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### “LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

When one of the disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” he responded by telling about a man who had an unexpected visitor stop by at midnight. The visitor, having been on a journey, was hungry. Because there was no food in the house, the man went to a neighbor to borrow some food. But his knock on the door was not welcome at this late hour. The neighbor was in bed and he did not want his entire household disturbed. In no uncertain terms he told this midnight intruder to go away, that he would *not* loan him any food. But the man kept knocking, would not give up, persisting until he received what he needed! (Luke 11:1-10).

*This*—as contrary as it seems to some of our polite and routine prayers—is the way *Jesus* said to pray! A story about a man who hammers away on his neighbor’s door at midnight seems crude—too simple to fit with today’s complicated theology. The idea that we should pray—*as though we had to talk God into it!*—runs counter to traditional concepts. Nevertheless, the principle of persistence is timeless and effective!

Consider briefly some examples of people who received answers to prayer because they would not give up, because they pressed in, because they persisted against the odds—in some cases, as strange as it sounds, even when the Lord (seemingly) had said no!

Seeking the Lord’s blessing, Jacob wrestled through the night with an angelic being. Finally, at dawn, as though heaven itself would deny his request, the angel said: “Let me go.” But Jacob’s faith persisted. “I will *not* let you go, unless you bless me.” And did he receive the blessing, even when he had been rejected? Indeed he did. “And he blessed him there” (Gen. 32:24-29).

After the Israelites had escaped Egypt, they fell into the idolatry of worshipping the golden calf. God said to Moses: “Let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them.” But even in the face of these words, Moses persisted in prayer. He spoke of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—holding God (as it were) to his word. Evidently his prayer moved the heart of God, for the nation was spared (Exod. 32:7-14).

God’s message to king Hezekiah, who was seriously ill, was this: “Set your house

in order, for *you will die and not live.*” Because this message was delivered by *Isaiah*, one of the greatest prophets that ever lived, most would have given up! But, Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, wept, and prayed that this pronouncement would be reversed. As a result, he was healed and received 15 additional years of life! (Isa. 38:1-5).

When the Syrophenician woman asked Jesus to heal her afflicted daughter, “he answered her not a word.” She then turned to the disciples for help and they also rejected her. They said to Jesus: “Send her away; for she cries after us!” Imagine being turned away by the top preachers of the time—the ones who were the closest to Jesus! What chance would she have for success? But she persisted. Being a non-Israelite, she could have been insulted when Jesus said it was not right to take the children’s bread and cast it to dogs. But she was not detoured in her need, pointing out that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Jesus replied: “O woman, great is your faith,” and her daughter was healed! (Matt. 15:21-28).

The blind beggar, Bartimaeus, hearing that Jesus was passing that way, began to cry out for mercy. The crowd rebuked him, told him to “hold his peace.” But great emergencies justify extravagant measures. In his blindness, he had no peace to hold, and he “cried out all the more”! He was not concerned about a dramatic pause here and there for effect. There was no wondering what the neighbors would think. Jesus was passing along the Jericho road and he was determined to get his attention. When he did, his sight was immediately restored (Mark 10:46-52).

Moses obtained an answer even when God said, “Let me alone.” Hezekiah was healed even when God said he would “die and not live.” The Syrophenician woman obtained healing for her daughter even after Jesus “answered her not a word.” If all of these obtained answers *even when the odds were stacked against them*, how much more should we—to whom are given “exceeding great and precious promises” (2 Peter 1:4)—receive the answers we need!

“Ask,” Jesus said, “and you shall receive, that your joy may be *full*” (John 16:24). In many cases when we fail to receive, it is not because God is opposed to the request. It is because we have failed to pray in the way

Jesus said to pray. We must get down to business with God. We must persist, and keep on persisting. Too often our prayers have become only a timid expression of a pious wish.

The Bible says we are to “come *boldly* unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in the time of need” (Heb. 4:16). If we pray in a half-hearted, vague or wavering way, we will not receive from the Lord (James 1:6,7). As the Faith Chapter says, God is “a rewarder of them that *diligently* seek him” (Heb. 11:6). We need to “stir up ourselves” to take hold of God (Isaiah 64:7) and “press in” to claim God’s provision (Luke 16:16).

Of course we believe God is *sovereign!* But we also believe that *prayer changes things*. If everything happens in an inflexible manner, if prayer does not change anything, then why pray? The woman with the issue of blood who pressed through the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus’ garment, could have said: “God is sovereign. If it is his will for me to be healed, I will be healed. There is nothing *I* can do to change anything.” But there *was* something she could do. Though she had been afflicted for 12 years, though she had spent all her money on doctors, she moved beyond her discouragement, pressed in and touched the hem of Jesus’ garment. Healing came instantly. Turning to her, Jesus said: “*Your* faith has made you well” (Luke 8:43-48).

If we desire definite answers to prayer, our approach to God must be *definite*. Suppose I said: “I will meet you.” And you said: “Where?” And I said: “Anywhere.” And you said: “When?” And I said: “Anytime.” WE WOULD NEVER MEET!

When we work on a job, attend school, or keep a doctor’s appointment—*times* and *places* are involved. Should we not be just as definite in this matter of prayer?

As to *place*, we read of times when Jesus “departed into a solitary place, and there prayed” (Mark 1:35; Matt. 14:23). While it is true that we can pray anywhere, sometimes it is helpful to separate ourselves from things that might distract (telephone calls, etc.) and go to a “solitary place” for prayer. Some Christians set aside a certain place in their house as a “prayer room.” There will also be times when we will want to join with others in a place of prayer (Acts 16:13). The details

as to “place” are not too important. What is important is that we take actions that will help us to pray effectively.

As to *time*, some may choose to designate a specific time each day for prayer. In the Psalms we read about prayer being offered three times a day—in the morning, at noon, and in the evening (Psalms 55:17). This was also the practice of Daniel (Dan. 6:10). Among the Jewish people, the hours of prayer corresponded with what we call 9 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. (Acts 10:9, 30; cf. 2:15). When the man who had been lame for 40 years was healed, Peter and John were on their way to the temple for the 3 p.m. hour of prayer (Acts 3:1).

Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, asked the disciples if they could not pray for one hour (Matt. 26:40,41). A fine old hymn uses this wording:

*Sweet hour of prayer,  
That calls me from a world of care....  
In seasons of distress and grief,  
My soul has often found relief,  
And oft escaped the tempter's snare,  
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer.*

Someone says, “I couldn’t pray for an hour—I wouldn’t know what to pray about.” Better pray about *THAT!* One only has to look around to see *many* things about which we need to pray.

Back in the 1960s I drove from Riverside to Porterville, California, where I held meetings. This is a drive of over four hours. I made this trip a time for prayer—praying all the way. Another time, I had the awesome experience of hiking down into the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Leaving the south rim early in the morning, I determined it would be more than a hike—it was also a time of prayer and meditation on the things of God. While still in my teens, seeking to follow the example of Jesus (Luke 6:12,13), I once prayed all night until dawn.

I am not giving these examples in some boasting way. There have been times in my life and ministry when I have spent much time in prayer; but there have been other times I have not. It is easy to get busy with other things—even busy with *ministry* work. But we should recall that Jesus—even when multitudes were coming to hear him and be healed—“withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed” (Luke 5:15,16). If Jesus found it important to pray, shouldn’t we?

If we are too busy to pray, we are *too busy*. As ridiculous as it sounds to the natural man—“who does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are *foolishness* unto

him” (1 Cor. 2:14)—let me say it here quite clearly: The busier we are, the *more* we need to pray—not less.

After Jesus had cast out a demonic spirit from a severely afflicted young man, the disciples asked why they had been unable to do so. “This kind,” Jesus answered, “can come forth by nothing, but by prayer *and fasting*” (Mark 9:14-29). So fasting can provide additional prayer power. Someone told me once: “If you need an answer fast, *fast!*” Fasting, along with prayer, was certainly a practice of the early Christians (Matt. 9:15; Acts 13:3, 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5).

Because eating meals is so much a part of our daily lives, fasting for a day or a few days serves as a constant reminder that we have set aside this time unto the Lord. For most people, fasting is not harmful to the body, and can be beneficial, giving the stomach and intestines a rest. One should drink plenty of water to cleanse poisons from the system. Apparently Jesus drank water during his 40-day fast, for at the end, we are told he was hungry, not thirsty (Matt. 4:2).

During this time, Jesus went out into the wilderness, away from people. If one can get away from *everything* and *everyone* to fast and pray, this is ideal. But this total separation is not always possible because of work schedules or other responsibilities. My advice is this: Don’t wait until everything is “ideal.” I know a man in Canada that fasted for several weeks, even while working as a cook and preparing food on a daily basis!

A 40-day fast is not for everyone—but how about setting aside a shorter period of time or even one day? Though it is not a full fast, some drink only juices for a few days, and spend extra time in prayer. Some will “fast” from television or other entertainment for a period of time, setting aside this extra time for prayer. It is not my purpose to tell you what to do. You can work that out with the Lord—between you and him—as you press into the blessings of answered prayer.

A little Chinese man, a dedicated Christian, was known to have a powerful prayer life. Some people asked what his secret was. He replied: “Walkie-talkie.” They did not understand until, in his broken English, he explained: “When I walkie, I talkie!” He spent time in prayer—not just in church, or at home, but even as he walked, he talked—to the Lord.

For many years now, one of the ways that I pray is while walking. This was true over 40 years ago when I was holding revival meetings for my friend Johnny Otto who pastored

a church in Orland, California. One day Johnny and I decided that after the service that night we would *both* walk around the community, praying, claiming it (as it were) for the Lord (cf. Joshua 1:3). But when the service got over that night, weather had turned off cold and rainy. Nevertheless, we were determined! John pulled out some heavy coats, scarves, and hats for us to wear. As I recall, the hat I wore looked like an explorer’s helmet. Under this a scarf, tied around my chin, covered my ears. What a sight we were, all bundled up!

Late into the night—past midnight as I recall—we were walking along a country road south of town in misting rain. A police car came speeding by. We saw the brake lights go on, as the officer turned around to check us out. I paused, and Johnny—who was walking along perhaps 200 feet behind me—came on up to where I was. The police-man put a light on us and said:

“I just want to ask you guys one question: What are you doing walking along here this time of night?” Johnny spoke up, bluntly, and right to the point: “WE’RE PRAYING!” “Praying?” the officer questioned. “Oh. Well. Alright—that’s all I wanted to know.” With this he hurriedly left, perhaps thinking we were a couple fanatics ready to witness to him about the Lord!

In walking up a mountain trail, I have commonly prayed: “Lord, as I climb this mountain, take me higher in you. Let me rise above the things of the world” (Col. 3:1,2). I purposely use the natural as a type of the spiritual. In passing a bush, I may recall how God spoke to Moses from a burning bush (Exod. 3:2). If I pass a large rock, I may think about how the Lord is our Rock (Psa. 18:2). If I rest beneath its shade, the words of Isaiah about “the shadow of a great rock in a weary land” commonly come to mind (Isa. 32:2). If I come to an oasis with flowing water, I may recall that God comes to us as “streams in the desert” (Isa. 35:6).

As we see the new growth of spring—blossoms on the trees, the hills turning green, and all of nature being renewed—it is not “pagan” if we think of the new life that we have in Christ! “He has made everything beautiful in his time” (Ecc. 3:11).

Wind may remind us of that “rushing mighty wind” of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1,2). Rain may cause us to think of “showers of blessing” that God has promised (Ezek. 34:26). When we see a sunrise we may think of the Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in his wings

(Mal. 4:2). As we behold the wonders of the earth and sky, we stand in awe of Him who is the Creator of all these things (Col. 1:16). Actually God is *everywhere*—we just need to look for him! (Acts 17:27,28).

“He’s Everywhere,” was the title of a song written perhaps 50 years ago. I don’t know the writer’s name (to give proper credit), but the words are wonderful and I give them here the best I can from memory:

*Through storms of doubt and fear I sailed,  
My eyes were blinded by a veil,  
I saw no beauty anywhere in anything.  
Then I drew near the cross where he,  
In shame and sorrow died for me,  
My veil was lifted  
And he taught my heart to see.  
I see him in a baby’s smile,  
I hear him in the wind that sighs.  
He loves me and I know not why,  
He’s everywhere!  
He calls me from a world of care,  
I seek him and I find him there.  
He’s in my heart, I feel him there,  
He’s everywhere!*

When we deeply love someone, *many* things may cause us to think of that person—a song, a word, a certain food, a place, an object—even though these things may be *insignificant in themselves*. So it is in the spiritual realm.

Years ago, something as insignificant as a *clock* provided inspiration for the song “It Is No Secret What God Can Do.” John Wayne had said to Stuart Hamblen, who was visiting in his home one evening, “It is no secret what God can do.” I don’t know the context in which those words were spoken, but when the Hamblens got home, the chimes of their clock rang out 12 midnight. Picking up a piece of paper, he wrote:

*The chimes of time ring out the news,  
Another day is through.  
Someone slipped and fell,  
Was that someone you?  
You may have asked for added strength  
Your courage to renew.  
Do not be disheartened,  
I bring hope to you!  
It is no secret what God can do.  
What he’s done for others,  
He’ll do for you.  
With arms wide open,  
He’ll pardon you,  
It is no secret what God can do.*

Hamblen, who had come to Christ in the famous Los Angeles Billy Graham Crusade back in the late 40s, would years later sing this song with a 5,000 voice choir at a Graham Crusade. The song went around the world. At age 15, the first time I ever played

the piano and sang in church, this was the song I chose.

About this same time in my life, in high school I had an R.O.T.C. (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) class which, as part of the training, included marching in step. One could repeat in his mind: “left, right, left, right,” to keep in step. I decided to say in my mind, “Praise God! Praise God!” as we marched, recalling Psalms 34:1: “His praise shall continually be in my mouth.”

If we are cleaning out the garage, we can pray, “Lord as I get rid of junk, help me to get rid of anything in my life that is not pleasing to you.” While using the vacuum cleaner, we can ask God to cleanse *us* “from all filthiness of the flesh *and* spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1). If we have to wait somewhere, we can pray. If we are driving somewhere, even a short distance, it can be a time of prayer. By so doing, we “redeem the time,” not waste it (Eph. 5:16). Such times of prayer keep us “built UP” spiritually (Jude 20).

Prayer can take various forms. It is not always “give me this” or “give me that.” Meditation, rightly understood, can have great value (Psa. 5:1). Sometimes we may just be silent a while. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psa. 46:10).

There are times we may run out of words in English, and other words, unknown to us, may flow forth. Paul spoke of praying two ways: with words he understood and words that were unknown to him (1 Cor. 14:14,15). Still other times our needs may be so overwhelming that no words of any kind seem adequate, but from deep within “the Spirit makes intercession with groanings that cannot be uttered” (Rom. 8:26,27).

When I am praying, as people I know come to mind, I pray for them. They may have some special need right at that time; but, regardless, prayer is *always* appropriate. Sometimes I send up prayer for people I do not know—it may only be someone I see out the window of a train or bus I am riding, or someone I pass on the street. In the very first verse about prayer in the New Testament, Jesus even told us to pray for our *enemies!* (Matt. 5:44).

To the northwest of Palm Springs is a pass between two 10,000 foot mountains through which wind commonly blows. Designated as a “wind farm,” it has about 3,000 huge wind generators for producing electricity. A Christian pilot who lives in Kentucky has told me in a letter that when he flies over this area and sees the wind generators from the Boeing 757 or 767 he is flying, he always prays for

us! Now when we see planes passing over we think he may be up there, praying for us. So we pray for him. It is a privilege we have to “pray one for another” (James 5:16).

On several occasions I have met for prayer with a number of the pastors in the Palm Springs area. I am certain they all do not agree on every doctrinal point, but *all agree on the need for prayer*, and this they sincerely do—for one another, for their churches, and the community.

Sometimes the word “anything” in the statement of Jesus has been questioned: “If you ask ANYTHING in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). A Christian farmer, needing rain for his crops, may be praying that it will rain on a certain day. But a Christian family, having planned a picnic, may be praying it will NOT rain on this day!

Some, quoting Jesus’ statement about ANYTHING, suppose this means they can receive anything they want: the finest home in town, a Rolls Royce automobile, an expensive yacht, fame, fortune, etc. This arrogant reasoning misses the point. The disciples to whom Jesus spoke these words, had a challenging and extensive mission ahead of them: to take the gospel into all the world. He promised to supply anything they would need—*anything they would need to accomplish this purpose*.

Suppose a man who owned a huge ranch hired me to put up a fence along a remote part of his property. Then suppose he told me: “Here is a pickup truck you can use. It is loaded with fence posts, a large supply of wire, and various tools. Also, inside the truck is a cell phone. If you need *anything*, just call me and I will see that you get it.” By “anything,” he would obviously mean *anything needed to get the job done*. So is it with prayer.

Valid prayer must be *according to the will of God*. John, who recorded the statement about asking “anything,” understood it this way. He would later write: “This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask ANYTHING *according to his will* ... we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1 John 5:14,15).

Another question that is sometimes asked: Does God hear the prayer of sinners? The words, “We know that God does not hear sinners” (John 9:31) are recorded in the Bible, but were not spoken by an inspired prophet or apostle. These were the words of a blind man who had been healed by Jesus, words given under questioning. At this point, he did not even know Jesus was the Son of God

(see verses 35,36). Did God hear the prayer of the man who said: "God be merciful to me a sinner?" Yes, he did (Lk. 18:13,14). God also heard the prayer of Cornelius, while he was yet unsaved (Acts 10:30,31; 11:14). To say that God *never*, under any circumstances, hears the prayer of a sinner, is certainly not true.

There is no reason to suppose that a person who is going the wrong way cannot call out to God for help. God allows U-turns. On the other hand, the prayer promises are *primarily* directed to those who believe and are serving the Lord. "The eyes of the Lord are upon the *righteous*, and his ears are open unto their cry" (Psalms 34:15). It is "the prayer of a *righteous* man that avails much" (James 5:16).

If there are things in our lives that are not pleasing to the Lord, it will hinder our prayers. One verse says, in effect, that a man's prayers can be "hindered" if he does not treat his wife right (1 Peter 3:7). How is that for pointing out a little-known verse!

The story is told about a pastor who overheard a little girl saying her ABCs. After a while he asked what she was doing. It came as a surprise when she told him: "I am praying!" He explained to her that this was not the way to pray. He told her about the proper posture, how to kneel and fold her hands just so, and about the use of various religious phrases. Finally she said, "That is too complicated for me. You pray your way and I'll pray mine. I can't remember all those big words. God is able to take these ABCs and make them into just the right words!" Such was the faith of a child (cf. Matt. 18:1-3).

I feel certain that effective prayer is not

based so much on our words, a certain posture, or ritual. God looks on the heart. He says: "You shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your *heart*" (Jer. 29:13).

You may kneel and pray. You may walk and pray. You may drive and pray. You may fast and pray. You may choose a certain time to pray. You may choose a certain place to pray. You may get others to join you and pray. As long as your *heart* is set on seeking God, I believe any or all of these things can be effective. The main thing is to pray—every day! "Seven days without prayer makes one *weak*."

If you want us to join you in prayer, your request will not be taken lightly. You may write, fax, e-mail, or phone the toll free number. This number is usually for book orders, but feel free to use it for prayer requests. Your message will be recorded and we will take it from there. It is a privilege to be a prayer partner with you (Matt. 18:19).

Be encouraged child of God! If we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, if we persist and don't give up, a breakthrough *will* come. Hang in there, the answer is on the way! God has promised "great and mighty things" when we call on him (Jer. 33:3).

"Now unto him that is able to do exceedingly abundantly *above all that we ask or think*....Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Eph. 3:20,21).

—Ralph Woodrow

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