

Lectures on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians

by
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Lecture XXV

**"Pray without ceasing"
1 Thessalonians 5:17**

This precept, "*Pray without ceasing*"--or, according to the form of the original,¹ *unceasingly pray*--comes immediately after the summons to *rejoice always*. So far, therefore, is that joy from being the mere buoyancy of the animal life or the elation of self-confidence; [but rather] that it exists only where there is an abiding sense of absolute dependence upon God.

The same connection between joy and prayer is indicated in Rom. 12:12: "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer." And in Phil. 4:4-7: "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

Prayer may be defined generally as the address of the soul to God in the consciousness of its own need, and in faith of the Divine mercy and all-sufficiency. For a creature with such feelings and convictions to pray is just as natural as for a hungry child to ask bread from a parent.

A vain philosophy, it is true, has often objected: "What profit should we have if we pray unto Him?² Will the Infinite God concern Himself with the petty affairs of men? Or can our feeble and distant cries affect in any way the onward march of His providence?" But these cavils [trivial objections] of a practical atheism have never satisfied the reason any more than they have been able to paralyze the instincts and aspirations of the heart. "Should not a people seek unto their God?"³ is a challenge that commands the ready assent of nations, civilized or savage. In all ages heathendom has multiplied its altars and sought to propitiate the higher powers by sacrifice and prayer. And especially before the light of revelation and the experience of the Church, the doubts and speculations of unbelief on this point vanish like empty mist.

"O Thou that hears prayer!"⁴--that is one of the many gracious Scriptural designations of the only living and true God. And so the place which He chooses to put His name there--where He

1 ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε.

2 Job 21:15.

3 Is. 8:19

4 Ps. 65:2.

meets and blesses His worshipers--"shall be called a house of prayer for all people."⁵ But in vain [it would be] should I attempt to enumerate all the motives and encouragements which the Bible furnishes to engage us in this direct intercourse of the soul with "the Father of spirits."⁶ They are [as] numerous as our own trials, and necessities, and temptations, and weaknesses, or as His mercies and resources. And nothing, I believe, more clearly demonstrates the desperate wickedness of our nature than that in spite of all these (and all the invitations and promises of the word and all the examples there recorded of effectual prayer) men in general continue [to be] so averse to this spiritual exercise, and Christians themselves are so cold and intermittent therein.

Reflect, brethren, on what we are and what God is, and then say if it would not be a wonder of condescension that should allow us even once in our lifetime to "take upon us to speak unto the Lord."⁷ But, behold, it is God that "calls, and we refuse; He stretches out His hand, and no man regards."⁸ He seats Himself on a throne of grace, and there He "waits that He may be gracious unto us."⁹ And He bids us draw near and receive, simply for the asking, all blessings. But, alas, how few thus come! And of those who do, how many approach under the impulse rather of custom or conscious duty than of fervent duty and filial expectation!

Meanwhile our unbelief and unfaithfulness have no power to change that economy of the Divine wisdom and love, according to which he "that asks receives, and he that seeks finds, and to him that knocks it shall be opened"¹⁰--a principle of administration by which the glory of God and the good of man are equally promoted. From the days when Abraham pleaded for Sodom, and Jacob wrestled at the fords of Peniel, it [this principle] has been abundantly verified, and it is so still in the lives of God's children.

Apart even from the many express assurances of Scripture, there will be found enough in the records of sacred and Christian biography to justify us in believing that in nothing does there obtain a more direct and invariable proportion than between a man's habits of prayer and the holiness of his character and the usefulness of his life. All of God's most eminent servants under either dispensation--as David and Daniel, Paul and Luther--have been preeminently men of prayer. Charged with the cares of empire or of Christendom, they yet seem to have made prayer the great, paramount business of life--seeking in that [prayer] the wisdom, love, courage, and strength required for all other business. In the latter [dispensation], they wrought according to their measure. In the former they engaged God Himself to work for the furtherance of His cause and the glory of His name. They therefore "gave themselves continually to prayer."¹¹ They "labored fervently," (or as the word is, *agonized, strove*) "in prayers."¹² They "watched unto prayer."¹³ They "continued in prayer"¹⁴--"praying always"--in

5 Is. 56:7.

6 Heb. 12:9.

7 Gen. 18:27.

8 Prov. 1:24.

9 Is. 30:18.

10 Matt. 7:8.

11 Acts 6:4.

12 Col. 4:12 (*ἀγωνιζόμενος*).

13 1 Pet. 4:7.

14 Col. 4:2.

every season, on every occasion¹⁵--"with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance." In the language of the text, they "*unceasingly prayed*"; because their hours of prayer were frequent and regular, because they did not willingly suffer aught else to supersede or interrupt that high communion, because in all their toils and conflicts they sought still to maintain the spirit and habit of devotion in an ever active, realizing sense of God's nearness to them and of their dependence on His grace.

Such--amidst whatever weakness of the flesh and disturbance from without--such, I say, was their constant aim. And according as they approximated to its attainment, in the same degree they "were strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."¹⁶ And they *always rejoiced*. Not only does David in one place¹⁷ speak of his "praying, and crying aloud, evening and morning, and at noon" (like Daniel in Babylon opening his windows in his chamber toward Jerusalem, and "kneeling upon his knees three times a day and praying"¹⁸), not only does he cry out in another place,¹⁹ "Seven times a day do I praise Thee," but in Psalm 86:3 he says: "Unto Thee will I cry all the day."²⁰

As on the one hand we read of the wicked that "God is not in all his thoughts,"²¹ so on the other hand (difficult as it may be for us, my hearers, in this sunken earthly life of ours to conceive aright of the state of perfection) we yet cannot doubt the possibility of rational and spiritual creatures who "live, and move, and have their being in God"²² being every moment of their existence so possessed with a glad consciousness of the glorious fact that their whole service shall be one continuous act of worship and adoration. And "whether they eat or drink, or whatsoever they do, they do all to the glory of God."²³

And here again we are reminded that as with every other duty, so likewise with that of prayer the great motive is supplied by the office and work, the teaching and the life, of the Lord Jesus.

He is the "one Mediator between God and men,"²⁴ and as such He "has consecrated for us a new and living way, whereby we have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus."²⁵ Assuming that His followers would be a praying people, He taught them how to pray, for what things, in what spirit, in whose name. To overcome their distrust He appealed to the strong instincts of the parental heart, and then declared the Fatherly benignity [kindness] of God. For their yet greater encouragement He assured them again and again beforehand of a favorable issue. And because human weakness and impatience and carnality are still so apt to fail in this matter, He spoke parable upon parable "to this end, that men ought always to pray,

15 Eph. 6:18 (ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ). So also in Luke 21:36).

16 2 Tim. 4:5.

17 Ps. 55:17.

18 Dan. 6:10.

19 Ps. 119:164.

20 אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה אֶקְרָא כָּל-הַיּוֹם

21 Ps. 10:4.

22 Acts 17:28.

23 1 Cor. 10:31.

24 1 Tim. 2:5

25 Heb. 10:19, 20.

and not to faint."²⁶

Then, such being His instructions, what was His example? Surely if there ever lived a man on earth who could afford to dispense with prayer, it was the Man in whom "dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,"²⁷ the Man that was God's "fellow"²⁸ and lay in His bosom from eternity. How noteworthy is it, brethren, and how instructive to find that even with Him God deals by the same rule as with us! Just as our Lord says to us, "Ask, and it shall be given you,"²⁹ so says the Father to Him, "Ask of me, and I shall give thee."³⁰ Accordingly, we altogether miss one main element of human interest in the gospels when we fail to observe that it was by the very same principles of faith and prayer, by which we are required to overcome all enemies, that Christ Himself overcame. "In the days of His flesh, He offered up prayers and supplications" (and that not merely in fulfilment of a legal righteousness but with a deep sense of present personal necessity), "with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared."³¹ Amid all the labors and agitations of His life, His loving, trusting soul ever watched for opportunities of pouring itself forth in secret to His "Father which is in secret."³² And when such opportunities could not be had by day or in the haunts of men, He sought them in desert solitudes and during the still, dark hours of night.

Thus, among the earliest incidents recorded by Mark is this one: "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed."³³ About the same time, but it would appear on a different occasion, "He withdrew Himself," says Luke, "into the wilderness, and prayed."³⁴ Not long after, as we learn from the same Evangelist, "He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God."³⁵ And a subsequent occurrence of the same wondrous character is related by both Matthew and Mark.³⁶ Still later Luke speaks of Him as being "alone praying";³⁷ and as, the very next week, "going up into a mountain to pray," on which occasion it was that "as He prayed"³⁸ the glory of the Transfiguration shone out for a brief season on the Man of sorrows. Then comes that great utterance of His faith and love, which He addressed to the Father with eyes lifted up to heaven in the presence and hearing of the disciples, just before passing into the darkness of His final passion.³⁹ And, dear hearers, you all remember by what means He prepared Himself for that last trial. "Then comes Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane, and said unto the disciples, Sit ye here while I go and pray yonder. . . . And He went a little further, and fell on His face, and prayed. . . . He went away again the second time, and prayed. . . . And He left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time."⁴⁰ Yea, "being in an agony He prayed

26 Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8.

27 Col. 2:9.

28 Zech. 13:7.

29 Matt. 7:7.

30 Ps. 2:8.

31 Heb. 5:7.

32 Matt. 6:6.

33 Mark 1:35.

34 Luke 5:16.

35 Luke 6:12.

36 Matt. 14:23; Mark 6:46.

37 Luke 9:18.

38 Luke 9:20.

39 John 17.

40 Matt. 26:36, 39, 42, 44.

more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."⁴¹

Ah, brethren, how should it affect our hearts that even at such a time, amidst the very throes of that dire struggle, pity for the weakness of His poor friends and, it may be, a human longing for human sympathy brought Him back once and again to their side! And what word of tenderest admonition was it, which of the many that He had spoken unto them, was now alone repeated by those quivering lips? "*Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation*"⁴² --as if He had said, "With no other weapons than these am I, in this hour and power of darkness, pressing toward the goal."

Blessed be God! In His hands they proved equal to the crisis. They brought Him off more than Conqueror. From the shades of death He emerged to "the right hand of the throne of God,"⁴³ and there resumed on the heights of the uncreated glory the work of intercession begun in the valley of His humiliation. No sooner does He present Himself within the veil as the Lamb that has been slain, then (mindful still of His promise) He "prays the Father" for "another Comforter" for those He had left.⁴⁴ And onward from that hour He Himself "ever lives to make intercession for them"⁴⁵ and to render their prayers likewise acceptable to God. "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand."⁴⁶

My dear hearers, after all these mighty preparations on earth and in heaven for the restoration of gracious intercourse between God and us, how many of you, it may be feared, instead of "praying without ceasing" never, never pray at all! Never in your families! Never in secret! After what has already been said, need one word be added to make manifest to yourselves the ingratitude, the recklessness, the madness of a prayerless life? Be sure that if you are ever to obtain mercy from the Lord, it is at the throne of grace that you must find it; and that of you too it shall yet be said, as of Saul of Tarsus, "Behold, he prays!"⁴⁷

But, alas! alas! how little faith have any of us in prayer--the omnipotence of prayer! "Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are,"⁴⁸ are he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." Of so much avail even then was "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man." And now when at any time under a dispensation of so much richer grace the sweet influences of the spiritual firmament descend no more, and our souls languish, and faith totters, and love waxes cold, and hope grows dim, and the songs of salvation cease, and sinners are not converted unto God, but the rousing,

41 Luke 22:44.

42 Matt. 26:41. Compare Mark 13:33 and Luke 21:36.

43 Heb. 12:2.

44 John 14:16.

45 Heb. 7:25.

46 Rev. 8:3, 4.

47 Acts 9:11.

48 James 5:16, 17 (*ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν, like-affected, of like infirmities with us*).

warning, beseeching voices of the sanctuary, of the word, and of providence pass alike ineffectual and unheeded--what is--what must be the explanation of all this but that prayer is "restrained before God?"⁴⁹ "We have not, because we ask not. We ask and receive not, because we ask amiss"⁵⁰ --with little or nothing of that urgent, violent inappeasable importunity which dares even to say unto God, "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me."⁵¹ Such a spirit not even God can resist, and to it He evermore delights to yield.

"Lecture XXV" in John Lillie, *Lectures on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860).

49 Job 15:4.

50 James 4:3.

51 Gen. 32:26.