

Praying In The Spirit

by J. Oswald Sanders

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*...the Spirit Himself
intercedes for us....*

Romans 8:26 NIV

In the previous lessons in the school of prayer we analyzed the various elements in prayer, reviewed the prayer life of the Master Teacher, showed the place the promises of God play in prayer, and considered two of the conditions of answered prayer. We now come to the extremely important lesson of the part played by the Holy Spirit in the prayer life of the disciple of Christ.

"True prayer," wrote Samuel M. Zwemer, "is God the Holy Spirit talking to God the Father in the name of God the Son, and the believer's heart is the prayer-room."

There is scriptural warrant for asserting that our chronic disinclination and reluctance to pray, as well as our ignorance of how to pray aright, find their complete answer in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Hence Paul's injunction, "Pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18).

The Holy Spirit is the Source and Sustainer of our spiritual life. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Since prayer is represented in Scripture as an essential factor in progress in the Christian life, it is not surprising to find that the Spirit of God is deeply involved in this sphere.

The Spirit and the Word

It hardly need be said that to pray in the Spirit means to pray in harmony with the Word of God, which He has inspired. He does not speak with two voices. He will never move us to pray for something that is not sanctioned by Scripture.

"There is an inseparable union between the Spirit, the Word and prayer," writes H. W. Frost, "which indicates that the Spirit will always lead the saint to make much of the Word, and especially God's promises in the Word. ...This explains the fact that the great pray-ers

have always been great students of the Word."

It naturally follows that praying in the Spirit means to pray in harmony with the will of God. Being God Himself, the Spirit knows and can interpret God's will to us. Indeed, this is one of the very reasons why He has been given to the Church. "He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27). We can therefore count on Him to enable us to pray in harmony with the will of God.

Prayer in the Spirit is prayer whose supreme object is the glory of God, and only in a secondary sense is it a blessing for ourselves or for others. This is not natural to us, for it is our natural tendency to be more concerned with our own interests and glory. The Holy Spirit will help us in this weakness, and will impart the motivation to shift our center from self to God.

Samuel Chadwick points out that the Holy Spirit never works alone—it is always in cooperation with men. "He depends upon human cooperation for the mediation of His mind, the manifestation of His truth, and the effectual working of His will.... We pray in the Spirit, and the Spirit maketh intercession for us."

Our Two Advocates

In this prayer life, the believer has the aid of two Advocates who continually make themselves available and plead his cause. How rich we are through this twofold ministry.

The Son of God intercedes for us before the throne of glory, securing for us the benefits of His mediatorial work. "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). We are thus the objects of His advocacy and intercession, which He carries on apart from us in heaven.

The Spirit of God is Christ's Advocate in our hearts to meet our deepest needs. In announcing the advent of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "If I do not go away, the Helper [Advocate, or Intercessor] shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7). "You know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you" (John 14:17). Paul gives further light on His activity in prayer. "The Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). We are thus the vehicles of

the Spirit's intercession, which He carries on within us, through our redeemed personalities.

Writing on this aspect of the Spirit's ministry, Andrew Murray said,

Just as wonderful and real is the divine work of God on the throne graciously hearing, and by His mighty power answering prayer. Just as divine as is the work of the Son, interceding and securing and transmitting the answer from above, is the work of the Holy Spirit in us in the prayer that awaits and obtains the answer. The intercession within is as divine as the intercession above.

Weakness and inadequacy in the art of prayer are not surprising to God. He never intended that prayer should be left to our own unaided faculties. So He gave the Holy Spirit to instruct, inspire, and illumine our hearts and minds. Unaided by Him, we would be likely to pray for things not only contrary to God's will but injurious to ourselves.

What Does It Mean to Pray "in the Spirit"?

We must first understand the meaning of the phrase, "in the Spirit." The text (Eph. 6:18) is literally, "in spirit," without the definite article. H. C. G. Moule interprets it as meaning surrounded by His presence and power. "The Holy Spirit was to be 'the Place' of the prayer, in the sense of being the surrounding, penetrating, transforming atmosphere of the spirit of the praying Christian."

Kenneth Wuest points out that "in the Spirit" is locative of sphere. That is, all true prayer is exercised in the sphere of the Holy Spirit, motivated and empowered by Him. The expression *praying in the Holy Spirit* is also instrumental of means. We pray by means of the Holy Spirit, in dependence on Him.

It is clear that praying in the Spirit means much more than praying by the Spirit's help, although that is included. We pray by means of and in dependence on the Spirit's help, but the Spirit is the atmosphere in which the believer lives. So long as He is ungrieved, He is able to guide us in our petitions and create in us the faith that claims the answer. Our prayers will then be in substance the same as the intercessions of the Spirit within.

So, praying in the Spirit is praying along the same lines, about the same things, and in the same Name as the Holy Spirit.

How Does the Spirit Help Us in Prayer?

1. It is He who introduces us into the presence of the Father. "For through Him we...have our access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:18). The picture behind access is that of a court official who introduces people

who desire an audience with the king. This is exactly what the Spirit does for us.

2. As "the Spirit of grace and of supplication" (Zech. 12:10), He overcomes our reluctance, working in us the desire to pray. He graciously yet faithfully reveals to us our true heart-needs, and He leads us to seek their fulfillment in prayer.

3. He imparts a sense of sonship and acceptance that creates freedom and confidence in the presence of God. "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6). Children are uninhibited in the presence of an understanding and loving father, and so may we be in our prayers.

4. He helps us in the ignorance of our minds and in the infirmities of our bodies, as well as in the maladies of the soul. "In the same way the Spirit helps our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we should" (Rom. 8:26), or as it is in the King James Version, "We know not what we should pray for as we ought."

We can count on the Spirit's aid in guiding us into the will of God through illumining Scripture to us and through stimulating and directing our mental processes. He also purifies our desires and redirects them towards the will of God, for He alone knows and can interpret God's will and purpose. "The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11). He also helps by improving our motivation and inspiring confidence and faith in a loving Father.

5. He takes our faltering and imperfect prayers, adds to them the incense of the merits of Christ, and puts them in a form acceptable to our heavenly Father. "Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne" (Rev 8:3). He takes our inarticulate groanings and infuses the right meaning into them.

6. He lays special burdens of prayer on the believer who is sensitively walking in fellowship with Him. Such a burden, intolerable at times, was laid on the prophets; often they could get relief only through prolonged and earnest prayer.

Daniel 10:2-3 refers to one such experience: "In those days I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all, until the entire three weeks were completed." But the answer came at the proper time — God's time.

When He lays such prayer-burdens on the hearts of His children, He intends to answer the prayer through their intercessions. He will impart the strength to pray through until the answer comes.

The foregoing considerations would lead us to conclude that to be able to pray prevailingly, we must be filled

with the Holy Spirit. "We are never really men of prayer in the best sense, until we are filled with the Holy Spirit."

This necessity is emphasized by J. Stuart Holden:

Here is the secret of prevailing prayer, to pray under a direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whose petitions for us and through us are always according to the Divine purpose, and hence certain of answer. "Praying in the Holy Ghost is but co-operating with the will of God, and such prayer is always victorious. How many Christians there are who cannot pray, and who seek by effort, resolve, joining prayer circles, etc., to cultivate in themselves the "holy art of intercession," and all to no purpose. Here for them and for all is the only secret of a real prayer life "Be filled with the Spirit," who is "the Spirit of grace and supplication."

The prayers I make will then be sweet indeed
If Thou the Spirit give by which I pray:
My unassisted heart is barren clay,
That of its nature self can nothing feed;
Of good and pious works Thou art the seed,
That quickens only when Thou say'st it may;
Unless Thou show to us Thine own true way
No man can find it: Father! Thou must lead.

MICHELANGELO

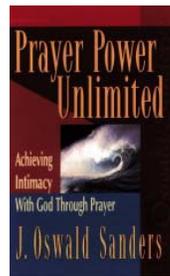
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A native of New Zealand, the late **J. Oswald Sanders** (1902-1992) was a consulting director for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the organization founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. He preached and taught in conferences in many countries and wrote over 40 books on the Christian life, including *The Incomparable Christ*, *Satan Is No Myth*, and *Enjoying Intimacy With God*. He received the Order of the British Empire for Christian service and theological writing.

In his preface to *Prayer Power Unlimited*, Sanders writes:

The supreme importance of prayer is tacitly admitted by most evangelical Christians. It is accepted as an article of faith. And yet there are few areas of the Christian life in which there are more regretful confessions of failure and disappointment.



The author does not pose as an authority on the subject – only a fellow student in the school of prayer; he is very conscious of the heights yet to be scaled.

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