

Ascension and Pentecost

praying in the Spirit

AIMS

To explore what the Apostle Paul meant by the phrase to “pray in the Spirit” and to see what we might learn about going deeper in our relationship with God as we engage in things which are spiritual and therefore outside of our experience in the physical world. This may include the gift of tongues but we should not be limited by that one understanding of the phrase.

Let me tell you

For me, being able to pray in the Spirit using the gift of tongues really transformed my prayer life and my relationship with God. At the time I was leading the ‘singing group’ in church. Being able to pray about this group - what we would sing each week, what we might talk and pray about - without always needing to use human words was very liberating for me. I discovered that praying in tongues didn’t bypass my intelligence, but it gave me access to something deeper, more instinctive within myself. I’m not naturally an instinctive, ‘gut type’ person. I evaluate everything, ponder and generally like to be sure I understand everything before acting. So this gift of tongues opened up a whole new dimension for me. I knew I was still in control of what was happening as I could start and stop any time I wanted. It wasn’t something taking me over or my own emotionalism – I’m really not that type! This was a different way of communicating with God which helped me open more of myself to Him and therefore receive more from Him.

Since those early days, the call to prayer has deepened and intensified. Praying in the Spirit gives me more scope than my limited human brain power can provide. I’ve discovered that praying in the Spirit is a good lead into worship, meditation, contemplation or a time of listening. It’s helpful for intercession or when I feel totally useless, angry or empty before God. Praying in the Spirit is a useful tool in my prayer kit and I’m very grateful to God for His grace in making such a strange but useful gift available to us.

INTRODUCTION

Prayer is a supernatural activity. In prayer, we engage in conversation with the great God of heaven who invites us to come to him as his beloved sons and daughters. This does not seem a natural thing at all yet it is part of what God created us for. We are made in the image of God and we are made for relationship with God. We need God’s help in order to pray just as a child needs help from its parents to develop communication skills. The gift of the Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus to all who believe in him. We need the help of God’s Spirit to develop our relationship in this spiritual realm. We can use our minds to pray intelligently based on all that we have learned but we also need to discover how to pray from our spiritual heart and allow the Lord to draw us deeper into experiencing his kingdom life. Jesus taught that there needs to be spiritual rebirth for us to see and enter this new realm (John 3:3-6).

Biblical Background

Romans chapter 8 tells us that both the risen Lord Jesus and the Spirit intercede for us (vs 26 & 34). We don’t know what we ought to pray so the Spirit is there to help. Jesus’ teaching on the person and work of the Holy Spirit in John chapters 14-16 helps us understand that the Spirit lives in us and so journeys with us through all our experiences of life – including prayer. Jesus came alongside those first disciples as he modelled Kingdom living and he promised that, when he left, the Holy Spirit would come alongside – another comforter like Jesus himself (John 14:16). He tells them that the Holy Spirit “will take from what is mine and make it known to you” (John 16:15) and that he “will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). How can we pray without his help?

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If we are struggling to pray then the Holy Spirit is the one to ask for help.

In his famous passage about the armour of God in Ephesians 6, Paul concludes by calling for these young Christians to *"pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests"* (v18). The battle they are in is not a physical one so the weapons required, including their prayers, need to be those of a spiritual nature. Jude also writes: *"build yourselves up in the most Holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit"* (v20).

In another letter, Paul urges the church at Corinth not to be uninformed about spiritual things (1 Cor 12:1). Clearly, some had overemphasised "charismatic" experiences and certain gifts of the Spirit and this had become an issue both of division and of a false sense of pride. The overall thrust of Paul's response to their (unrecorded!) questions to him, however, was to call for balance. He puts everything in the context of love but he does not in any way play down the importance of things of the Spirit (1 Cor 14:1). As he addresses concerns about the gifts of tongues and prophecy he thanks God that he does speak in tongues (v18) and would like everyone to (v5) but stresses that other things are more important. He says *"I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind"* (v15). He goes on to refer to singing and praising *"with my/your spirit"*. What does he mean? Should we all be able to engage in such activity?

The gift of tongues

For some Christians the gift of tongues, or speaking in unknown languages (human or angelic tongues in 1 Cor 13: 1), is a key resource in their prayer lives. When words run out this allows them to go deeper into prayer without rationalising everything. It is like getting caught up into heavenly places (Eph 2:6) and going deeper into praise or intercession. Paul may well be referring to tongues when he writes about praying with his spirit as well as with his mind. He would like everyone to be able to share in that kind of prayer experience as it is truly up-building: *"a person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally in the Lord."* (1 Cor 14:4 NLT), but he would rather see prophetic gifts released for the benefit of the whole church.

For Paul, the gift of tongues was not the be all and end all. There are many Spirit-filled Christians around today who don't have that particular gift yet still know what it is to pray in the Spirit. There are many facets to being open to the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer and various other gifts such as wisdom, knowledge and prophecy can all be vital in the prayer life of a local church. Many do gain great benefit from having the gift of tongues and it is fine to eagerly desire such gifts but one must also recognise that God in his grace distributes gifts in the Body of Christ as he chooses (Roman 12:6) and for the benefit of all: *"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."* (1 Cor 12:7).

Cooperating with the Holy Spirit in prayer

Often we pray according to our own agendas. Praying in the Spirit is a deliberate act of letting go and allowing oneself to be directed by God. Whether in our personal prayer times or in corporate settings it is good to open up to the Lord and allow his Spirit to come and direct what happens. This can be truly liberating but also a trifle scary!

Listening to God in prayer requires patience and, in group settings, some clear leadership and a good deal of self restraint by all. Thoughts may emerge, Scripture verses come to mind or even pictures and specific words. The Spirit can lead us in all kinds of ways.

The Holy Spirit is specifically linked with power (*dunamis* in Greek) in the Bible. Prayer can become far more powerful as well as better focussed when we are Spirit led. The key verse here from Ephesians 6 is given in the context of teaching about the spiritual battle that we

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are in. We need powerful weapons to even begin to take on such cosmic forces. We are also told to stay alert and be persistent in our prayers. All this is challenging when left to our own resources as we can quickly run dry but as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit we are led into new levels of engagement and effectiveness in prayer.

Praying in the Spirit is like taking a power tool out of the toolbox. And power tools come in all shapes and sizes with many different uses. So we are to *"pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests"* (Eph 6.18). Learning to tap into such resources can enrich and empower our prayer life in all its various forms.

PRAYER

Like with other aspects of prayer, *"the proof of the pudding is in the eating"*. It is no good studying prayer as an academic exercise. We need to practice prayer in order to grow in our relationship with the Lord. There can be no rule here to help you in this dimension of prayer other than to simply encourage you to let go and allow yourself to be drawn deeper into the experience of prayer as you take the risk of going beyond what is natural and venturing into the realms of the supernatural. It may sound scary but we are in safe hands if we keep the Lord Jesus Christ at the centre of everything.

Jesus nurtured his disciples in prayer and prepared them for the time when he would no longer be around to ask for things. He says *"In that day you will no longer ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Up until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete."* (John 16:23-4). Jesus' name is a bit like the plug that connects the tool of prayer with the power supply. The power of the Holy Spirit has to be linked to the authority of the name of Jesus for our praying to become effective and powerful. Only those who are in relationship with Jesus can call on that name (see Acts 19:13-16).

Be alert to the spiritual battle and don't be drawn away from prayer and meditation that is firmly rooted in Christ and in the Word of God. The closer we get to the Lord and the more effective in prayer we become, the more we will be under attack. Paul concludes his call to prayer in Eph 6:18 by urging believers to be alert.

It's surely time now to get down and pray - the moment to *"let go and to let God....."*.

Here are a few steps that you may find helpful in personal prayer times:

- Find a time and a space where you can be focussed on God. It is often helpful to have a Bible and a notebook handy but don't be ruled by the need to study.
- Relax and take some deep breaths. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh and to help you to pray.
- Accept and believe that God wants to answer that prayer – see Luke 11:13. Begin to thank the Lord and to worship.
- Acknowledge the sin that has got in the way as well as the blocks that you may have put up and the places in your life where the Spirit has not been welcomed. Ask for and forgiveness and receive it with thanksgiving.
- Allow God's Spirit to fill every place - be *"being filled"* with the Spirit (Eph 5:18).
- Take hold of the promise that the Spirit lives in you and will be in you (John 14:17) as you draw near through faith in Jesus Christ. Thank the Lord for that promise and continue to worship him.

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- Then wait in silence and listen for promptings from God. This may come as words or pictures or a passage of Scripture. Be open to what the Lord is saying.
- Offer these thoughts back to the Lord and seek discernment about what is from the Holy Spirit and what may be a distraction.
- Let your prayers flow from this beginning.
- If you run out of things to say then simply pause and wait. If you feel a deep stirring within to go on in prayer but don't have the words, don't be afraid to let the Holy Spirit lead you on in prayer. This may develop as the gift of tongues or may remain as an inward groaning. God hears the sighs of our hearts too.
- Don't feel unspiritual if you don't have that particular gift – that is a lie from the enemy of God to hold back your prayer life. Thank the Lord that you can come with all kinds of prayers and requests and for the gifts which he has given you.

THE NEXT STEP

Let God take you on a prayer journey of discovery. Allow his Spirit to take you deeper in your experience just like Ezekiel being invited into the progressively deeper waters of God's river in chapter 47. Take time to grow in this relationship of prayer and try not to always rush in and out of the place of prayer (though there are times when this is necessary and the only thing we can do!).

Find other Christians who want to explore prayer and to go deeper with God. As you meet together don't simply dive in with an agenda for prayer. Take time waiting on the Lord and allow the Holy Spirit to lead and direct you as a group. Value each other's contributions and the diversity of the group and keep to one area of prayer until you all feel that it is right to move on to something else. This requires focus and discipline but is good to learn and helps things to flow better avoiding disjointedness and frustration. This can be an exciting adventure and should result in prayers being more focused and effective.

Watch and see what God does!

Please revisit the website for more material in the prayer toolkit.

Be open to the Holy Spirit as you use these various resources and so be **transformed through prayer**.

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

Acknowledgements

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Showing the Spirit by Don Carson is a well balanced study which looks closely at 1 Corinthians 12-14. (Baker 1987)

For further reading and developing this approach to prayer:

GEAR Booklets: (available from mary@lmbarrett.co.uk or via www.gear.org.uk)

Renewal in the local church
Let us pray

by John Hall
edited by Marcus Hargis and Brian Harley

The Dunamis Project: explores the whole issue of cooperating with the Holy Spirit and the third in the series explores the Power of Prayer – see www.dunamis.org.uk There is a 10 week DVD Dunamis Course which can be used in local churches with the help of a facilitator.

Rev Paul Stokes has co-authored an excellent book: Growing the Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit – Zondervan ISBN 978-0-310-29209-8

The Walk of Prayer is a resource developed by Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International to help people grow in the experience of prayer. It is a simple model that invites you to take time to dwell on scripture, to wait on God and to pray. The walk involves moving ones position so as to progress in a short journey of prayer. Downloadable leaflets can be found under "Other Prayer Resources" on the Vision4Life website (Prayer - The walk of Encounter), and there are others at: www.primi.org/

HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group about general or website V4L issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the prayer year, you can email the V4L prayer year coordinator via prayer@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk