

us of spiritual concerns. Disinterest and no sense of urgency begin to set in. Unknowningly the cares of this world slip right in and slowly but surely choke out the very life of the soul.

Something else, too, that proves to bring coldness to the closet is a *distorted view of the doctrines of grace*. A lazy and unconcerned attitude is generally found knit together with the cliché: “*If God’s gonna save him, it’ll all be in His own good time.*” The *sovereign grace* of God in many lives has practically eclipsed duty and responsibility. Right doctrine wrongly received can stunt the most vibrant prayer life.

Our theology has run a-ground if our view of God’s sovereignty has brought sloth and neglect to our closet life. Empty and lifeless prayers are fostered by the attitude: “*God’s gonna do what He wants to do anyway.*” We’re praying, but not really. And we intrude into that which doesn’t belong to our realm at all—“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God” (*Deut 29:29*). Whom the Lord’s gonna save is His business; and His business is *His business!* Ours is to follow Christ; and Christ was a fervent man of prayer (*Luke 6:12; John 17*). The apostle Paul preached sovereignty like no other; yet he also prayed like no other: “I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen...My heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (*Rom 9:2-3; 10:1*). God would have us recognize His sovereignty in salvation, and seek Him earnestly to manifest His converting power!

It is this earnest seeking of God that we set forth now under three very important heads: fervency, persistency, and expectancy.

### FERVENT PRAYER

“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (*James 5:16*). The word “fervent” is *zeelos*; and it carries the definition of excitement of mind, zeal, pursuing and embracing. No better adjective for prayer could be found anywhere! A sluggish, drowsy spirit has no place before the throne of grace. Our very hearts and minds are to be fully exercised and engaged in this holy activity.

That prayer that avails much in heaven is no lukewarm, lifeless, formal thing; it has power, energy, and life! It’s the understanding and spirit of a man in enthusiastic search of its desire, and it will not rest without attaining its end. Something of the spirit of Jacob is found in true prayer—“*I will not let thee go, except Thou bless me!*” (*Gen 32:26*).

The prophet caught this idea of *zeelos* in these words to Jehovah: “There is none that calleth upon Thy name, *that stirreth up himself to take hold of Thee*” (*Isaiah 64:7*). The very essence and soul of prayer is this stirring up of ourselves to take hold of God, even as Jacob “wrestled” for the blessing (*Gen 32:24*). Our whole being is to be aroused in nothing less than the pursuit of our God: “My soul follows hard after thee” (*Psalms 63:8*). Fervent prayer, then, is *pursuing* prayer, and fervent prayer is *embracing* prayer: “to take hold of thee.” This “taking hold” implies something real that we grasp. It’s gripping and grasping God with a tenacious faith, a faith stimulated by the consciousness that God is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (*Heb 11:6*).

God is a Spirit, and to grasp a spirit is not everyday work. Only a spiritual man can do anything of the kind or know what it means. A man must be stirred up and have all his faculties awake, and his entire mental and spiritual nature thrown into energetic action before he will be able to cope with this mystery, and take hold of Him that made the heavens and the earth, who is not seen of the eye nor heard of the ear, and is only to be apprehended by the inner spirit of man.

(*Charles Spurgeon, 1834-1892*)

### PERSISTENT PRAYER

“Yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth” (*Luke 11:8*). Importunity is calling upon God with perseverance and persistency. Our Saviour emphasized the importance of this in two distinct parables. There are many times when it seems that God is nowhere around, and His ear is heavy. Christ teaches us that during these times nothing has gone wrong: we’re not to give up; we’re not to faint. “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (*Luke 18:1*).

Why is persistence necessary? What’s the problem? Is it a lack of God’s love for us? Assuredly not! That was settled long ago by the death of His Son. Is it a lack of God’s goodness? Maybe insufficient wisdom on God’s part? Or perhaps He’s not able to accomplish it right now? Maybe He’s just holding out on us? None of these. These are all lies from the enemy. Nor is it a matter of pulling and tugging at the Divine coat-tail in order to finally overcome God’s reluctance to give. He’s more ready to give than we are to receive! Our Saviour assures us that God longs to avenge His elect speedily (*Luke 18:7-8*). Why then is persistence necessary?

Our spiritual constitution sometimes is so “out-of-sorts” that it not only takes us a while to figure out *what* we really need, but *why* we’re even asking. Laboring in prayer has a way of bringing these things to light. “Therefore will the LORD wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you...blessed are all they that wait for Him” (*Isaiah 30:18*). He not only waits to be sought unto, and waits for faith to lay hold of His readiness to bless, but He sometimes waits because of a lack of spiritual preparedness in us to receive.

As God probes our hearts, those messed-up motives begin to surface: pride, self-righteousness, and unbelief become apparent and visible. And sure enough, the time spent in prayer while we thought we were the ones working on God, come to find out just the opposite was true—*He was working on us!* What a blessed incentive to labor on in prayer! In the presence of the holy God, we discovered ourselves! Our *hearts* were exposed, and we were enabled by His grace to get right with Him and petition according to His will and to His glory.

Patience and faith must be operative, as we hold dear the Saviour’s promise: “Yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.” What a promise! Persistence is necessary; but the answer is *absolutely certain!*—“*For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened!*” (*Luke 11:8-10*).

Elijah’s head stayed between his knees in passionate prayer through *six dry reports* from his servant: “I see nothing!” But then it came, “Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man’s hand” (*1 Kings 18:42-44*). And take another look at Elisha. Though three times the prophet sought to shake him loose, Elisha’s firm resolve was: “I will not leave thee!” Elijah finally asked, “What shall I do for thee?” We know the story all too well (*2 Kings 2*); but do we realize that Elisha would *not* have received a double portion of the spirit of Elijah if *he had not persisted!* through Bethel, through Jericho, and through Jordan. In other words, *if we give up, we’re gonna miss out!* We’re gonna miss out on what God has. It was John Bunyan who said: “Faith will help the soul to wait, though God defers to give; but unbelief will take offence and throw up all, if God makes any tarrying.”

Consider, too, lest we become too hasty—*the majesty of our God*. It’s been said of olden times that petitioners did not only put up their requests, but they used to wait at great men’s doors, and inquire, and listen for an answer to be given to them. It was part of an honor to great men that this was done. So also, we’re to wait upon God. Why? to show His greatness, to acknowledge our distance from Him, and our absolute dependence upon Him. David said: “As the eyes of the servants look to the hand of their masters...even so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until He have mercy upon us” (*Psalms 123:2*).

He waits, therefore, that **HE** may receive all the glory, by bringing us to the end of ourselves in utter dependence and helplessness, convincing us that if any deliverance comes, *it must be God!* He just stepped in and had mercy. Persistent prayer proves, then, to bring us to the place of total surrender, bowing wholly to the will of God, where we belong, where He’s glorified, and where He “commands the blessing” (*Deut 28:8*).

Through all the ages God’s children have understood what Christ’s two parables teach, that God holds Himself back, and seeks to get away from us, until what is of flesh and self and sloth in us is overcome, and we so prevail with Him that He can and must bless us. Oh! why is it that so many of God’s children have no desire for this honour—being princes with God, strivers with God, and prevailing? (*Andrew Murray, 1828-1917*)

## EXPECTANT PRAYER

Psalms 85 is a beautiful place to view expectant prayer. In verses 1-3, the psalmist addresses the Lord with an acknowledgment of complete atonement. He then, in verses 4-7, beseeches God for present blessings of revival. But beginning with verse 8, and through the remainder of the Psalm, it is as though he turns himself to the people and declares emphatically that he has a prayer-hearing and a prayer-answering God: “**I will hear** what God the LORD will speak: for He **will** speak peace unto His people...**Surely** His salvation is nigh...The LORD **shall** give that which is good...and **shall** set us in the way of His steps” (vv 8,9,12,13). Nothing but faith and confidence is expressed that his God would do what he asked! “**I will hear what God the LORD will speak,**” that is, how He will accomplish it. Assurance is vibrant: “**He will speak peace!**”

This is that steadfast expectancy that honors and pleases God, and always draws down answers of peace. If this be not joined to our petitions, faith is not fully in exercise. The prophet Micah resolved: “I will look unto the LORD; I will **wait** for the God of my salvation: my God **will** hear me” (7:7). Faith never hopes in the Lord in vain. Our business is to be always armed with patience fully persuaded that God will be our Deliverer, when the suitable time comes. The soul of prayer is gone when you have no expectation.

How beautifully do we see this in the prophet Habakkuk. He makes his prayer against the tyranny of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter one, then immediately following declares: “I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will **watch to see what God will say unto me**” (2:1). Habakkuk never made a holier or more fruitful resolve. Here’s a man on the lookout with holy eyes of expectant faith peeled for God’s answer!

No less is expected of us! A faithful prayer-life may yet lose many answers to prayer, not owing to its neglect, but because of a failure to go up to the tower to **watch for** and **welcome** God’s promised returns. That Divine eye of desire and blessing is ever toward His expectant children. The Lord would encourage us here by affirming: “The just shall live by his faith” (2:4), and also by showing

that He never leaves long any such tower without its proper and appointed vision: “Though it tarry, wait for it; because **it will surely come, it will not tarry**” (2:2-3). Rest and trust in God; for the answer is not only coming, but when it comes, it’ll be right on time! It might “tarry” past **our** time, but never past **God’s** time—always the fittest and the best.

When we think of it, prayer is a magnificent and venturesome thing, when performed aright, for any man to do. For prayer builds, and fits out, and mans, and launches a frail vessel of faith on the deep and wide sea of God’s sovereignty: and sets her sails for a harbor nothing short of heaven. And, then, the wise merchantman gives God, and his ship, time to be on her way back again: and then like Habakkuk, he sets himself on his high tower. All his interests are now up there. (Alexander Whyte, 1836-1921)

We’re to leave the prayer room and climb into the watchtower. The assurance of Micah: “My God will hear me,” and the confidence of the Psalmist: “I will hear what God will speak” is to be ever present in our supplications. If it is not, we become guilty of taking this holy ordinance of God in vain in our hearts.

To neglect looking for God’s answers is a sure sign that we do not believe that prayer is an effectual means to attain the end which it was ordained for. So we bow our heads and pray, but without that expectant hand lifted Godward, we’re just going through the motions. God’s promised blessings and deliverances are no longer in view; prayer has become, of all things, **an end in itself!** Never are we to imagine prayer as a place of “arrival,” but we’re to see it as that needed vehicle which brings us into the covenant blessings of a faithful God, who promises for Christ’s sake to do His believing children nothing but good. If we use any means, and expect not the end, it’s a sign that we think the means vain to accomplish that end.

Another charge that can be leveled against us if we scale not the watchtower scouting for the return of prayer, is that of praying to the gods of the heathen. “The LORD’s hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither is His ear heavy, that it cannot hear” (Isaiah 59:1). But if during and after prayer, our attitude of heart is not: “**I will hear** what God will speak,”

then we’ve robbed and spoiled our Maker of one of His most royal titles: “**O thou that hearest prayer!**” (Psalm 65:2). The heathen pray to a god that neither sees, hears, nor answers (Psalm 115:1-8)—in short, “a god that cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). But would not Elijah mock us for being equally guilty of the vanities of the heathen, if from God we anticipate no answer, expect no real return from Him, nor pray in faith and confidence that His ear is open unto us? (1 Kings 18:25-27).

Always follow prayer with holy expectancy. Prayers which expect no answer are guilty of taking the name of God in vain; they are a misuse of the holy ordinance of supplication; and they are a question put upon the Divine existence, inasmuch as they reduce the Godhead to an idol, like to those images of the heathen which have ears, but they hear not, neither speak they through their throats. Prayers without faith are an insult to the attributes of God, and do dishonour to His sacred name. If thou prayest aright, in the name of Jesus, expect the Lord to hear thee, even as thou wouldst hear thy child, if he ask bread of thee. (Spurgeon)

*In themselves as weak as worms,  
How can poor believers stand,  
When temptations, foes, and storms,  
Press them close on every hand?*

*Weak indeed they feel they are,  
But they know the Throne of Grace;  
And the God who answers prayer,  
Helps them when they seek His face.*

*Though the Lord awhile delay,  
Succour they at length obtain;  
He who taught their hearts to pray,  
Will not let them cry in vain.*

*Wrestling prayer can wonders do;  
Bring relief in deepest straits!  
Prayer can force a passage through  
Iron bars and brazen gates.*

*For the wonders He has wrought,  
Let us now our praises give;  
And by sweet experience taught,  
Call upon Him while we live.*

(John Newton, 1725-1807)

## PRAYER

### FERVENT • PERSISTENT • EXPECTANT

by Van Shanks

**D**efinite prayer is a must. It is a must if we would have our labors attended upon by the Spirit of God. It is a must if we would walk and commune with the living God. It is a must in daily deliverance from indwelling sin, from the enticements of the world, and the assaults of our adversary—“**Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation**” (Mark 14:38).

Prayerlessness in the life will surely give rise to spiritual defeat and decline in the soul. Any attempt to justify its neglect is vain and foolish: “*I don’t know how to pray. I don’t have time. My work is so demanding. My body’s constantly in pain. God is a sovereign God, etc.*” We love to excuse ourselves this way, but it won’t work. Because the best excuse we can come up with for avoiding the throne of grace is worthless—all lies. If you want to get to the bottom of it, these three things you’ll always find—pride, unbelief, and a cold heart of indifference. These are the real culprits.

**Pride** will surely keep us from our knees in a spirit of humble dependency upon God. We go about tackling jobs all alone gloating with self-sufficiency! Confidence in the flesh, arrogance and proud self is written all over our endeavours. We foolishly imagine there are other and better resources than God. Pride keeps us from prayer.

**Unbelief** is the real deep-rooted cause of our not calling upon God. “What is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto Him?” (Job 21:15). What’s it gonna profit anyway? We just really don’t believe it’s gonna do any good! Unbelief is Satan’s first-born child: “Yea, hath God said?” This evil hits us from so many different directions. We’ve constantly got to be on the guard against it!

Then again, prayer wanes pitifully in our lives because of just plain ol’ **cold-hearted indifference**. We become too much entangled in the things of this life. Worldly cares rob