

The Holy Spirit, *the* Word, *and* Prayer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 15:7; Matt. 7:7; Ps. 66:18; James 1:6–8; 1 John 5:14, 15; Acts 2:38.*

Memory Text: “The Spirit also helps us in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (*Romans 8:26, 27, NKJV*).

True spirituality and prayer go together. There is no real spiritual life without vigorous prayer. After the need for repentance, perhaps one of the greatest and most urgent needs is a revival of our prayer life. The good news is that even in our prayers we are not left without the help of the Holy Spirit. Prayer draws us closer to God; it lifts us up into His presence. The prayer of faith enables us to live in response to the abundance of God's promises. Our lives are transformed when we claim the blessings God has promised in His Word. God is more than able to supply all of our needs according to His riches (*Phil. 4:19*). True prayer and authentic spirituality always have God at the center of our attention, and both are rooted in His Written Word.

We should not be basing our spiritual lives on our unsteady experience and subjective feelings, nor focusing our prayers on suspect contemplative and meditative practices. Rather, our spirituality has to be guided by the Bible and to follow God's will as revealed in His Word. It is the Holy Spirit who awakens in us a desire to seek God's presence in prayer and to lift up one another in our supplications.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 11.

Prayer That Is Pleasing to God

Even though clothed in pious cloaks, many prayers are guided by questionable motives. We might pray that someone's life be spared because we do not like living alone. We might pray for success in God's work because we are playing an important role in it. We might pray for the conversion of a person because then our life will be easier. Often our prayers center more on what we want rather than on what God wants. Prayer that is pleasing to God has a different focus.

Read John 15:7. Why is it important for our prayers that we abide in Jesus and His Words abide in us? What other focus will our prayers have if we don't abide in Jesus?

To seek God first and to enjoy His companionship is more important than anything else He might give to us. If God comes first in our lives, we will want to do what He wants; His thoughts will shape our desires. Once God is the center of prayer, we will begin to pray from His perspective. We will start to see our whole lives through His eyes. This perspective ennobles prayer.

God is deeply interested in us. He longs to be part of all aspects of our lives: our worries, our fears, our wishes, our hopes, our desires, our successes, our joys, our failures—everything. We can talk about these things with Him as with a good friend. And we look at all of it through His eyes.

Prayer does not change God; it changes us, because we are brought into the life-changing presence of God.

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 93.

What a powerful quote! It captures so much of the reality of what prayer does to us and for us. Prayer alone makes us open receptacles for the grace, the power, and the presence of God in our lives. Who hasn't at some point experienced the reality of how prayer can draw us closer to God?

Think about your prayer life—that is, what you pray for, when you pray, why you pray, and so forth. What does it tell you about your own spiritual state and your own relationship to God? What changes might you need to make?

The Foundation of Biblical Prayer: Ask God

Read Matthew 7:7. Before we can receive anything from God, we have to ask for it. Why is our asking so important, since God knows everything anyhow?

Asking reveals our desire and expresses our trust in God. Through prayer we approach Him, from whom we seek support and help. When we ask God, we also publicly give Him permission to become active in our behalf. God wants to be asked. He desires that we bring to Him our prayer requests. If we do not ask Him, we will not receive the gifts He has promised. Jesus said: “ ‘Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, it will be opened’ ” (Luke 11:9, 10, NKJV).

Read Mark 11:24; 1 John 5:14, 15; and Psalm 66:18. Why is no prayer request too big for God? Why is it good to know that God is generous and loves to give out of His abundance? What is the prerequisite for God to fulfill our prayers?

We truly can ask God for anything. No request is too small or unimportant for Him. No request is so big that God cannot handle it. He is omnipotent. By faith we may claim every promise in the Bible and receive the promised gifts from His hands according to His will (2 Cor. 1:20).

Yet, there are some conditions to be met in order to receive what we are asking. If we are not willing to submit fully to God, and if our requests reflect only our selfish and sinful desires, God will not answer our prayers (see Isa. 59:1, 2). An important condition for the fulfillment of our prayers is our willingness to follow God's will and to be obedient. “All His [God's] gifts are promised on condition of obedience.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 145. Knowing that God is generous, we can come boldly to Him. “The Lord is not glorified by the tame supplications which show that nothing is expected. He desires every one who believes, to approach the throne of grace with earnestness and assurance.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, Aug. 7, 1901.

The Foundation of Biblical Prayer: Believe

Read Mark 11:24. Besides asking, what other aspect does Jesus mention in connection with prayer?

Asking alone is not enough. There is a second important aspect that needs to be present in our prayers: faith. The book of Hebrews tells us that “without faith it is impossible to please” God (*Heb. 11:6, NASB*). When we kneel down before God and open the Bible to any of the more than three thousand promises and then ask God, with the simplicity of a small child, to fulfill His promises in our behalf, we have to believe that He will do what is best for us in His time.

Read James 1:6–8. How does the text describe the person who lacks faith? Why is faith a prerequisite to receiving the promised gifts?

If we come to God, we must believe that He exists and that He will reward those who seek Him. Effectual prayer must be accompanied by a belief not only that God *can* answer, but that He *will* do so according to His divine will.

In the Bible, believing is related to trusting. We can trust someone only when we know the other person to be trustworthy. When we entertain doubts that God will keep His promises, we waver and cannot expect that we will receive anything from Him. To believe means to take God at His word. It means that we depend on God and His promises, even when our feelings tell us otherwise. For “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (*Heb. 11:1, NASB*). Faith clings to God’s promises because we trust what He has said (*Heb. 11:11*). Faith knows that “it is impossible for God to lie” (*Heb. 6:18, NASB*). God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (*Heb. 13:8*). Faith knows that for God nothing is impossible (*Luke 1:37*).

Faith opens the door to the divine treasure-house. Through the Holy Spirit, God moves the hearts of men and women to trust the Word of God, and through faith, our prayers move the arm of omnipotence.

What helps you to grow stronger in faith? What aspect of Jesus helps you to have confidence in His willingness and ability to help you in your times of need?

The Foundation of Biblical Prayer: Claim God's Promises

All faith is useless if we do not claim the things for which we have prayed.

Read 1 John 5:14, 15. What is the reason that we can be confident that God hears us and that we receive what we have requested from Him?

The third aspect of Bible prayer is reception. After asking God and believing His promises, we need to claim what He has promised. We claim God's promise by returning thanks to God that we have received it. Thus, the promises are applied to our hearts. Ellen G. White said that "for any gift He has promised, we may ask; then we are to believe that we receive, and return thanks to God that we have received."—*Education*, p. 258.

In Luke 8:11, Jesus compares the Word of God to a seed. In the same way that the whole apple tree is contained in an apple seed, the gift of God is contained in His promises. When we claim the promise and thank God for it, we already possess the gift He has promised. We receive the promised gift by faith even before we might feel or see it.

The example of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 illustrates that Jesus prayed in this way. Jesus knew exactly what God's will in this situation was. John 11:11 tells us that He was willing to do God's will and that He was obedient. In John 11:39–41, we read that Jesus thanked the Father in advance that He would resurrect Lazarus, even though Lazarus was still in the grave. When Jesus had thanked God, He did receive the fulfillment of His request. As God's children we are to live on God's promises, not on His explanations. Even though we can't explain everything, we can trust His promises.

"The Lord says, 'Call upon Me in the day of trouble.' Ps. 50:15. He invites us to present to Him our perplexities and necessities, and our need of divine help. He bids us be instant in prayer. As soon as difficulties arise, we are to offer to Him our sincere, earnest petitions. By our importunate prayers we give evidence of our strong confidence in God. The sense of our need leads us to pray earnestly, and our heavenly Father is moved by our supplications."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 172.

Why is it so important to always bring everything to God in prayer?

Praying for the Holy Spirit

Read Ephesians 3:16 and Acts 2:38. What do these texts tell us about receiving the Holy Spirit in our lives?

There are many things we can pray for, but there is one great need in this time of peril in which we live: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the greatest gift that Jesus could give. In giving the Holy Spirit, God could not have given His people more. To this gift nothing could be added (after all, what could be added to Divinity Himself?). Through Him and His work in our lives, all our needs are supplied. The blessing of the Holy Spirit will bring in its train all other blessings.

There is, however, one major obstacle—and that is ourselves, because we are often unprepared to receive the Holy Spirit.

As in the days of the New Testament church, we have to realize that we first need to repent and surrender our lives fully to Jesus. Yes, it is only the prompting of the Holy Spirit that even allows us to do that.

However, when we respond to His prompting, then repentance for sin is the firstfruit of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In humility and faith, we need to confess our sins so that He can cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We need to understand just how fallen we are and how much we need God and His grace in our lives. Without Him, we are lost, dead in our sins, and doomed to eternal loss.

Thus, in earnest prayer, we will fulfill the conditions upon which God has promised to give us His Holy Spirit. Then all we have to do is to ask God, and He will gladly grant us His Spirit. “The heavenly Parent is more willing to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him than earthly parents are to give good gifts to their children.”—Ellen G. White, *Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 284.

As with other spiritual things, the gift of the Holy Spirit is never an end in itself. He is given to elevate Jesus, to reproduce Christ’s character in our lives, and to enable us to serve others in building up the body of Christ, the church. So any worship practice, public or private, that elevates the Spirit above Jesus Christ is wrong. For it is through Jesus that we “have our access in one Spirit to the Father” (*Eph. 2:18, NASB*).

Why is the gift of the Holy Spirit the greatest gift that Jesus could give to us? What has been your experience with the reality of the Holy Spirit in your life? How different would your life be without this gift?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Asking to Give,” pp. 139–149, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*. For a helpful collection of encouraging promises, read Ellen G. White, *God Has Promised* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1982).

Without prayer, we would have no spiritual power in our lives, because prayer connects us to the Source of that power. Without prayer we would have no vital link with God. We would become empty vessels who might have “a form of godliness” but would be devoid of the power and promise of the gifts from on high. And, no question, as we have seen all this week—we have been given wonderful promises about God’s answering prayer. But what about the times when we don’t get what we pray for, even when we have sought to meet all the conditions to the best of our God-given ability? “But be not discouraged if your prayers do not seem to obtain an immediate answer. The Lord sees that prayer is often mixed with earthliness. Men pray for that which will gratify their selfish desires, and the Lord does not fulfill their requests in the way which they expect. He takes them through tests and trials, He brings them through humiliations, until they see more clearly what their necessities are. He does not give to men those things which will gratify a debased appetite and which will prove an injury to the human agent and make him a dishonor to God. He does not give men that which will gratify their ambition and work simply for self-exaltation. When we come to God we must be submissive and contrite of heart, subordinating everything to His sacred will.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 89.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In what ways does prayer impact our whole spiritual existence? That is, what effect does prayer have on you when you pray? In what ways are you different after you have prayed than before you did?
- 2 What do you say to someone who has prayed and prayed for something and it hasn’t happened as the person had hoped and prayed for, such as the healing of a sick child or the like? How do we learn to trust God even in situations like this?
- 3 In class, talk about your own experiences with prayer, and about what it means to you. What have you learned about prayer that could help others who might be struggling with understanding the purpose of prayer?
- 4 Why is it important to pray even if we don’t fully understand how it all works?

Something Beautiful: Part 1

Editor's Note: In the following three-part story, Kim Laovin from Stockholm, Sweden, tells how God transformed her life of misery into something beautiful.

For 25 years, more than half my life, the first thing I did every morning was inject heroin into my veins. I used heroin to get through the day. Then one July morning I awoke and knew that I was done letting drugs run my life. I knew I would get sick if I stopped taking drugs, but I was determined to get clean.

Drugs were not only my life—they were my livelihood. I had a lovely big house, owned a good car, and had lots of nice clothes. But when I gave up drugs, the beautiful things around me seemed filthy and disgusting. They had been purchased with drug money. I sold or gave away everything. Then with only a suitcase of things left, I moved to another town.

I suffered all the symptoms of withdrawal, but I refused to go back on drugs. I knew if I could only tough it out long enough, I would feel better. Weeks went by, and I was still very weak and tired. My chest hurt, and I could not walk more than a block.

I went to the doctor, and after he examined me, he declared, “You have a serious heart problem. Your heart is enlarged and is working hard, but it is doing only half the work it should. The pain you feel is angina. It is pain caused when the heart does not get enough oxygen.” I realized that, ironically, the drugs I had been taking had masked these symptoms for years.

The doctor gave me medicine and sent me home. But I had no real home to go back to. I had been staying with a friend, but my friend could not keep me forever. I was sick, lonely, and homeless. I started calling my relatives. They were happy to hear from me and happy to hear I was no longer taking drugs, but they had reasons why I could not come and stay with them. Finally, an uncle took me in. He and my aunt were kind and took me to see a nearby doctor.

“Have you taken the medicine you were prescribed?” the doctor asked.

“No,” I admitted. “I have just kicked a drug addiction, and I don’t want to become addicted to these drugs.”

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 8:26, 27*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Discern the absolute necessity of prayer and Scripture in living a Spirit-filled Christian life.

Feel: Sense the need to experience more of the Holy Spirit's presence through prayer and Bible study.

Do: Cultivate a love for quiet times of communion with Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in regularly scheduled times of prayer and Bible study.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Promise of the Spirit

- Ⓐ Why is the Holy Spirit's presence so important in the Christian life?
- Ⓑ What relationship is there between prayer and Bible study and the infilling of the Spirit?

II. Feel: The Presence of the Spirit

- Ⓐ How can we experience more of the Holy Spirit's presence and power?
- Ⓑ How do you feel when you have a vibrant, meaningful devotional time with God?
- Ⓒ How do you feel when you repeatedly miss your devotional time?

III. Do: The Power of the Spirit

- Ⓐ What specific things can you do to improve the quality of your devotional life in order to live daily in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit?
- Ⓑ As we read the promises of Scripture, how can they become ours, rather than something we have simply read in the Bible?

► **Summary:** God longs to fill our lives with His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is Christ's personal Ambassador and most precious Gift. As we spend time with Jesus in prayer and in Bible study, with humble hearts and submissive attitudes, He will fill us with His Spirit. As we surrender our lives to Christ, believe His Word, and by faith claim His promises, we will live in His presence. The Holy Spirit will fill our lives. The secret of receiving the Holy Spirit in the fullness of His power is not a secret at all. When we submit our lives to Christ, we seek His glory, not our own. As we pray, believe, and claim the promise of the Spirit, He will be poured out on us in abundant measure.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 John 5:14, 15*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Many Christians misunderstand the true purpose of prayer. We pray not just because we want something for ourselves. We pray because we are so filled with love for Christ, and so appreciative of what He has done for us, that we long to have a relationship with Him. Being in His presence is a delight. Enjoying His fellowship is our hearts' desire. Prayer is the environment in which Christ's Spirit speaks to our hearts, and we are drawn closer to Him.

When our hearts' desire is to know Him, we are open to receive His richest blessings. Our Lord is the Giver of all good gifts (*Ps. 84:11, James 1:17*). Just as a parent longs to give good gifts to his or her children, our heavenly Father longs to give good gifts in abundance to each one of us. By asking in faith, believing we will receive, and claiming His promises, we become the recipients of Heaven's richest blessings.

Just for Teachers: One of the most meaningful ways to experience a deeper devotional life is to blend prayer and Bible study. When we pray, we are talking to God. When we read His Word, He is speaking to us. Encourage your class to kneel before the Lord with their Bibles open. Begin with a section of the Psalms or one of the Gospels. Suggest that they read a portion of Scripture, and then silently talk to God about what they have read. The Holy Spirit will impress their minds with areas in their lives that need to grow spiritually. He will reveal insights in God's Word that draw them closer to Jesus.

Ellen G. White gives us this practical counsel: "If you search the Scriptures with a meek and teachable spirit, your efforts will be richly rewarded. 'The natural man receiveth not of the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.' The Bible should be studied with prayer."—*The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 4, 1889. Ask your class to follow this divinely inspired counsel of combining Bible study with prayer this week, and report back to the class next Sabbath on the difference it made in their devotional lives.

Opening Discussion: Although prayer is extremely meaningful to many Christians, for others it is more duty than delight. It has become a monotony

of repeating the same phrases over again. God seems silent and far away. What have you found to make your prayer life meaningful? Do you have a favorite place to pray where you feel especially close to God? Do you have a scheduled time to pray daily that you do not want to miss? What are some aspects of your personal prayer life that you would like to share with the class?

When we observe Jesus in prayer, we notice at least four things:

1. Jesus recognized that prayer was essential to His spiritual life. Throughout the Gospels, we see Him in prayer often (*Luke 11:1*).
2. Jesus had specific places that He prayed and specific times to pray (*Mark 1:35*).
3. Jesus regularly prayed aloud (*Heb. 5:7, 8*).
4. Jesus completely was surrendered to the Father's will in all of His prayers (*Matt. 26:39*).

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ How can Jesus' prayer life be a model for our own?

- ❷ Why is it important to blend prayer and Bible study?

- ❸ What role does faith play in answered prayer? Why do you think that faith is so important in our prayer lives?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Praying for God's Promises (*Review 1 John 5:14, 15 with the class.*)

In 1 John 5:14, John gives us this assurance: "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (*NKJV*). Notice where our confidence is. It is not in our prayers. It is not in our good works or righteous deeds. It is not even in our faith. It is in Jesus Christ. The passage says, "This is the confidence that we have in Him." Our confidence is in Christ who cannot lie and whose promises are sure. We can have absolute confidence that what Christ has promised He is able to accomplish.

The Greek word for “confidence” is *parrêsia*. The original meaning of this word was freedom of speech—the freedom in any truly democratic society to speak openly and boldly. In Heaven’s eyes, we have this perfect freedom. We need hold nothing back or hide anything from the One who knows us best and loves us still. God invites us to come to Him and speak freely about anything that is on our minds.

In one of the most amazing passages ever written on prayer, Ellen G. White states, “Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. . . . Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

We are encouraged to come boldly or confidently to the throne of grace (*Heb. 4:16*). God is waiting for us to come. He is there, always listening, delighted when His children come with their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears, and their victories and defeats.

John rightly states that the great principle of prayer is asking according to God’s will. We do not pray, “Lord, Your will be changed,” but rather, “Lord, Your will be done.” In his Bible commentary on the letters of John, William Barclay states this concept succinctly: “In the last analysis the only true prayer is the prayer which says, ‘Thy will be done,’ and whose only request is for grace to accept that will and strength to do it.”—William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 137.

Discussion Questions: What is the only true source of our confidence? What does it mean to have full confidence in Christ when we pray? How does the original meaning of the word *confidence* in the Greek help to deepen our understanding of what it means to come to God without any fear or reservation? What does it mean to pray according to God’s will?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Lead your class in a practical discussion on claiming God’s promises. Invite your class members to share their favorite promises from the Bible. You may want to ask someone to make a list of your class’s ten favorite promises and share them with the entire class next Sabbath.

Thought Questions:

① Why do you think God’s people often are more preoccupied with getting something from God than knowing the God they desire something from?

② Although the Holy Spirit is in our midst, gently leading us to a deeper experience with Jesus, why does He seem so far away at times? What can we do to cultivate a keener awareness of the presence of the Spirit?

Application Questions:

① Can you think of any promises in the Bible that do not need to be prayed in this manner: “Lord, if it is Your will, I ask You to do this for me”?

② If God longs to give us His Holy Spirit even more than we long to receive Him, why should we then pray for the outpouring of the Spirit?

③ How might our local Sabbath School class place more emphasis on praying for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on our own lives and on our church?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: There is real spiritual strength when God’s people seek the outpouring of the Holy Spirit together. The Holy Spirit came in mighty power when the disciples prayed in unity. The New Testament church was a praying church. Believers recognized their absolute inability, without the power of the Holy Spirit, to face Satan’s temptations and to accomplish Christ’s mission of evangelizing the world.

Individual Activities:

① This week choose one other Sabbath School class member with whom you can share your favorite Bible promises.

② Ask God to guide you to a prayer partner with whom you can seek the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.