

Chapter 10

November 17, 1996

We have begun a sub-section of our series of studies in the Bible's doctrine of prayer devoted to the "qualifications" or "characteristics" of sincere prayer, or prayer that prevails with God. We considered last week the first of these qualifications and one that looms large in our Savior's teaching about prayer, viz. "importunity or perseverance." Remember, all of these characteristics are various ways in which prayer becomes genuinely sincere, what one writer has called, "a living voice speaking in a living ear."

Tonight we consider prayer "in the Spirit."

In Ephesians 6:18 Paul writes, in concluding that great section on the spiritual warfare, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Now, what does Paul mean by "pray in the Spirit"? Commentators through the ages have suggested a number of possible interpretations.

I. Many have thought that in the phrase "in the spirit" "spirit" should be written with a small "s," a lower case "s" and taken to mean the human spirit. "In the spirit" would thus mean "inwardly" or "with the heart" and would be in contrast to prayer that is merely "outward" or a bare formality. That is, the prayer that Paul is calling us to must be prayer that is not with the voice only but also with the spirit, the soul, the

heart. Now that is true prayer, of course, and a characteristic of true prayer, but is this primarily what Paul is saying to us?

This interpretation is possible but unlikely. First, the grammar of Paul's Greek does not favor it. When he means "in the spirit" in that sense, as referring to the human agency and the sincerity of a prayer, as he does, for example, in Rom. 1:9 and 1 Cor. 14:15, he typically does not use the preposition "en" ("in" or "with") that he uses here in Ephesians 6:18.

More to the point, however, we have other texts that suggest that Paul and other NT writers see a very close link between the Holy Spirit and the true prayer of a Christian.

Take, for example, Gal. 4:6:

"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out 'Abba, Father.'"

There we have the idea of the Spirit in us either praying through us, or, perhaps better, enabling us to pray as we should.

In Jude 20, we have an unmistakable reference to prayer "in the Holy Spirit" which is nearly parallel to Paul's statement in Ephesians 6:18.

"But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit."

Jude's Greek phrase is the same as Paul's except he makes explicit that it is the *Holy* Spirit in whom we are to pray.

II. Others, including Martin Lloyd-Jones have taken it to mean "prayer for spiritual revival." Taken this way, Paul is not speaking of *how* to pray, but *what to pray for*. But there is little to commend this. It is not a natural reading of Paul's Greek, the content of the prayers is specified explicitly in the rest of the verse ("with all kinds of prayers and requests" and, later, "praying for all the saints"), and prayer *for* the Spirit is not the same thing as prayer *in or with* the Spirit.

III. Others have taken Paul to mean prayer by a special inspiration. This interpretation has traveled widely in evangelical Christianity and is preserved in the jargon with which all who have grown up in the church are

thoroughly familiar. Prayer meetings begin with the minister or the leader saying something like, “As many of you as are led to pray...” What lies behind that familiar way of speaking is the idea that the Spirit directly and specifically directs the praying of Christians, inspiring them to pray for this or that at such and such a time.

But, first, Paul does not say this. This is reading an entire theory of praying into a single preposition. Nowhere else does the Bible teach us to expect to be led into our prayers by the specific inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Quite the contrary, even here, Paul’s emphasis seems rather to be on simple obedience to the summons to prayer: keep on praying, always and for everything. It seems doubtful that he would say these words if he meant, at the beginning of the verse, that the Spirit would himself decide for what and when individual Christians are to pray.

This theory has had both a sentimentalizing and a deadening effect on prayer, especially corporate prayer. I grew up in prayer meetings that were so lifeless and so uninteresting and so predictable and so little animated by any sense of expectation that it was hard to believe anything more resulted from them than a sense of duty having been done by those few who attended. Our prayer meetings began with that jargon about being led to pray and, apparently, the Holy Spirit led only a few of the people to pray, led the same ones every week, led them to pray long prayers, and then did not lead anyone else until an uncomfortably long silence had intervened.

I remember being liberated from this view of prayer by a remark of Dr. John Sanderson, a college professor of mine and a man of real biblical learning. Perhaps this has happened to you sometimes, a single remark causing you to look again at what you thought the Bible taught, what you had always been led to suppose the Bible taught, only to realize at once that it taught no such thing. Such is the power of spiritual culture. It can make it seem that the Bible teaches something that actually you can’t find anywhere in the Bible! Altar calls, the insistence that covenant children have a “conversion experience,” elaborate scenarios about how events will unfold before the second coming, etc. are all the product of a particular spiritual culture, not the teaching of the Bible. Well, Dr. Sanderson said in my hearing that he wasn’t sure he had ever been “led to pray” in his life. Wonderful! I went and looked again and realized that my view of prayer was utterly without biblical warrant. God’s people in the Bible don’t wait for the Spirit to inspire

them: they pray out of their need, out of their love, out of their duty, and they pray even when God seems not to be interested in what they are saying to him. We are commanded to pray, invited to pray, encouraged to pray, warned about prayerlessness, but we are never taught *to wait* to pray until led by the Spirit of God. Nor are we ever taught what that leading would feel like or how we would know that it was the Spirit leading us and not the Devil or our own flesh.

The last thing Paul means here is that Christians are until the Holy Spirit indicates to them that they are to begin to pray, or that the Spirit must activate or inspire each individual prayer by some kind of signal sent to the soul. He is commanding us to pray all the time and for all manner of things. “In the Spirit” clearly refers to “how we are to pray” not when we are to pray.

So, what does Paul mean when he tells us to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions”?

Well, in the Bible, and in Paul there are two spheres of spiritual activity: the flesh and the Spirit, with Spirit spelled with a capital “S,” and referring to the Holy Spirit. That is, human activity may be of the flesh or it may be of the Holy Spirit.

If any activity is of the flesh, Paul says in many different places, it is self-motivated, self-empowered (or empowered as well by Satan), for selfish ends and purposes, and by entirely natural means. Prayer in the flesh, of which there is a great deal described in the Bible, and of which there is a great deal every day in the world, is prayer, therefore, that is prayed

not to secure God’s interests but ours;
with no sense of a need in that prayer for God’s enablement or accompaniment;
with no true embrace of the promises of God;
with no true submission to God;
but prayer that is prayed in hopes of securing some benefit from God while paying him no true reverence as Lord and Savior;
prayer that is prayed not as earnest and familiar talking with God, but in order to perform some duty that God will reward with some benefit;
and so on.

Prayer in the Spirit, on the contrary, is prayer that is prayed in the realm or sphere of the Holy Spirit. That is, prayer that is prayed from a reborn heart, as an act of love, trust, confidence in and cheerful submission to a God who has been immeasurably gracious to us; prayer that is prayed in an active sense of our dependence upon the Spirit of God to help us pray aright, to pray with a right spirit, with true motives, with a genuine submission to the will of God, with faith, with confidence, with expectation, that God may have his glory in us and through us. That is prayer in the Spirit, prayer that is prayed by one who inhabits the realm of the Holy Spirit, who is deriving his impulse to and strength for holiness from the Holy Spirit, and who is depending always upon the Holy Spirit for every good and holy act that he or she performs.

(Not, of course, that you have to have this conversation with yourself before every prayer! Nehemiah didn't before his Arrow Prayer, but Paul is saying that this must be your essential attitude toward prayer, the foundation of your life of prayer, to which you often return in active thought lest you forget and slide unwittingly into praying in the flesh — the constant temptation to which all Christians are always subject.)

“Lord I believe, help my unbelief” is praying in the Spirit.

“Not my will, but thine be done” is praying in the Spirit.

“Lord, teach us to pray” is praying in the Spirit.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer” is praying in the Spirit.

“I waited patiently for the Lord” is praying in the Spirit.

“How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord” is praying in the Spirit.

“Father, I am not worthy to be considered as one of your hired servants” is praying in the Spirit.

And all of these prayers and many others in the Bible express the condition of mind and heart that lies beneath all prayer in the Spirit, the condition of dependence, of love, and of faith.

Jesus said, without me, you can do nothing. But Christ's presence and active help and support is provided us by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who makes Christ known to us and applies Christ's ministry to our hearts and lives.

As the Lord says of his people in Zech. 12:10: "I will pour out on them the Spirit of grace and supplication!"

And think in what different ways he does that:

1. He prompts us to pray: Ps. 27:8 (the more likely reading): "You said to me, 'Seek my face,' and my heart said, 'Your face, O Lord, I will seek.'"
2. He encourages us to come to God confidently: "by him we call out 'Abba, Father.'"
3. His presence assures us of a hearing with God. So David in Ps. 51:11: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."
4. He animates our hearts in prayer, in joy and in love. So he did for Jesus himself. Luke 10:21: "At that time, Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said 'I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth...'"

And nothing is better calculated to keep that foundation for true prayer clearly in view that we might build our prayers on it and rest their weight on it, than Paul's remark about the Spirit assisting our prayers.

Romans 8:26-27: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

There is a realm of the Holy Spirit, and a kind of praying that belongs to that realm, and in that praying the prayer of the soul is accompanied and perfected by another prayer, alongside, prayed by the Holy Spirit himself!

Paul has already said in the previous verses that the creation groans until now, waiting for the consummation of God's gracious work in the world at

the resurrection. Now, he adds that the Holy Spirit also groans, he too labors to bring forth the full fruit of prayer in us.

Already, in previous verses in Romans 8, Paul has said that Christians do what they do *as Christians*, that believers live *by the Spirit of God*. The Christian life is created by the Holy Spirit, enabled by the Holy Spirit, directed by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in a certain sense, the Christian's life is lived *by the Spirit in him*. (Must take care there, of course.)

“Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation — but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if *by the Spirit* you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led *by the Spirit of God* are the sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received *the Spirit of sonship* (read with capital ‘S’). And *by Him* we cry ‘Abba, Father.’ *The Spirit himself* testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” 8:12-16

Notice carefully the mixture of divine Spirit and human will. We must put to death our sins, but do so *by the Spirit*. We must cry out to God, but can do so only *by Him*. Notice too, the contrast, the same contrast we said should be assumed to be in Paul’s mind in Ephesians 6:18 when he tells us to pray *in the Spirit*. The contrast is between flesh and spirit (what the NIV calls “sinful nature” in Rom. 8:12-13). There are two ways to live and so two ways to pray, according to the flesh and by the Holy Spirit. As Paul puts it elsewhere, no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Spirit, so obviously no one can pray aright without the Spirit. Or, as he puts it in Eph. 2:18, we have access to God only through the Holy Spirit.

And what is true in terms of the absolute contrast between flesh and Spirit, faith and unbelief, is, as always, also true in the relative contrast between a greater or lesser faith and greater or lesser ministry of the Spirit and greater or lesser dependence upon the Holy Spirit. So now Rom. 8:26-27. Our weakness, our sinfulness, as we would expect, effecting everything else in our lives, effects our prayers also. We are severely limited and do not know either how to pray or what to pray for — that is, prayer not as a mere act, but true prayer, real prayer —. But the Spirit prays beside us, both enabling our praying and himself asking God for what we do not know to ask for and in a

way that is fully acceptable to God. A perfect prayer is offered by the Spirit alongside our feeble, faulty, all too fleshly prayers.

And, then, v. 27, which I take to mean that since the Lord searches our hearts and knows all their secrets, he surely knows the heart and desires of his own Spirit as he prays with us and for us to the Father. So the Spirit not only enables us to pray as Christians at all, to offer prayers that God will hear, he also prompts more faithful prayers, makes us wiser in our prayers, directs our prayers, and, at last, makes up what is wanting in our prayers.

This is the realm of the Spirit and what is involved in praying *in the Spirit*. Imagine yourself for a moment going to pray. You kneel down beside your bed or you raise your heart to God in your car, or wherever. But you know that the prayer you wish to pray to God, for content, for manner, for faith, for sincerity of heart, for love, for purity of purpose, you cannot pray alone and by yourself and in your own strength. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” And so you look in every direction and there, not far away, you see a bright light, glory is what it is, the universal indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit. So, in your soul, you go over to that glory and kneel before it, and you find that it comes over you and surrounds you and covers you. And, when it does, you find your heart stirred, a strange warmth has come over you — now God is before you in your prayer in all his majesty and his grace and you love and trust him, now it is clear to you what you ought to say in both your worship and your petitions, and now there is such a sense of joy and expectation that you pray persuaded both that God will hear and answer and that whatever his will for you may be it is exactly what you most want for yourself and for others. The Holy Spirit has overcome you and changed everything and made your prayer what you know prayer should always be.

Now, our prayers are not usually like that — though most of us have had some, if only a few prayers in our lives that we could almost describe in that way. But, Paul says, that is what prayer is, actually, when any Christian seeks to pray *in and by the Spirit of God*, whether he senses his prayer that way or not. And when he does not sense it so wonderfully and powerfully, does not feel the overshadowing of the Spirit, it is in just those prayers that the Spirit is praying hardest beside us to make up whatever is wanting so that the prayer God hears is such a prayer as he would have heard if the Spirit had poured himself into our consciousness as only very rarely he does.

Samuel Rutherford wrote to one of his correspondents, a man of whom little

is known, but Andrew Bonar, the editor of the best edition of Rutherford's Letters imagines that he must have been an educated man, I say, Rutherford wrote to him, "Words are but the accidents of prayer." Rutherford was not only a pastor and a man of deep spiritual experience and insight, he was also one of the most accomplished scholars of his day. "Accident" in this use is an old term from philosophy, meaning something that is not of the essence of the thing. Say you have a brown chair with engraving on the back. The color brown and the engraving are accidents, for it is a chair without them. "Words are but the accidents of prayer," Rutherford says. That is, what is essential to true prayer is the state of mind and heart, the dependence upon God, the faith in God, the trust in his promises, and the longing for that which is sought from God. That is the true prayer. And all of that comes at last from the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

And it is down there, where true prayer comes from, where the Holy Spirit is found, creating, prompting, purifying, instructing, inspiring, *and* praying himself.

To believe that the Spirit must enable my prayer, to look to him for that enablement, to trust that He is there when I cannot feel him or sense him, to come to God on the wings of the Holy Spirit — that is what it means to pray *in the Spirit*.

"How wonderful my brethren! How amazing! And, above all, how gracious! That we should have one divine intercessor in our hearts, and another divine intercessor for us in heaven! How blessed are we." [Whyte, James Fraser, p. 91.]