

January 29, 2012

Psalm 5:1-3 / Psalm 62:1-8 / Romans 8:26-27 / I Samuel 1:1-18
Prayer - The Saints Greatest Privilege

It wasn't just Terri Feralio's request on New Year's Day (the day we started The Lord's Watch) asking for another sermon on prayer that made me plan at that time to schedule another follow-up sermon on prayer today.

It was also because I KNEW that this far into The Lord's Watch, some of you would probably have experienced two things. Both the unspeakable joy AND the distracting struggles that confront nearly everyone who sets their heart to praying for significant periods of time / on a scheduled basis / in a disciplined fashion (and not just when we "feel like it").

When someone seriously sets their heart to pray, they will usually come to experience those two things. Times in prayer that are emotionally uplifting and even euphoric / as well as other times in prayer where we find ourselves mentally distracted / and feeling emotion-ally cold / or distant from God / and struggling to focus / and interrupted by odd and intrusive thoughts that virtually come out of nowhere!

Sometimes we can even find ourselves struggling NOT to drift off into sleep -- like the disciples actually did when they were asked by Jesus to watch and pray (for just one hour) in the Garden on the night of His arrest.

And what I want to tell you today, is that if you have experienced any of those things -- you're not alone! As C. S. Lewis pointed out, prayer is so absolutely vital and indispensable to the success of any Christian endeavor, that Satan will do nearly anything to keep us from praying.

It's so instrumental to our own spiritual development / and so powerful in bringing forth fruit for God's kingdom / that we can just about guarantee that **AT SOME POINT** there will some sort of spiritual backlash which seeks to discourage us and wear down our resolve to pray.

And the opposition is not just Satanic in origin. The flesh (or our sinful

nature) also rises up to resist and rebel against the establishment of an earnestly prayerful spirit within us / or within any sector of the church.

You see, earnest and kingdom-focused prayer (and not just intercessory prayer for the needs of others) automatically brings us into the front lines of the fray of spiritual warfare. And I don't say that to scare anyone off!

I say it to encourage you / and prepare you / and help you to understand what's going on when you find yourself being tempted to lay prayer aside for much lesser things or to think it's not all that important.

Earnest, kingdom-focused prayer, where we strive to pray for those things God wants to bring about in our lives / in the church / and in the world / is the place where the Spirit-birthed self (the self that God is making into the image of Christ) gets to feed on the rich oxygen of the Holy Spirit's presence.

Yet when it does, the old self (or the sinful self) gets choked out and denied that which it needs to feed on and live. And when that happens, the old self (with its insatiable appetite for sin) doesn't take kindly to being denied the "food" it needs to survive. So, like any living entity, it rebels against being starved, weakened or put to death!

That's why many of the most prayerful saints throughout history have spoken of the spiritual battle which begins and must be fought whenever one becomes serious about this matter of prayer.

That's why they counsel us (from their own personal experience) about the need to be disciplined / and committed / and watchful / and to fight the good fight / and to persevere in prayer / especially when those forces that oppose it, seek to get us to lay it aside.

Like C. S. Lewis, Steve Brown, in his book, "Approaching God - How To Pray," gives us this wise advice: ***"The mere act of prayer is abhorrent to the forces of evil, and you will find that there will be all sorts of 'hindrances'--depression, doubt, frustrations, and so on. And many of those hindrances will have the smell of sulfur smoke about them. But...even if Satan didn't***

exist (or you don't believe that he exists) there is plenty in you to keep you from praying... / There is... the natural frustration that follows a serious commitment to pray (because) prayer is not easy. It requires time, effort and commitment. There will be times when you think God has gone on vacation, that your prayers will never bear fruit, and that it's all useless... For these reasons and more, it is important when we decide to be committed to prayer, that we...find ways to keep on keeping on in the dark, with the things which we became committed to in the light."

And likewise, E. M. Bounds in his book "The Necessity of Prayer" writes:

"It cannot be said too often that the life of a Christian is warfare, an intense conflict, a life-long contest. It is a battle fought against invisible foes who are ever alert and seeking to entrap, deceive, and ruin the souls of men. The Bible calls us to life, not a picnic or holiday... It entails effort, wrestling, and struggling... It is no primrose path... From start to finish it is war."

In fact, he concludes his thought by saying:"It is just at this point in today's Christianity that one may find its greatest defect. [For today] There is little or nothing of the soldier element in it. The discipline, self-denial, willing-ness to endure hardship and determination so prominent in a soldiers life -- are lacking. Yet the Christian life is warfare, all the way."

I believe they're both right. And, therefore, what I'd like to do today, is give you helpful insights on how to enter into prayer / and persevere in prayer / until your life becomes a prayer-filled and prayer-saturated life -- knowing as we do that it is God's will that we, **"Pray without ceasing"** (I Thess. 5:17) / **"Pray in the Spirit on all occasions"** (Eph. 6:18) / and as Jesus Himself told us: **"Pray always and never give up"** (Luke 18:1).

Something He told us because He was well aware of our struggle to pray. As He told the disciples, who couldn't even stay awake for one hour to pray: **"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."**

So, because prayer engages us in the ever-present battle with, "the world, the flesh, and the devil," I'd like to offer some insights from Scripture that can help us persevere through / and move beyond / the hindrances to the prayer-saturated life God calls us to commit ourselves to.

What are they? The **FIRST** comes from Psalm 27, where David gives us the primary purpose and the ultimate reason for prayer. In v. 4, he tells us: ***"One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek Him in His temple."*** And he basically repeats the same thing in vv. 7-8 where he says: ***"My heart says of you, 'Seek His face!' Your face, O LORD, will I seek."***

So what is the primary purpose of prayer? It's to seek to come into the presence of God / and spend time with Him / that we might get to know Him better. / It's to gaze upon Him with the eyes of faith / and be captivated by the beauty of all He is / that we might learn to adore Him. / It's to seek Him and desire Him and yearn for Him MORE than anything we might ask for from Him in that time of prayer.

You see, too often our desires for the things we want, are actually more intense than our desires for the God who gives them to us. We make the common mistake of desiring the gift, more than the Gift-giver.

And David here offers us a helpful corrective when he says: ***"ONE thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: That I may dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord..."*** That is, the place where He had chosen for His Name, and His glory to dwell. The place where His presence was known to dwell.

And notice he does not say his desire is to get things from Him / or get Him to do what he wants. He doesn't have the "Santa Claus image of God" that's so prevalent in our day. / He simply wants GOD / and yearns above all else to spend time with HIM.

It's a concept driven home very clearly in a prayer I once read. It went like this: ***"If I seek you only that I may enjoy the pleasures of heaven, bar me from it; and if I seek you only to escape the torments of hell, burn me in it; but if I seek you only that I may have you, then of your goodness, give me what I ask."***

David essentially says the same thing: ***"I only want only ONE thing: You and You alone."*** It's no wonder he was called, ***"a man after God's own heart."***

So what is our primary purpose and pursuit to be in prayer? To seek, with all our heart, the presence or face of God. **"My HEART says of You," writes David, 'Seek His Face!'** (exclamation point!) / And David obeys the command and yearning of his heart and does what his heart is telling him to do: **"Your Face, O LORD, I will seek."**

And what is the "face" of God? It's not a physical face, obviously, since God is a Spirit, and has no body or parts, as Scripture tells us and the Westminster Confession affirms. **"There is but one living and true God, who is in-finite in being and perfection; a most pure spirit, invisible & without body, parts, or passions..."**

So what is God's "face"? The term "face" ("panim" in the Hebrew / or "prosopon" in the Greek) when used in regard to God, means, "to be as close to Him as one could be -- in His immediate presence in a unique, intimate, and special way."

In fact, maybe the best way to see it is in the light of God being our Father / and us being His children. For then this phrase comes alive. In that case it paints for us the picture of a little child -- a little boy or a little girl -- running throughout the house seeking and then finding their dad.

A father whom they know delights to spend time with them / and smiles when he sees them come through the door / and holds out his arms for them / and picks them up when they run over to him / and squeezes them cheek to cheek / as they both laugh and stare into each others in the eyes only inches away.

That's what it means to, **"Seek His Face."** It means to come into God's blessed presence -- not so much to get something from Him -- but simply because we want to be with Him / and spend time with Him / and be near to Him or close to Him in that special and intimate way.

And yes, I know the biblical doctrine of "God's omnipresent." I know He is "in all places at all times" (as Psalm 139 assures us). Yet Teresa of Avilla expressed this concept of our need to come into the presence of the ever-present One as well as anyone could when she said: **"We are always in the presence of God; yet it seems to me that those who pray are in His presence in a very**

different way." Tozer called it the difference between God's omnipresence and His manifest presence.

Only when we see prayer that way, as an opportunity to spend time with our heavenly Father (who loves us more than we could ever love ourselves and delights to be with us) does prayer become a restful and joyful activity, rather than a burdensome, dutiful, obligation.

Sometimes prayer is simply the sigh of one resting in God's presence. In fact, sometimes it is even falling asleep in His presence, like a child who runs to its parents, arms outstretched and asking to be picked up and carried after a long exhausting day, and then falls asleep on their shoulder with his or her arms wrapped around mom or dad's neck. Where better to fall asleep than in God presence?!

Which brings me to the **SECOND** thing I need to share with you. The importance of believing the Gospel -- all over again -- every time we seek to enter the presence of our holy God.

When I struggle and fail and fall / and the guilt of my sin stings my conscience / and makes me think that God will not receive me, or listen to my prayers / or ever want to hear from me again / it's only the promises of the Gospel that assure me that the truth is far different from that / and that nothing will ever cause my Father to forsake me and turn me away.

It's the Gospel that promises me I can come, even if when I come, I'm as filthy as the prodigal son returning in his dirty, tattered, smelly rags.

That's what makes the Gospel so precious. It not only calls to us / and draws us with its echo's of love / and saves us / it also makes intimate communion with God possible, no matter how badly we fail. / For it beats back those condemning thoughts / and dismantles those false notions that we're too far gone to return. And by doing so, it keeps us coming back, making a prayer-filled life possible.

It's the Gospel / and the Gospel alone / that assures us that when we seek to enter the Holy of Holies of God's presence in prayer, He sees us coming from

afar / and rushes to embrace us / even if we are dirtied by sin / because when He sees us, all He sees is the spotlessly clean robes of Christ's righteousness (even though underneath those robes the stains of our sin still cling to our body).

Even though I'm a sinner / and always will be / and I continue to fail so often - - sometimes even while I'm praying! -- when God sees me getting down on my knees / coming to Him in prayer / He receives me just as He did Jesus himself when He went off into the wilderness to pray / or kneeled to pray on the Mount of Transfiguration / or knelt to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His crucifixion.

Because of CHRIST I am given the same welcome Jesus received with the Father. And knowing that frees me / and gives me BOTH the confidence and the desire and the yearning to return as much as I can to be in His presence in prayer.

That's the beauty of the Gospel. It promises me that God's pardon is mine. / That I have His full acceptance. / That forgiveness and a welcoming Father always awaits me, when I come confessing my sin and seeking both Him, and it, by faith. It's the Gospel that makes me want to come -- drawn by the knowledge and pledge and assurance of His grace.

As Richard Lovelace rightly points out: ***"Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many... are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. [Yet] Few know enough to start each day with a thorough-going stand upon Luther's platform [the Gospel platform]: 'You are accepted,' looking outward in faith and claiming the righteousness of Christ [the perfect righteousness of another] as the only ground for their acceptance [with God], and relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude."***

You have to do it, my friends. You cannot go deep in prayer / or plumb the depths of your soul / or expose to God the darkness that often dwells deep within (so the light of His countenance can shine upon it and like the sun, dry it up like mold) -- if you are NOT convinced by the Gospel -- that your forgiveness / and a righteousness acceptable to God / and thus your acceptance with the Father / has already been secured for you, by Jesus.

When doubt and sin assail / and the guilt of failure and shame make it hard to think you could ever go to God in prayer / remember what the Gospel teaches: ***You are accepted and washed and forgiven and clean in His sight. For the believer there is ALWAYS pardon and a warm welcome awaiting us when we come to God in prayer. For in Christ, we are loved by God with the same degree and measure of love that God has for Jesus.***

Then **LAST** I want to turn your attention to Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, because she has much to teach us about prayer. In fact, apart from her barrenness, and the broken heart she had because of it, and that she cried a lot, prayer is the most notable characteristic about her. She was a praying woman.

So what does she have to teach us about prayer? In chap. 1, v. 10, we find her standing at the entrance of the house of the Lord at Shiloh. She is apparently standing outside right by the doorpost where Eli the priest is sitting.

And in v. 10 we read: ***"In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord."*** / Or as she says in v. 16: ***"I have been praying out of much anguish and grief."***

Which tells us what? It tells us her prayer was a passionate prayer. / It was a prayer of emotional desperation. / It was a "lay everything out on the table" type prayer. / A "hold nothing back" type prayer. / An honest, earnest, pleading, from the depth-of-her-soul type prayer. / A prayer where she brought nothing to God but the misery, and pain, and anguish and grief of a barren woman's blocked yearning to have a child.

Which means she believed and was convinced that God was a gracious and compassionate God. And we must also.

In fact, as far as grace allows, we must pray as earnestly, and honestly, and passionately, and transparently as she did. / Because when it comes to prayer, God isn't looking for words that mask or don't really reveal what we're truly thinking / or hide what we're really feeling. / God is moved by the expression of what is real and earnest and true / not by what is shallow or hollow or surfacy or imaginary.

Which means, when we pray, we need to pray what's on our heart. Or as she puts it in v.15, we need to pour out the contents of our souls to the Lord. We need to follow the thread of what we're really thinking and really feeling when we're praying.

Sometimes when you pray, you will touch on something and you will notice it stir something inside you. It will move you -- either emotionally or spiritually. You can feel it. And when you do, follow that line of praying wherever it takes you. Pray along those lines until you sense, that what you have said is exactly what you felt and needed to say.

But that's not all. Her prayer was also a faith-filled prayer. Hannah came to the temple that day and prayed because she was convinced that God and God alone was her last and only hope / and that He would hear and answer her prayer. And so it is with us. We must always pray in faith, for it pleases God when we trust Him for the difficult and the impossible.

It always used to MOVE ME TO PROVE MY KIDS RIGHT, when in their younger days (they don't do it anymore!) they used to say: "You can do it dad." Whether it was lifting something / or building something / or pushing the twins around the house yet one more time in their plastic car / I was pleased by the expression of their faith in me. And the same is true of God. It pleases Him when believe that He can and ask that He would.

That's why E. M. Bounds could say:

"Faith is the essential quality in the heart of any person who desires to communicate with God... Prayer is actually faith, claiming and laying hold of its immeasurable inheritance... Moreover, when faith ceases to pray it ceases to live."

Why? Because prayer is where faith feeds and nourishes and stretches and exercises itself!

And the last lesson we learn from Hannah is that true prayer, when it asks for what it desires most of all, must be totally uninhibited. It must so focus on God, and communicating with Him from the heart, that it causes us to get lost in God, and even forget what's around us or who's around us.

Here's Hannah standing by the doorpost of the temple praying. Eli is there, but you get the sense she is either unaware he's there, or doesn't care. She is apparently praying with her hands lifted / her eyes closed / tears streaming down her face / and her lips moving -- though no sound is coming out.

She is so intensely engaged in personal spiritual conversation with God that she is oblivious to everything else around her -- until Eli breaks in and accuses her of being drunk!

And that focus in prayer (I believe) is at least in part, what it means to "pray in the Spirit." It's to be so focused on God / and so conscious of His presence (or His face right there pressed up against ours) / and so caught up in our communion and conversation with Him / that we lose ourselves in God and forget everything else around us -- until something snaps us out of it.

It's to be aware (for even the shortest time) of nothing but Him / and be concerned (for that short time) about nothing in this world -- until we come out of our time of prayer.

It's to pray our hearts out (or as Hannah puts it, "to pour out ones soul to the Lord") without any concern that someone might be around / or listening / or watching / or hearing what we say.

Pray that way, my friends, like Hannah did, and then watch what happens!