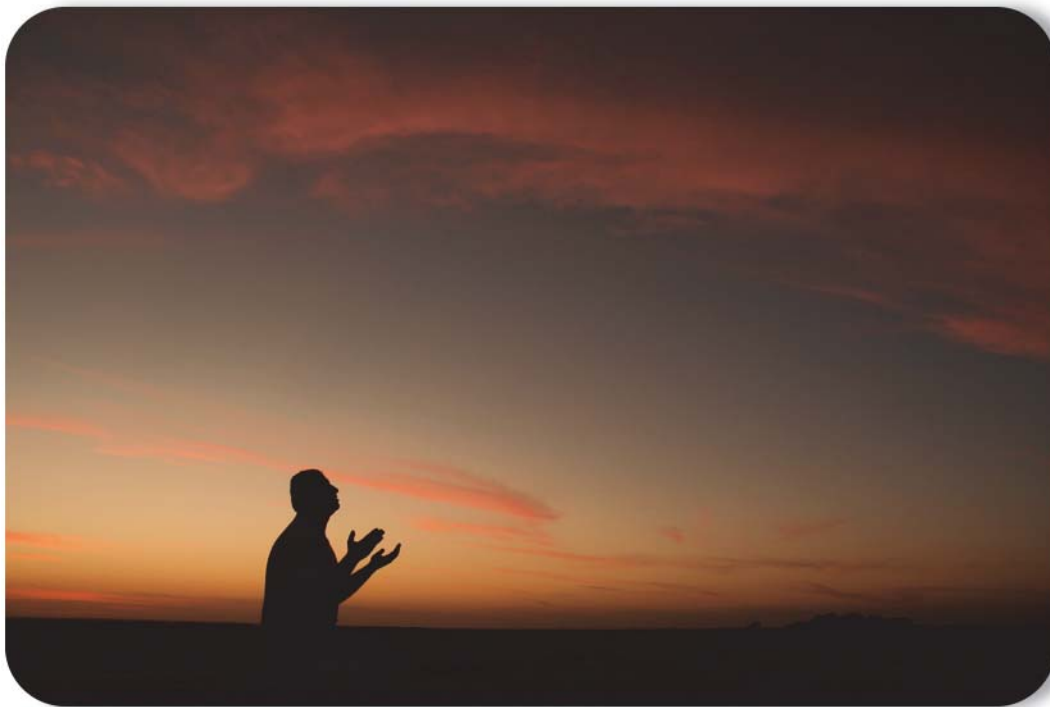


The Potential of Prayer

Parameters of Prayer 5



T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

A ReVision Study

The Potential of Prayer
Parameters of Prayer 5
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Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Potential of Prayer*

We would be more diligent in prayer if we really understood and believed in prayer's *potential*.

Prayer is our great privilege, and to make but little use of this privilege is not in our best interest, and not obedient to the Lord's commands. Prayer can bring us into the presence of God with such illuminating and transforming power, that we learn to see different things, and to see things different. And living this way makes of our lives vessels for God's Spirit to manifest and advance His Kingdom and glory.

But we have to pray, and be diligent about it, if we want to realize the potential of prayer in our walk with and work for the Lord.

Our studies in the six-part series, *Parameters of Prayer*, continues with a word of encouragement and exhortation: I *encourage*, even *urge* you to make the best possible use of this glorious divine privilege, the privilege of prayer, trusting the Lord as you do to enable you to realize more of prayer's potential to bring you into great things and mysteries you've never known before.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, to subscribe to our free instructional newsletters, including *ReVision*, *Scriptorium*, and *Crosfigell*, featuring insights from Scripture and our Celtic Christian forebears.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 A Privilege Abused?

“Thus says the LORD who made it, the LORD who formed it to establish it (the LORD is His name): ‘Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’” Jeremiah 33.2, 3

The privilege of prayer

We’ve all known people who tend to abuse their privileges. Give ‘em an inch, and they’ll take a mile. Grant them a little access, and they’re at your door every day. Let them attain some place of status, and they use it to bully the people they’re supposed to serve.

Abuse of privilege is not a good thing. Almost as bad is not using your privileges at all.

And this is where we find a great many Christians. As followers of Jesus Christ we are the recipients of many benefits and privileges. Of these, none is more amazing or more fraught with potential than the privilege of prayer. As we have seen, prayer enables us to penetrate the veil that separates time from eternity. It launches us into the very throne room of God and establishes us in His presence. It mobilizes the most amazing powers of the universe – indeed, even beyond the universe – to our assistance. Prayer has the potential to bring us before the face of God and into His glory, to transform the condition of our souls, and to affect the state of things on earth in surprising and even astonishing ways. Prayer brings us the mercy and grace we require in our times of need.

Prayer, in short, is the greatest privilege any Christian possesses.

And thus it is the greatest offense *not* to use this privilege any more than we do.

A simple test

Here’s a simple test to determine whether or not you are using the privilege of prayer as God intends. The Apostle Paul, echoing the Lord Jesus (Lk. 18.1), enjoins us to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in every situation and everything (1 Thess. 5.17, 18; Phil. 4.6, 7). Apparently Paul believed that prayer is important for establishing and keeping us in the will of God, according to the purposes of His Kingdom and glory, down to even the smallest, most mundane details of our lives. Everything, every situation, and every moment require the focus, framework, and force that prayer provides, if those situations and moments are to be redeemed as God intends, for His glory and the benefit of our neighbors (1 Thess. 2.12; 1 Cor. 10.31).

So: On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating you could give, how much of your day thus far has been actively and consistently engaged with God in prayer?

Whatever score you may have given yourself, it’s clear we are prosecuting a certain portion of our lives without the benefit of prayer. We are not using the privilege God has granted us in order to make the best use of our time for loving Him and our neighbors.

So no matter how high we might rate ourselves on this little test, there’s always room for improvement! And, if we say “no” to improving in this highest of Christian privileges, what are we saying to our Father in heaven? Or about our relationship with Him?

Our waiting God

God the Father promises that, when we pray – that is, when we pray according to the preconditions for prayer He has established – He will grant us audience and will answer us according to His riches in glory in

Christ Jesus (2 Chron. 7.14; Jer. 33.3).

Pause for a moment to reflect on that. Those of us who are parents can barely manage to get our *children* to listen to us. The same is true with our employers or supervisors: they may listen politely to our complaints and concerns, but often it seems as if they aren't really *hearing*. And what shall we say about our political representatives? Do they hear our concerns, or do they hear only what they want to hear?

But God the Father, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, not only promises to *hear* our prayers but to *answer* them as well! He will show us mercy! He will give us the grace we need for every situation! Prayer is a special form of communication, like speaking in a code that ensures certain designated parties can hear. When we pray, God hears. As He hears, God processes our requests. The Son and Spirit join in to clarify our concerns and needs (Heb. 7.25; Rom. 8.27). Departed saints and mighty angels interrupt their glorious activities to aid in presenting our prayers before the throne of heaven (Rev. 5.8; 8.3). When we pray, it is as if the vast unseen landscape of eternal majesty and glory catches its breath and mobilizes to ensure that God the Father will hear our prayers. And if we know that He hears them, as we seek His mercy and grace, we can be sure that we have the requests we have made of Him (1 Jn. 5.15).

But can we really *know* this? *Know* that our prayers have been heard, and that God the Father of every living creature is readying a response to *our* prayers?

We can, indeed, when we ask according to what God *promises* with respect to prayer, and in line with the *preconditions* for prayer He has established. Praying according to God's promises and preconditions unleashes the power and potential of this great and glorious privilege of prayer.

And if that doesn't excite you to *improve your prayers*, then you need to consider whether this great prayer-hearing God is in fact your Father at all.

For reflection

1. Why is prayer such a great privilege? Do you think most Christians recognize prayer as the privilege it is? Explain.
2. What are some of the *preconditions* for having God hear and answer our prayers?
3. How are you hoping to improve your use of the privilege of prayer?

Next steps – Transformation: What number did you give yourself on this little exercise? Why did you choose that number? What's one thing right now that you would like to see different about your prayers? Share your answers to these questions with a prayer partner, and covenant together to read and discuss the articles in this series.

2 Great Things and Mysteries

“Thus says the LORD who made it, the LORD who formed it to establish it (the LORD is His name): ‘Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’” Jeremiah 33.2, 3

Want to know a secret?

“I know a secret.” From childhood to the present, we can’t resist the allure of secrets. Someone wants to tell us something, but insists we have to keep it to ourselves, and we just can’t wait to hear it. We want to be in the know. To have a secret is to be in on something concerning which others simply have no clue.

Something in us longs to know secret, forbidden, inaccessible things – the bigger and more spectacular, the better. To know these things in such a way as to *own* them, to *possess* them and enjoy the satisfaction of participating in something special. And this is part of the potential of prayer. The God Who hears and answers prayers promises to show us great things, mighty things, and mysteries we’ve never known before. And that promise never grows old. It’s always fresh, and it’s always true. God always has more great things and mysteries to show us than we’ve ever known.

The force of our text is actually a little stronger than most English translations convey. A more literal translation would be something like this: “Call on Me, and keep calling, and I will answer you; and I will cause you to know great things and mighty, inaccessible, secret things, which you have not known.” God baits us to seek Him in prayer with the promise of big, glorious, hidden things – secrets, but not the kind He ever expects us to keep to ourselves, rather, the kind He intends us to rejoice in and shout from the house tops.

Prayer can bring us into great things and mysteries, and there we can be utterly transformed.

The greatness of God

Through prayer God promises to show us great things and mysteries, things that are not otherwise available to us, and that we cannot obtain or possess apart from prayer. What might some of these be?

For a glimpse of these, we need look no further than the rest of Jeremiah 33. First, God holds out to His praying people a *vision of Himself* – of His great power, saving purpose, and coming redemption. Prayer has the potential to deepen our knowledge of God, our *experience* of and *relationship* with Him. As we call upon Him in prayer, God begins to reveal Himself in powerful and mysterious ways, with the result that we come to know Him better, and are drawn more deeply into His glory.

In Jeremiah 33 God caused His people to know that He was greater than the power of fierce nations (vv. 4, 5); able to restore blessings and spiritual vitality to a rebellious people (vv. 6, 8); and powerful to make His despised people a source of joy and wonder to all the nations of the earth (vv. 9-13). You can bet that the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day had never seen anything like *that* before.

In prayer, as we draw near to God, approaching Him according to His Word, we discover Him to be greater, more powerful, and more loving, forgiving, and amazing than we’ve ever known. The Father, Son, and Spirit meet us in prayer, and make themselves known to us in ever-deeper and more expansive ways. And we discover this always-fresh-and-greater vision of God, over and over, greater and greater, with increasing hope and delight, the more we seek the Lord in prayer.

His Kingdom and salvation

Also among the great things God causes us to know in prayer are the scope, beauty, and might of His

Kingdom and salvation. In prayer we meet with *Jesus our King*, Who sits on the throne of David, ruling the nations in justice and righteousness (Jer. 33.14-16). We commune with Him Whose power none can resist or overthrow (Ps. 2), and Who wields that power on our behalf, so that we might be safe and secure in Him (Jer. 33.16).

As we pray we hear Jesus interceding for us, our great High Priest (vv. 17, 18), and we hear again the Lord reciting His covenant promises of blessedness and blessing, redounding to us through our King and Savior, Jesus, the offspring of David (vv. 19-22; cf. 2 Pet. 1.4).

In prayer, in the presence of our Savior and King, we *lift up the cup of salvation*, celebrating Him Who has purchased and poured this great boon for us, and we drink our salvation down with greater fullness, joy, and hope than we have ever known before, every time we come to the Lord in prayer (Ps. 116.1-14).

The glory which is to come

Finally, in prayer we *glimpse the glory of God* and, entering into His glory, gain a foretaste of the greater, unbroken and unending glory, which is to come (vv. 23-25). In the presence of God we know *fullness of joy* and *pleasures forevermore* (Ps. 16.11), for we enter into the joy and pleasure of the Lord Himself, are renewed in His mercy, and have our minds and hearts directed toward the greater and more continuous, ever-flourishing restoration which Jesus Christ is preparing for us even now (v. 25; cf. Jn. 14.1-3).

God wants us to know Him in all His greatness, greater and greater, more and more (Jn. 17.3; 2 Pet. 3.18). We are privileged to know the secrets of His Kingdom, beginning with God Himself. He wants us to drink more deeply of His Kingdom and salvation. And He is ready to bathe us in His glory as preparation and foretaste of the eternal glory to come.

But He will only do this in prayer, as we call on Him, and keep calling on Him, submitting to His terms and preconditions, and longing to know what He has to show us – secrets to be known and proclaimed, greater and more wondrous and glorious than we've ever known before.

For reflection

1. Can you say that, when you pray, you truly experience the presence of God? Explain.
2. What are some of the *mysteries* or *secrets* of life in the Kingdom about which you would like to know more? Can you know these apart from prayer?
3. How does prayer help you to stand in the hope of God's glory (Rom. 5.1, 2)?

Next steps – Preparation: When was the last time you glimpsed great things and mysteries like this in prayer? How might you arrange your prayers so that what God promises in Jeremiah 33 is more consistently what you acquire? Talk with a pastor, church leader, or soul friend about these questions.

3 Unexplainable Peace

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4.6, 7

Anxious about everything

These are anxious times. The economy is flimsy. Terror and disease are on the rise. Relationships are more fragile than ever. Morality shape-shifts with abandon; schools flounder; jobs evaporate; wealth disappears, or simply disappoints; and death stalks us daily and stands waiting for us at the end of our journey.

Have a nice day.

In short, there's a good bit to fret and worry about, all of which robs people of their sense of wellbeing – their *peace*. Or perhaps you haven't noticed the increase of commercials and advertising promoting drugs to relax us or help us sleep, resorts and cruises to enable us to get away from it all, offers for gold and silver to shore up your diminishing retirement, and new cars, new clothes, new credit cards, or new cosmetics to allow you to become someone other than that person whose anxious fears just won't go away.

These are anxious times, friends, and we tend to be an anxious people. We keep reaching, grabbing, and lurching after peace, peace, but there is no lasting peace to be gained.

Not, at least, by means such as I have thus far mentioned.

Prayer and peace

The Apostle Paul tells us that anxiousness need not rob the praying Christian of his peace. Whenever we feel that tug of anxiousness in our breast, we don't need to take a pill, hop in our new ride, or make reservations for a cruise. We simply need to pray.

Paul holds out prayer as an *antidote to anxiousness* and the *pathway to peace*. But prayer will only have this effect to the extent that we actually make use of prayer. We can't expect anything from God if we won't call on Him for it. Here Paul enlarges and clarifies that condition somewhat.

Anxiousness, it seems, requires a certain kind of praying if we are to overcome it and know the peace of God. Paul says our prayers against anxiousness must include supplications and thanksgiving. Now prayer consists of many things, as we have seen. Prayers include praises to God, interludes of silent meditation as we reflect on God's greatness or meditate on His Word, periods of listening in silence for some prompting or incitement of the Spirit, intercessions for others, invocations of God's promises, recitations of His works and His Word, celebrations of His grace, singing and shouting, and, of course, supplications and thanksgiving. While we'll want to learn how to master all these, when our *peace* is threatened and anxiousness is skulking around the door, supplications and thanksgiving appear to be the best defense.

OK, but what does this mean?

A supplication is a specific request. To supplicate is to beg, petition, or plead with God concerning a specific matter or situation. Implied in this is that we should be able to identify whatever is threatening our peace and talk with the Lord specifically about it, placing the matter or situation in His hands and trusting that He Who does all things well will take care of this for us. That doesn't relieve us of responsibility; rather, it simply gives us the confidence that, as we act in good faith, God will be at work within us, willing and doing of His good

pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13).

But we need to remember that what we may expect from the Lord is *not* the answer to our prayers as we might dictate it; what we may expect is *grace to help in our time of need*. So we'll need to leave it to the Lord to determine just what form that grace should take.

By giving thanks when we are feeling anxious, we declare our confidence in God Who works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). We don't give thanks because we *feel* thankful, but because we want God to know we trust Him and are already looking forward with gratitude to the good and perfect way He will banish anxiousness and flood our souls with peace.

Unexplainable peace

The peace that comes from such prayers cannot be explained; it is beyond understanding. It has to be experienced. It stills every anxious thought and relieves every worry. We couldn't explain to someone what this peace *is* or how it works within the chambers of our soul, but we know it, we possess it; and worries, doubts, and fears simply cannot overcome it. When the grace of God meets us at our point of need, we can know the peace that passes understanding, *even though nothing may have changed in our outward circumstances*. God's peace floods us when we come seeking it in prayer.

In anxious times like these, peace that banishes anxious fears is a rare commodity. Such peace is only available through prayers of supplication and thanksgiving. Isn't this the kind of peace – peace that passes understanding – you'd like to know more consistently in your life? Look to God in prayer, with supplication and thanksgiving, and the peace that passes understanding will be yours.

For reflection

1. What are some things that can cause you to feel anxious or uncertain? How can you learn to see these as divine summons to seek Him in prayer?
2. Why can we give thanks *in* all things, if not necessarily *for* all things?
3. Does knowing God's peace mean that all our outward circumstances are exactly as *we* would have them? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Do you ever feel anxious? Make a list of the things that cause you to feel anxious. Then take those things to God in supplication and prayer. Wait on Him until He shows you Himself in a great and mighty new way, and floods you with His peace.

4 Great Working Power

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. James 5.16

What can the righteous do?

In the eleventh psalm David responds to a counselor who advises him, in the face of some enemy threat, to head for the high ground, get out of town, beat a path of retreat.

In this adviser's view of the situation, David did not have sufficient power to prevail against his opponent, so his best course of action was to retreat and live to fight another day (Ps. 11.1-3).

But David had a better idea for what the righteous person can do in such times: "In the LORD I put my trust..." (v. 1.). What did he mean by that? "The LORD *is* in His holy temple, the LORD's throne *is* in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men" (v. 4). David reminded his friend that God knew all about his situation, and David was determined to hasten to His presence and bring this potentially anxiety-producing situation to the Lord.

In a time when *power* was lacking, David determined to go to God in prayer. What, exactly, was David expecting from such prayers?

To be concise, he was expecting God to do something by showing him what he should do.

God knows, and God tests

David's situation would not have escaped God's notice: "His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men" (v. 4). Nothing sneaks up on God; nothing takes Him by surprise. Nothing arises in our lives which catches Him off guard or is too great for Him to handle. We may not have power – whether of wisdom, skill, or inner strength – to prevail in the face of whatever is threatening us, but God does. And He Who loves us and sent His Son for our salvation, and Who hears and answers our prayers, sees what we're going through, and is ready to exercise power wherever we are lacking in it.

But God also uses trials like this to test us: "The LORD tests the righteous..." (v. 5). His *testing* is not the pass/fail sort. It's more like a blacksmith *testing* the malleability of his iron by thrusting it into the fire and banging it with a hammer against an anvil. He's not trying to destroy that piece of metal, but to fashion it into something useful, solid, and good.

But in order to accomplish that, he needs to turn up the heat and bring on the pressure.

Every test or trial that comes our way, every matter or situation that might cause us to become anxious, is simply one of God's ways of strengthening our souls. If we *flee* from such situations – refuse to face or deal with them, rather than flee to God – then our souls will not grow stronger but will become weak and fearful and anxious. When God "turns up the heat" and "brings the hammer down" on us, our response must not be one of avoidance, but of seeking Him in prayer. If we will pray, the heat may not decrease, and the hammering may not subside, but we will grow strong through grace within, so that, through the power of prayer, we may be at peace *over* our circumstances, rather than anxious and helpless *under* them.

Unleashing power

David believed that God could handle his situation. Yes, it might get worse before it gets better, but a righteous man, looking to the righteous God, wants only to discover a righteous work to do. Then he can

follow God's Word and know the indwelling power of His Spirit. In verse 7 David wrote, "For the LORD *is* righteous; He loves righteousness; the upright shall behold His face" (my translation). In times of trial we should not be looking for some way of *avoiding* whatever threatens us, but of *engaging* it with an appropriate work of grace-born righteousness. The "face" of God refers to the Spirit and Word of God (cf. Ezek. 39.29; Ps. 119.135), as well as His presence, favor, and strength. David resolved to seek God in His Word, and in the indwelling strength of His Spirit, so that he might learn something holy and righteous and good to do in light of the danger that threatened him, knowing that the goodness of the Lord can overcome every evil (Rom. 12.21).

In so acting, David expected that God would take care of the rest: "But the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain coals; fire and brimstone and a burning wind *shall be* the portion of their cup" (vv. 5, 6). David perhaps didn't expect these things *literally*—this is poetry, after all — or perhaps *not at this time*. But he did believe that if he stood his ground, took his case before the Lord — with supplication and thanksgiving — and waited on Him to show His face and make known His will, whatever David was shown to do would unleash the power of God in this situation, overcome the evil, and make David stronger and more useful in His Kingdom.

James reminds us that the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Prayer should be a context in which we seek the power of God, and the power of God is the power to *overcome* evil, not merely to *avoid* or *escape* it. You may have to visit the Lord's throne a few times and be prepared to linger there, listening and waiting and supplicating and giving thanks. But in His way and time, the Lord will show you the righteous way to overcome whatever is threatening your peace, and grant you the power to do so.

Prayer gives us power to act according to the will of God, and when we act, God's power meets us and carries us through.

For reflection

1. How should we expect the power of God to flow through us in any situation? Look at John 7.37-39 and Acts 1.8. How do these passages guide your thinking?
2. Is this power really sufficient to help us overcome evil with good? Explain.
3. What can keep us from realizing this kind of power?

Next steps: - Preparation: God gives us power to live for Him in our Personal Mission Fields. [Click here](#) to watch a brief video about how you can identify and begin seeing God's power at work in you in your Personal Mission Field.

5 The Promise of God's Spirit

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," He said, "you have heard from Me...But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1.4, 8

You have to want it

Gaining access to the promise and power of prayer begins with *wanting to improve* prayer. When we get to the place where we're no longer satisfied with our prayers, when we feel like we're missing something, and realize that we're not making good use of an almost unbelievable privilege, then perhaps we'll want to do something about that.

That's apparently where Jesus' disciples arrived fairly early in His ministry with them. They noticed something in the disciples of John the Baptist – their prayers were so sincere, so earnest, and so enviable. One of Jesus' disciples recognized that his own prayers were lacking something, compared to those of John's disciples, so in Luke 11.1, he appealed to Jesus to teach him and the other disciples how to pray.

Jesus was more than willing to comply. In His answer, which we have already looked at in this series, we see several important teachings about prayer. First, Jesus provided a *pattern* for their prayers, an outline for praying which we know as the Lord's Prayer (vv. 2-4). Second, He told His disciples that they must be *persistent* in prayer, even to the point of "annoying" God with their prayers, refusing to relent from prayer until God grants what they seek (vv. 5-10; cf. Is. 62.6, 7). Next, Jesus encouraged His disciples to pray by reminding them of the *promise* of prayer – that God their heavenly Father loves them and will grant what they seek when they come to Him in prayer.

And then, when Jesus had provided these practical guidelines for improving prayer, He dropped a bombshell on the disciples which must have left them scratching their heads and saying, "What the...?"

He knows our needs

There's a corny commercial I've seen a few times. It shows a guy on an airplane, rubbing his back as if in pain. He rings for the flight attendant and, when she shows up, the man asks for something to help his back pain. She offers him a common aspirin tablet. He, thinking she doesn't understand him, stands up and rubs his back and says, "No, I don't have a headache; I have back pain." She offers the same remedy, because she knows what he needs and that what she has to offer will do the trick.

Jesus promised that our heavenly Father knows what we need even before we ask Him (Matt. 6.8). And so, to conclude his brief seminar on how to pray, Jesus said to His disciples, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

Again, just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus did the same thing. He taught them for forty days about the Kingdom of God, then told them to wait for the promise of God. They, eager to get the *power* of His Kingdom, asked if this was the time when He would grant the Kingdom to them. He answered by promising to give them the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.7, 8).

In neither of these situations were the disciples asking about the Holy Spirit. They didn't have "Holy Spirit shortage," as they saw it; they had a prayer deficiency, and a Kingdom longing. Nevertheless, the request and remedy were the same in each case: You want to learn to pray? Pray for the Holy Spirit. You're seeking the

Kingdom of God? Wait for the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is what our Father knows we need, regardless of what we may be seeking from Him in prayer.

The gift of the Spirit

This only makes sense. After all, the Holy Spirit is the Giver of life (Jn. 6.63), our Helper in every situation (Jn. 14.16), and the One Who teaches us the righteous works of God (Jn. 14.26). He reveals our sins to us (Jn. 16.8-11), guides us in the way of righteousness (Ps. 139.23, 24), brings forth spiritual fruit and gifts within us (Gal. 5.22, 23; 1 Cor. 12.7-11), empowers us to do what is pleasing to God as witnesses to Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 4.20; Phil. 2.13; Acts 1.8), and brings us more fully into our calling as citizens of the Kingdom of God, privileged to know Him in glory (Rom. 14.17, 18; 2 Cor. 3.12-18). The Holy Spirit is the Keeper of the great and mighty things of the Lord (Eph. 3.20), the Agent of His peace (Gal. 5.22, 23), and the Power for every good and evil-overcoming work (Jn. 6.63).

So, while we're rubbing our backs, seeking some relief from the pains and stresses of life's journey, our heavenly Father is holding out His Spirit as the remedy for everything we seek from Him in prayer.

Whatever we ask in prayer, God will only ultimately give us Himself as the answer to what we seek. *He* is the grace for all our times of need. For Him to do otherwise would be to invite us into idolatry. This is not to say that God does not often grant us such things as direction in life, provision of our material needs, relief in the midst of trials, and the like. He does, but what He is ultimately offering with those fleeting, temporal remedies and solutions is the presence of His indwelling Spirit with exceeding abundant power, more than we have ever dared to ask or think, power to overcome even the greatest evils we might have to confront, and to rest in the peace and joy of the Lord (Heb. 12.1, 2).

Which makes me wonder: Might the great and mighty things of God, the peace that passes understanding, and the power that overcomes evil in every area of life – might such gifts of God be *more readily available to us* if we simply began, sustained, and ended our prayers by pleading for the Spirit of God Himself?

For reflection

1. How do you presently experience the power of God's Spirit in your life? Do you think more of this power is available to you? Explain.
2. Meditate on Philippians 2.13, Ephesians 3.20, and Acts 1.8. For what primary ends is God willing to grant us the power of His Spirit?
3. Meditate on Galatians 5.16-23. How can believers help one another to walk in the Spirit rather than the flesh?

Next steps – Preparation: Begin today clothing your prayers in an overall request for the Spirit of God. Practice doing this throughout the day. At the end of the day reflect on how praying this way has affected your prayers. What have you learned? Are you praying any more frequently? Are you finding more perspective or rest in your prayers? Keep this up tomorrow, and share your experience of doing this with a Christian friend.

6 The Joy and Praise of the Earth

*I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem;
They shall never hold their peace day or night.
You who make mention of the LORD, do not keep silent,
And give Him no rest till He establishes
And till He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth.* Isaiah 62.6, 7

Come inside!

When our kids were small, Susie and I would sometimes watch *Sesame Street* with them. One vignette we particularly enjoyed was designed to stimulate logical thinking: If you're experiencing a problem, rather than complain and whimper, look for a simple solution.

In this vignette, Grover shows up at Kermit's door. The Frog is inside reading the paper in front of a warm fire, while Grover stands knocking at the window, outside in the snow. He keeps complaining about the cold. He's shivering, shouting, struggling to get warm, while all he has around his cute furry body is a scarf. He has a problem, and he is appealing to Kermit for help.

Kermit looks at the audience with that "Duh" expression, then says to the lovable blue monster, "Grover, come inside!"

Life's tough. It can seem cold and indifferent to us as we try to deal with each day's issues and challenges. We whine and complain and wish things were different, but life just keeps blowing against us and threatening to freeze us in our tracks. We are not well prepared to deal with the challenges that face us, and sometimes we just want to shout out loud for some help.

Meanwhile, our heavenly Father, His Son our King, and the Holy Spirit cry out to us with one voice: "Come inside!" (Jer. 33.3)

Power to renew

Prayer holds the promise of peace and power to overcome every threat to our wellbeing, all our anxieties, concerns, troubles, and trials. Through prayer we may know the warmth and reviving presence of the Spirit of God. Why do so many of us prefer to continue shivering against the bitter cold of our lives rather than come inside to the throne room of God in prayer?

But prayer has even more potential than this. In a day when the Christian faith and the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ have lost much of their luster, and we are becoming a people more likely to be scorned than joined, only the power of God can bring *revival, renewal, and awakening*. Only the power of God can so transform His Church, that His beauty, goodness, and truth rise within it and are dispersed from it like the refreshing dew of the morning (Pss. 48, 110). Only the power of God can heal the divides that exist within His Church (Acts 6.1-6), cause the light of Jesus to fill and shine through us (Eph. 4.10), and bring the reconciling and restoring power of Jesus for making all things new in the world (Rev. 21.5). Only the power of God can make His Church a community deserving of the praise, respect, and attention of our lost neighbors.

And that power of God is only available to us through prayer.

God's guidelines

God clearly intends to make His Church a thing of praise in the earth once again. We can hardly imagine that.

Attendance is down. The media mocks the faith, academics deride religion, our secularized neighbors are too busy with their getting-and-spending lifestyles to have time for church, and *nobody we know* considers the Church – *even their own church!* – to be a thing of beauty and a source of joy in their community.

But God has called His Church into existence to be a Body so filled with His presence, so luminous with His glory, so moved by His goodness and love, and so empowered by His Spirit, that the peoples of the world will be *eager* to learn from the Church how they, too, might become part of such an admirable and praiseworthy endeavor (cf. Mic. 4.1-8).

God intends to make His Church an object of the world's praise. And to do this, He is placing people on the walls, so that they can see the world as it exists without, and the community of faith as it struggles within; and so that, elevated above both, they can cry out day and night, taking no rest and giving Him no rest, until He does what He intends to do in making His Church a praise in the earth once again.

Here the Scripture's teaching about praying always and in everything, seeking the Kingdom and Spirit of God, waiting on the Lord and listening for His guidance, coming and going in faith and obedience, and asking, seeking, and knocking at the throne of grace – all this comes into focus. Be diligent in prayer! Take no rest in your prayers, and give God no rest, pleading with Him to make His Church a praise in all the earth. He will do it, but He will only do it in response to the prayers of His people.

When it comes to seeing God's people revived, His churches renewed, and the world awakened for the Gospel, the power of God will flow in response to the prayers of His faithful people, or it will not flow at all.

For reflection

1. What could your church do to have a greater focus on the work of prayer?
2. What would your church look like if it were a praise in your community?
3. What can you do to enlist more of your fellow church members to take their place on the wall in prayer?

Next step – Conversation: So, improving our time for prayer is a matter of both quantity and quality. What's one thing you might do to start improving the quality of your prayers? Do you think if the quality of your prayers improved, that might affect the time you devote to prayer? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

7 Diligent in Prayer

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication... Acts 1.14

A parable of devotion in prayer

Kevin of Glendalough (fl. 6th century) was a man diligent in prayer. He was renowned for his intense and protracted seasons of laboring before the throne of grace, giving the Lord no rest (Is. 62.6, 7) as he lavished the Savior with praise and thanksgiving and importuned Him on behalf of the flock under his care.

His contemporaries greatly admired his diligence in prayer, and were at pains to describe the ardor, fervor, and duration of his many prayers. So, in typical Celtic style, they related Kevin's life of being diligent in prayer by a story, written down three centuries after his death – not intending that it should be taken literally, but that all should understand it as a parable of his devotion, and an exhortation to follow his example.

On one occasion, the story goes, Kevin retired to his cell to pray, extending his hands *crossfigell* – outward in the shape of a cross, the Celtic practice of the “cross vigil.” The palms of his hands, turned upward to receive mercy and grace, extended out the windows of his cell. So long did he pray, the story goes, and with such still persistence and focus, that a blackbird came and made its nest in his upturned palm. Kevin persevered in prayer through all the period of nest-building, egg-laying, young-raising, and fledging, until at last, he returned from his vigil to the other duties required of him as head of a prominent monastery.

The point, of course, is that Kevin learned the example of Jesus and the apostles well, and followed carefully in their steps: he was a man diligent in prayer. He prayed always and in everything, seeking mercy and grace to help in his times of need.

What does this mean, and what would it look like for us to be so diligent in prayer?

A primary duty of ministry

The apostles were devoted to prayer, not just here, as they retired to the upper room for that 10-day season of waiting on the Lord to send His Spirit, but as one of the two principal duties of their pastoral ministry (Acts 6.4). As we have seen, we find the apostles leading the people of God in prayer, using the psalms – the scripts for prayer – that God Himself had provided (Acts 4.23-27). We see them keeping the daily hours of prayer, stopping all other activities in order to meet with the Lord at regular times each day (Acts 3.1; 10.9). In prayer we find the apostles *waiting* on the Lord – not just speaking to Him, but meditating and receiving from Him fresh insights and visions, and clear guidance concerning what they must do each day (Acts 1.15ff, 10.9ff; 18.9). We hear them exhorting us to pray about everything (Phil. 4.7), pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17), and to let prayer be the defining characteristic of our existence in these last days (1 Pt. 4.7; 2 Pt. 3.11, 12). We read in their epistles that they themselves were much given to prayer, and in the most eloquent and powerful of terms. We find them praying in the face of grave danger (Acts 16.25), and before making significant decisions concerning the direction of their ministries (Acts 13.1-3). We learn that they actually met the Lord in prayer, as He revealed Himself to them and spoke with them concerning His purpose and plan (Acts 18.9; 13.1-5). So important to the apostles was the work of prayer that not even emergencies threatening the peace of the church, nor new ministries urgently needed, could distract them from this duty (Acts 6.4).

To be diligent in prayer means to have this kind of prayer life. It is the life of prayer commended to all true servants of Christ.

Devoted to prayer?

Would you describe yourself as diligent in prayer? Would you like this to be the manner of your praying? How can we want anything less than what we see our Fathers in the faith exemplifying, particularly those of us who have responsibility for the care of the Lord's flocks?

The place to begin in becoming diligent in prayer is to *desire* such a life of prayer as your highest priority. You will not begin to set aside the time such devotion requires, or to take up the disciplines of praying and singing the psalms, meditating and envisioning the exalted Christ, or waiting on Him in prayer until you first of all *desire* such a life of prayer.

A wise Christian friend once reminded me that we will do in our lives only and exactly what we *want* to do, and nothing else. And when we *want* to pray, when we *want to be diligent* in prayer, then praying always and in everything for the mercy and grace of our heavenly Father will simply be the kind of people we are. We have the potential of becoming *diligent in prayer*, and thus to find in prayer the *potential* for full and fruitful Kingdom living in Jesus Christ. But we will not realize this potential until we *desire* prayer like Jesus, the apostles, and Kevin of Glendalough.

Begin today to seek the Lord on this matter. Plead with Him so to work in your heart and mind that you might long, like the psalmist, for time to be in His presence in prayer (Ps. 42.1, 2). Ask Him to expose and remove everything that you desire *more* than prayer, everything that *keeps you from prayer*, and *every doubt* that lingers in your soul, suggesting that prayer is not as important as we have been insisting in this series. Make it your daily discipline, and throughout the day, to plead with God to teach you how to be diligent in prayer, and to lead you more consistently and joyously into it.

You will never understand the utter joy of prayer, nor enter fully into its beauty and power, until you become one who, like Kevin and the apostles, is truly diligent in prayer.

For reflection

1. "Would you describe yourself as diligent in prayer? Would you like this to be the manner of your praying?" What do you say?
2. What practical steps can you begin taking at once in order to become more diligent in prayer?
3. Do you have a prayer partner, or a soul friend? Would having such a person in your life help you to become more diligent in prayer? Explain.

Next steps: Do you have a Christian friend who will help you in this effort to become more devoted in prayer? Share this article with your friend. Then meet to discuss ways you might encourage one another to greater consistency and power in prayer.

For reflection

1. How would you summarize the potential of prayer for a new believer?
2. What have you learned about receiving from God mercy and grace to help in your time of need? What does this mean? What does it not *necessarily* mean? But why is it always just the right thing?
3. Why is it that so much of what we might seek from the Lord in prayer comes down to knowing more of the Spirit's indwelling presence and power?
4. What obstacles can keep you from becoming more diligent in prayer? How can you overcome these?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about the potential of prayer? How do you expect this to affect your prayer life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.