

Praying Always (Part Two)

by Pat Higgins

Forerunner, July 2007

In Luke 21:36, our Savior provides us with the two tickets we need—*watching* (careful, vigilant attention to overcoming our nature) and *praying always*—to be accounted worthy to escape the troubles at the close of this age and to enter the Kingdom of God. These two activities are pillars that support the foundation on which our Christian lives rest during these end times.

How important are these two pillars? Exactly what is Christ instructing us to do as we encounter the end of an age?

In Luke 21:36, when Christ says, "Watch," He is calling for us to scrutinize our lives in order to change them. We are not just to note the problems we see but to overcome them. How important is it to overcome? If God mentioning something twice establishes it (Genesis 41:32), how significant is a subject when He mentions it *fifteen times*? Not fifteen times throughout the whole Bible but in just one book! And not in just any book, but a book of special significance to us, one about the end time—Revelation!

In this end-time message, Christ says seven times, "I know your works" (Revelation 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). What are works? They are simply the results of our efforts in overcoming, both the failures and successes. Jesus is saying, "I know the level of your overcoming." Then, for each church—whether era, group, or attitude—He comments on that effort. Overcoming is highlighted another seven times (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), as Christ ends each of His critiques with a promise that begins, "To him who overcomes. . . ." As an exclamation point, Christ warns us seven times, a number signifying completeness, to heed what He says to *all* these churches (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Finally, in Revelation 21:7, Christ addresses overcoming a fifteenth time. He makes a promise to those who successfully overcome: "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son."

Revelation shows us that "Job One" for a Christian is overcoming, especially for someone living at the end time. This is the message in Luke 21:36 also: We have to overcome to be with Him in God's Kingdom. Salvation itself hinges on our cooperation with Him in overcoming (Matthew 25:30).

The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) demonstrates the importance of overcoming. The difference between the wise and foolish virgins is their supplies of oil. While water represents the power of God's Holy Spirit to cleanse, oil represents its power to work, to do good. Thus, the difference between the virgins is their good works ("I know your works"), how much they overcame their selfish human natures by acting in love toward God and man.

Both groups had oil, but the foolish virgins did not have *enough* for the unexpectedly long delay (Luke 21:34-35). When the cry went out, their lamps were still burning but sputtering and about to go out. They were not prepared for the long haul. They had not continued to overcome. They were not enduring to the end. Their oil—their good works, their overcoming—proved insufficient for the task. In this one point, they failed, and what a foolish failure it was!

Emphasizing the importance of Luke 21:36 and watching, Christ makes a specific promise to those living at the end who are watching, that is, successfully overcoming: "Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them" (Luke 12:37).

Conversely, considering the implications of John 17:3, Jesus gives a chilling judgment to the virgins who fail to overcome: "I do not know you" (Matthew 25:12).

How Important Is Prayer?

Coupled with watching and overcoming, the next subject that Jesus addresses in Luke 21:36 is prayer. To grasp just how important prayer is, notice the example of Daniel, one of the three most righteous men in the Bible, according to Ezekiel 14:14. Part of his story is in Daniel 6:7, 10:

All the governors of the kingdom, the administrators and satraps, the counselors and advisors, have consulted together to establish a royal statute and to make a firm decree, that whoever petitions any god or man for thirty days, except you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. . . . Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.

Daniel believed that prayer was so essential that he chose to risk his life to lions rather than lose contact with God for even a part of a day. We could say that he feared the Lion of Judah more than any physical lion. To him, prayer was a life-and-death issue. Is it to us? How many excuses would we have made to avoid those lions? What excuses do we make today to justify a lack of prayer?

Is anything more serious than a life-and-death issue? Because of the Bible's obviously high regard for Daniel, it is reasonable to assume that his attitude about prayer played a significant part in deserving the label of "righteous." Prayer, for us, becomes a *spiritual* life-and-death question, not just a physical one as Daniel faced.

Faith to Endure

If we do not have *enough* faith to endure to the end, we will not survive spiritually (Matthew 24:13). So, how do we increase that faith? How do we increase it to the level needed to ensure our survival? Without the answer, we face possible spiritual death.

The good news is that we have an answer, and we have had it for decades. Herbert W. Armstrong answers that very question in his booklet, "What is Faith?":

When Jesus walked the earth in human flesh, He possessed faith! . . .

Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul—all common, humble ordinary men themselves—all *had that power*, the same identical power Jesus had, *because they lived and walked close to God and were filled with the Holy Spirit!*

And we seem to lack that power today, not because God denies us that power, but *because we are so close to a modern, materialistic world*—our minds are so filled with

the *material* interests of this life; our minds and our hearts are *so far from God*; we are so out of touch with Him through lack of enough *time* spent in the study of His Word, and lack of enough of the right kind of surrendered, submissive, earnest and heart-rending prayer—and consequently, because we are *not filled* with the Holy Spirit! . . .

And let us remember, faith is the gift of God.

So many think that everything else that comes from God is His *gift*, but the faith required to *receive* these things is something we ourselves must somehow work up, or strain and strive for. But we have to just relax and trust God, even for the faith by which we receive everything else! (Ephesians 2:8.)

In Revelation 14:12 is a description of the *true* Church of this day. Those in this church have the faith of Jesus. Notice, the faith of Jesus! It is not just *our* faith in Him, but *His* faith—the very faith with which He performed His miracles—placed *in us* and *acting* in us.

How can you get it? Draw closer to God. Get to *know* God. Surrender *all the way* to Him, and *do* His will. And then pray. You get to *know* Him in prayer. We are too close to the *material* things. Through prayer, *much* more prayer, you can come closer to God and the *spiritual* things. And what a *happy, joyous* experience it is, once you have really done it!

What is his answer to a lack of faith? Prayer and surrender to God's will. Surrendering to His will is our act of overcoming our rebellious carnal nature. His answer, prayer and overcoming, is the same instruction Christ gives in Luke 21:36 to those of us living at the end time.

Building Faith

A lack of faith is a sign of a weak prayer life. Notice the proof of this in Matthew 17:19-21:

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast him 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."

He advises us how to address unbelief—prayer and fasting.

On a human level, how do we build trust, faith, and loyalty? Will we have faith in someone we do not know? Can we be loyal to a stranger? We build confidence in others through repeated contact with them over time—close and frequent communication. As we get to know them, to see them in action, to see their characters, we eventually reach a point where we can have trust and faith in them and in their behavior. Is it any different with God?

Prayer provides the repeated and continual contact with God that we need to get to know Him. This sets in motion the process that will lead to faith, to God being willing to give us the gift of faith

(Ephesians 2:8). The prayerful person becomes the faithful person, not the other way around. Hebrews 11:6 illustrates this point: "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."

Notice the condition in this verse: God is not the rewarder of *everyone*, but "of those who diligently seek Him." The gift of living faith comes from diligently, actively seeking Him, consistently and with zeal. Prayer is a major tool in seeking God, along with study, fasting, and using the knowledge gained to conform to His will—practical Christian living and overcoming. Those who prove their diligence by doing these things are the ones rewarded with the faith to overcome (I John 5:4).

The Sabbath is an external sign that identifies God's people (Exodus 31:13, 17). Nevertheless, others not in God's true church observe it. Is there another sign—a less visible one—that perhaps only God sees? Yes, and Zechariah 13:9 shows it is prayer: "They will pray in my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'You are my people,' and they will reply, 'You, Lord, are our God!'" (Contemporary English Version).

Those with a weak prayer life have weak faith (Matthew 17:19-21). Those with weak faith are sinful (Romans 14:23) and are promised death (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23). That is just how important earnest prayer is as part of a solid foundation, especially during the end time. As I Peter 4:7 instructs, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers."

Faith's Role

Consider the connection the apostle John makes in I John 5:4-5: "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

How do we overcome? John writes that our victory comes through belief, the power of faith—God's gift. How do we build that faith to the needed levels? As we saw in Matthew 17:19-21, we do it by prayer and fasting.

Whether His people would have enough faith to overcome, to have a sufficient supply of oil in their lamps, is an issue Christ knew would be critical as the world neared the end of the age. In Luke 18:8, Christ looked down the corridors of time to the period of His return and wondered, "Will I really find faith on the earth?" Are we praying enough in both quality and quantity to build the faith that God is seeking at the end, the faith He knows we need both to overcome and to survive the great trials of the day?

We can now realize the power of Christ's message in Luke 21:36. To overcome, we need faith. To have and show faith, we need prayer. God requires works on our part, the works of prayer and overcoming. However, the power comes only from God and His gift of faith.

Overcoming and prayer are absolute requirements for those living at the end. They are the two tickets we must have to be among those counted worthy to escape and enter God's Kingdom. Without both of these requirements in abundance, we will not be granted either blessing.

Praying Always

While prayer is important, notice that in Luke 21:36, Jesus does not use just the word "pray" but the phrase "pray *always*." Why is this significant?

As we begin to answer this question, it is good to know that the word "always" is a translation of three Greek words. A literal translation of those three words, *en pantí kairoó*, would be "in all times," and many Bible translations have chosen to use similar wording, such as "at all times." Other versions may use "all the time," while some use words like "constant" and "constantly." Weymouth's New Testament goes so far as to read, "every moment."

Christ is speaking, not just about prayer, but also about the frequency of our prayers. How often are we in contact with God throughout our day? Do we give Him some time in the morning or evening, but the rest of the day He is in none, or very few, of our thoughts? Doing so places us in very dangerous company (Psalm 10:4).

Laodiceans have lukewarm relationships with God, thus Christ has to say to them in Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." He calls for them to rekindle the relationship. Making the first move, He suggests what friends who have a close relationship do—they share a meal. What happens at a meal with friends? Conversation, which is what prayer is. Humans, whether with people or with God, build their relationships the same way: They talk to each other—a lot.

We can see why Christ tells those living at the end, when Laodiceanism reigns, that we have to overcome and pray always. Generally, the relationship between God and the Christian is weak and must be rebuilt, requiring considerable conversation, prayer, at all times of the day.

If we observed a marriage in which the husband and wife only mumbled to each other a little in the morning and/or a little at night, we would conclude that that relationship was in trouble. Our God who sees all knows the same thing when He experiences it.

How does a Christian "pray always"? In one of Herbert W. Armstrong's radio broadcasts on the book of Hebrews, he says, paraphrased, "You need to be in contact with God every hour!" I Thessalonians 5:17 instructs, "Pray without ceasing." Hebrews 13:15 urges us to offer prayer to God "continually." God's purpose for us requires a great deal of contact with Him.

A speaker once reported that he heard Herbert Armstrong say that he always tried to be aware that he was in God's presence and that he was constantly asking God for help. It is reported that it was common for him to pray 30 or 40 times a day—short prayers asking for help with a decision, in counseling a person, in preparing an article or sermon, etc.

Notice the advice he gave church members in the October 1957 *Good News*:

You must go to a private place, alone with God, and have long talks with Him—yes, every day! Unburden your heart to Him. Take all your problems, your interests, your plans, your troubles to Him. Talk over *everything* with Him, continually. Then, even when going about your work—when walking down the street—when driving your car, or wherever you are or whatever you do, talk with God as you work or as you drive or

walk along. Go to a private place, and kneel in prayer (on both knees) as often as you can, and at least once every day. But talk with God often in between. Pray without ceasing!

Are we following that good advice? Herbert Armstrong followed the advice of Jesus Christ in Luke 21:36 to "pray always" or to "pray at all times." Are we always praying? It is those who are overcoming and praying *always*, at all times of the day and night, that will be counted worthy to escape the end-time troubles and to stand before the Son of Man in God's Kingdom.

Now that we have established what Christ was actually saying in Luke 21:36—and why it is important—the next question becomes, "How do we apply this information?" The next article will begin to provide the answer.