into his image. Who will be able to change that? Who will fight the battle necessary to conquer our evil nature sold under sin? Who will free us just as God freed Israel in Egypt? Paul answers in Romans 7:24-25: "O unhappy and pitiable and wretched man that I am! Who will release and deliver me from [the shackles of] this body of death? O thank God! [He will!] through Jesus Christ (the Anointed One) our Lord!" (*The Amplified Bible*).

Enemies

Who will conquer our enemies? Romans 8:37 tells us: "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." Paul answers that God and Christ will conquer our enemies! Our most determined enemy is, of course, Satan. Another foe is the world under the influence of Satan, a society full of distractions designed by the Devil to take our minds off God at every step. Finally, our own nature pulls us away from God because Satan has influenced it to do just that since the day we were born.

How are we to overcome these enemies? Do we overcome them or does God? Where does David look for help when faced with his mortal enemies? He answers this in many places (Psalm 44:5, 7; 60:12; 143:9, 12), but notice Psalm 17:8-9: "Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings, from the wicked who oppress me, from my deadly enemies who surround me." Our enemies are more deadly than David's because they can kill us eternally, not just physically.

In the following two passages, reminiscent of the "I will" statements in Exodus 23:20-30, notice who is fighting these spiritual battles with our enemies:

Psalm 37:5-6: "Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and **He shall** bring it to pass. **He shall** bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday."

Philippians 2:13: ". . . for **it is God** who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

Are we taking advantage of the power and weapons God offers to us in the fight against our enemies, to win the battle for our minds?

Weapons of War

In Psalm 56:9, David informs us about one of the weapons he used against his enemies: "When I cry out to You, then my enemies will turn back; this I know, because God is for me." David used prayer, "when I cry out." It was only "then" that God turned back his enemies.

David expected God's help to send his enemies into retreat so that he would not have to do all the fighting. God would do much of it for him. Why? God was for him. David believed in how much God loved him, a wholehearted love that Jesus reveals in John 17:23. Are we like David? Do we believe God loves us that much?

David was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). We should follow his example and use the weapon that worked for him—prayer. Christ concurs with David's belief in God's desire to protect us and send our enemies into retreat:

» **Matthew 6:13** (*The Bible in Basic English*): "And let us not be put to the test, but keep us safe from the Evil One."

» **Luke 11:4** (*Revised English Bible*): "And forgive us our sins, for we too forgive all who have done us wrong. And do not put us to the test."

» **Luke 22:40:** "When He came to the place, He said to them, 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation.'"

» **Luke 22:46** (William Barclay's translation): "Why are you sleeping?" he said to them. "Up and pray that you may not have to face the ordeal of temptation!"

These verses are not asking for success to overcome but rather that He not allow temptations or trials to reach us. We are, in our flesh, too feeble and weak for the task without the help of God (Romans 8:26). The verses above show that prayer can protect us from temptation, quenching the fiery darts of

Satan *before* they ever get near their target. Even Jesus initially asked God to take away His trial in Luke 22:42: "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." We can thank God that Christ chose to put our welfare above His physical life and submitted to His part in God's plan for our salvation.

What weapons are we to use in this battle against our enemies? Simply, God Himself, as Psalm 18:2 ("my powerful weapon") shows. Prayer allows God to become our weapon, one we desperately need.

Our Need

All of us should be aware of just how inadequate we are to accomplish the task of overcoming and growing in the way God is showing us. If we are not deeply aware of this need, we will never turn to God in the first place. We will not continuously turn to Him, thinking like the Laodiceans that we need nothing—we have all we need within ourselves.

Remember Peter, who confidently boasted that, unlike others, he would never desert Christ (Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29). Then, shortly thereafter he grossly failed in a way that should be a sobering lesson to us all (Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72). One principle we can take from this is that the secret to overcoming lies largely in realizing our powerlessness and acknowledging it before God.

Do we believe Christ when He tells us in John 15:5, "for without Me you can do nothing?" Without help from a Source greater than ourselves, we can do nothing of a true, godly, spiritual nature that could ever meet God's standards (Isaiah 64:6). We are far short of the mark. It is time to turn to God with all that is in us (Deuteronomy 10:12). We cannot just play church at this time in history. Judgment is now on us (I Peter 4:17), and if we fail, there never will be a greater failure.

However, if we turn to God with all our heart—and prayer is a major part of that process—He promises that He will hear from heaven and respond: ". . . if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14). This method of healing the land applies equally to healing the church today.

How do we access the power from God to humble ourselves? How do we overcome? How do we avoid the attitude of "I can do this myself"? Luke 21:36 has the answer—striving to pray at all times. It brings God onto the battlefield that is our mind, putting Him at the front of every skirmish we fight. For where He fights as our weapon, there can be only success against our enemies.

Praying always or at all times is an overlooked key to overcoming all of our enemies—Satan, the world, and our human nature. It may be more accurate to say that, while it is the most vital key to overcoming, it is also the most underused. Many overlook the importance of prayer as the *primary* tool we have been given to accomplish "job one"—overcoming. We may be depending too much on our will rather than on the power of our great God. Luke 21:36 emphasizes the importance of careful attention to overcoming and praying always, the latter needed to build the faith needed to accomplish the former.

By striving to pray always, we will be able to look to God with confidence and repeat Psalm 55:18: "I am attacked from all sides, but *you will* rescue me unharmed by the battle" (CEV, emphasis ours).

Now that we have identified praying always as a primary tool for overcoming, why does it work?
That will be the subject of Part Four.