

Pray Always

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[0 : 00] For a short time, as God enables us, can we turn to the second passage of Scripture we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, and the words of verse 18.

Ephesians 6, 18. Ephesians 6, 18.

As I ought to speak. Clearly the Apostle Paul values prayer.

Prayer from Paul's perspective is absolutely pivotal. It is the linchpin of his ministry and his mission work.

And as we read of Paul's emphasis on prayer, we recognize too that spirit-fueled prayer, spirit-driven prayer, is Paul's great emphasis.

[1 : 36] And we see this clearly in verse 18. These words, in the Spirit.

Pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit. So the doctrine of the Holy Spirit saturates all of Paul's teachings.

Of course, Paul is being led by God the Holy Spirit. He's under the superintendents of the Holy Spirit in his writings.

And we see that Paul recognizes the importance of God's Spirit in every aspect of the Christian life.

As Paul begins to emphasize the need for the full armor of God. And then you will notice that before referring to the armor and the various component parts of the armor, he urges the believer to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his mind.

[2 : 52] What is the power of his mind but that power, that mighty power that we all crave and require in our Christian lives, the power of God the Holy Spirit.

And as we begin to appreciate Paul's perspective on prayer, then we, as we go through the various component parts of the armor, it's as if Paul is stressing how crucial, how critical these parts are.

And yet, as he concludes this letter, prayer seems to be that final point of emphasis that he's so anxious to stress.

Praying always, he says elsewhere, pray without ceasing. But he himself asks for prayer as he serves the Lord as for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the Gospel.

But he himself, of course, is a prisoner. And although he's an ambassador, although he's in chains, yet he still recognizes that whilst he is bound physically, he's by no means bound spiritually.

[4 : 26] He is, he remains, an ambassador for Jesus Christ. And he's asking that he might speak boldly, even within his prison cell, even within this confined environment where there's so little scope to reach out.

Yet, we know that Paul was witnessing, actively witnessing, to the prison guards and to others within the vicinity.

And that knees were bowing and tongues were confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. So tonight, I just want us to reflect a little on the ministry of the Holy Spirit with respect to prayer.

When we reflect back on revivals of past days, we pray for revival in the present. And yet, many have given up praying for spiritual awakenings, such as the darkness that prevails.

And many in our day and generation consider revival in the past tense. They consider it to be historical. So they look back, and some who experience revival do so with an element of nostalgia.

[5 : 53] And they're almost sentimental in their thinking, wishing that they could relive that experience, wishing indeed that they might even go back in time and be a part of it, without recognizing that that revival can and is happening in the present tense, in other parts of the world.

God's Spirit is at work. In the more closed countries of the world, like North Korea, God's Spirit is moving. God's Spirit is hovering over such places.

And many are witnessing for the Lord in very trying and pressing circumstances. And yet, all it takes is for God the Holy Spirit to breathe.

And when the breath of heaven enters a community, then that community is touched and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And we've witnessed that within our own congregation, not all that long ago, in recent times. Others can speak of more prominent revivals, such as the Barber's Revival in the late 40s and the early 50s.

[7 : 17] But the remarkable thing about that particular revival is that its roots are widely, its roots take us back to a very primitive croft house in Arno, where two elderly ladies were praying and prayed earnestly, and we believe prayed in the Spirit, that God's Spirit would come with the reviving power across their community and the communities of the West Side.

And God's Spirit did come with remarkable power. Yet few people perhaps appreciate that it began by the fireside, in a very humble croft house, where two women were compelled to pray, and prayed as Paul urges you and I to pray here.

They prayed always. They prayed with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, petitioning prayer.

And they were indeed watchful with perseverance and supplication.

And God's Spirit came with power. And there are times too when perhaps we lose heart, when we pray, perhaps as we have been this evening, praying for loved ones, praying for those within our own immediate and extended family circles.

And yet, we ourselves have experienced the power of God's Spirit. We ourselves were spiritually revived within.

[9 : 01] We came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Through the power of God's Spirit. Through the power of God's Spirit, we experienced conversion. We experienced the transformation that the Gospel brings when accompanied by the power of the Spirit.

And as we recognize that change in ourselves, we long to see others come to know the Lord. And we acknowledge that we may plant, we may water, but only God's Spirit can give the increase.

But nonetheless, we are given any encouragement in these words to persevere in prayer and to pray for those who may seem some distance away from the Lord.

And yet, we are encouraged to pray because we ourselves may have been a considerable distance away. And although we were in the far country, ourselves, we were brought near by the power of the Spirit.

I read recently of a man who was much prayed for. And yet, he himself made every effort to evade the Gospel.

[10 : 17] Indeed, he would give Gospel opportunities a very wide berth. But God's Spirit was at work in this man's life. It concerns the remarkable providence of God in the life of a London bus driver who was commissioned to shuttle passengers to a crusade service where Billy Graham was preaching.

And the services were held at Wembley Stadium. This is some years ago. And one of the passengers on the bus invited the bus driver to come along to the crusade and hear Billy Graham for himself.

But he politely declined. And the passenger on that bus might have thought, well, that was that. But that passenger, we believe, prayed for the bus driver as other passengers did on that bus that evening.

Anyway, time passed and the same bus driver left London and moved to New York. And at the providence of God, Billy Graham happened to be preaching at Madison Square Garden.

And the man's job, again, was to take passengers to the Billy Graham crusade. And when he got off the bus, a passenger asked him if he wished to join them at the crusade and hear Billy Graham for himself.

[12 : 02] And he politely declined. But the passengers on the bus prayed for the driver as they had back in London. Time passed and the same bus driver went on to marry an Australian lady and eventually ended up working in Sydney, Australia where, surprisingly, he was again assigned to drive people to the stadium where Billy Graham was preaching.

And this time, when he was invited to come along to the crusade and hear Billy Graham for himself, he felt there was no escape.

So he gave in. And looking back, he said, no matter where I went, I was confronted with Billy Graham. So I went to hear him and I committed my life to Jesus Christ. It was the best decision I ever made. And Bob Gass, the late Bob Gass, who shared that anecdote in Word for Today some years ago, concludes by making the following observation. God never gives up on you. God will follow you to the ends of the earth to give you another opportunity to surrender your life to him.

[13 : 37] How many opportunities has he already given you? Isn't it time, he says, you stopped running and surrendered your life to him?

But whilst we recognise that this individual surrendered his life, it strikes us to that he reached a point where God's Spirit brought him to a juncture in his life where he recognised that God's Spirit was on his tail, that God's Spirit was striving with him and he reached a point where he felt constrained to come under the sound of the Gospel and submit to the Gospel and surrender his life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, the psalmist says, and we sang these words from Psalm 139, he says, of God's Spirit, you hem me in, you have laid your hand upon me, where can I go from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there, there in the depths. Again, you are there. On the far side of the sea, your hand will hold me fast.

And the Apostle Paul has witnessed remarkable conversions in his own time. He has witnessed the conversion of very unlikely converts.

[15 : 17] He has witnessed the conversion of Lydia and the jailer and a demonic slavery in Philippi itself.

And then we can reflect on the many conversions that the Book of Acts testifies to. And within Ephesus itself is a church that is growing, where the Gospel is being proclaimed and where God's Spirit is at work.

So we're given every encouragement to pray, to recognise that when we pray in the Spirit, as we recognise that it is of God's Spirit, and when we leave all these pressing matters that may keep us awake at night with respect to our loved ones, with respect to work colleagues and neighbours and others around us, we know that all it would take is for God the Holy Spirit to breathe just a little of the very breath of heaven, and that is enough to bring transformation, to bring change, the change that we see in repentance when one turns from sin to a saviour.

So we're encouraged in these discouraging times in our day when we see so little evidence of God's Spirit, and as we look back over the scriptures, as we turn the pages of the Old Testament, we see, for example, in the days of the judges, things were difficult and dark and distressing for Gideon as they fought off the Midianites, but ultimately God's Spirit prevailed with Gideon and a small band of men with pictures to hand.

They overcame the might of the enemy, and in any case Jesus has said, hasn't he, that I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail.

[17 : 44] So, although we find ourselves perhaps somewhat despondent as we look around us, and as we witness much that leaves us perplexed, whether we're watching our television or analysing the latest statistics for church attendance, which is a downward spiral, yet it is when circumstances were at a low end in the past that God's Spirit came with mighty power.

So, may God grant us to be encouraged as he encourages us to pray without ceasing always with prayer, with supplication in the Spirit, recognizing that everything is of the Spirit.

And when God's Spirit quickens, when God's Spirit is, when God's Spirit revives, then God's Spirit will rattle the community.

We read from Romans 8, the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses, and we simply do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

How often we petition the throne of grace, Lord, teach us to pray, and yet God encourages us in his word to come, not trying to bring many words, but to bring heartfelt, groanings, because God's Spirit is at work, he, if you like, translates these groanings, and as we groan, as our deepest eyes seem to reach the floor, they reach heaven in a moment, and God's Spirit, if you like, translates these groanings, and conveys our heartfelt requests before the very throne room of heaven.

[20 : 08] So we pray in the Spirit, recognizing that it is of the Holy Spirit that our prayers are heard, and it is of God's Spirit that we are prompted to pray.

It is all of grace, and the Holy Spirit encourages us to pursue every means of grace, because it is through these means that the Spirit moves, and every means revolves around his word, and he has, as another put it, a floodlight ministry, he reveals to us the things of Christ, he gives us clarity, we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, as God's Spirit, and gives us light and greater clarity on the Lord Jesus.

So may he grant us to pray without ceasing, always, in the Spirit. Amen. That's the night of hearts.