

## **Pray without Ceasing**

**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 13; I Thessalonians 5:12a, 13b-18**

January 27, 2008

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor

Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Again this year we are confronted with a challenging theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The text comes directly from the Apostle Paul. Just three words, but what a challenge they are: “pray without ceasing.” At first it sounds like a bit of religious talk: pray without ceasing. We all know that it’s impossible to pray without ceasing. Not one of us can devote 24 hours a day to prayer. Nevertheless, it is a goal some ancient monks tried to achieve. They are called the desert fathers. Abba Lucius, one of the ancient desert fathers, asked a group of young monks one day, “What is your manual work?”

The young monks said that they didn’t touch manual work. Instead, they said that they obeyed the Apostle Paul’s command to pray without ceasing.

The wise old monk, Abba Lucius, asked them whether they ate, and they admitted that they did eat. “When you are eating,” he asked, “who prays for you then?”

He then asked them if they slept, and they admitted that they did sleep. Again the wise old monk asked, “When you are asleep, who prays for you then?” (Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations with the Early Church*, pp. 7-8)

Pray without ceasing. For 100 years now Christians have been praying for Christian unity. This year is the centennial observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It began as the Church Unity Octave in 1908 at a small Episcopal Church near New York City. What began as a small, earnest prayer service for Christian unity caught the imagination of others and has blossomed into a worldwide observance involving many nations and millions of Believers, people who share the vision of our Lord that one day the man-made barriers that separate Christian people will crumble into

nothing and that we will act and speak with one voice, even as Jesus and his Father were one. That is the hope and prayer of this day.

When Paul issued this command to pray without ceasing, what could he have meant? This is what we do know. We know that Paul was at the end of his letter to the church in Thessalonica when he issued this command. We know also that the letter would have been read aloud to the congregation, so it had the affect of a sermon. Right at the end, at a critical moment in Paul's sermon, he issued not one but three imperatives: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Now think about these commands. Rejoice *always*? Who can do that? Pray *without ceasing*? Give thanks in *all* circumstances? Each of these is difficult if not impossible, especially the middle imperative to pray without ceasing. So what does this mean?

To answer this question, we must first answer another question: what does it mean to pray? Many of us grew up in a tradition of private, personal prayer. At night our parents sat at our bedsides and listened as we prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Then our parents would kiss us on the forehead, snug us in, and turn out the lights. We would drift to sleep assured of, wrapped in, our parents' and our Heavenly Father's protective care.

Then we grew up and learned that when it rains the rain really does fall on everybody, the just and the unjust. We grew up and discovered that prayer is not like a vending machine where you put in your change and get back exactly what you want.

And so, many of us—disappointed and confused—secretly gave up on prayer. It's not that we don't believe in prayer; it just doesn't work for us, not as we expected it would. I suspect that our churches are filled with people who long to pray, who yearn for a richer and more satisfying prayer life. Their lives have been touched at deep and profound levels, and it seems like prayer, some kind of deep communication with the Holy Other, ought to accompany it. "Now I lay me down to sleep..." just doesn't suffice anymore. For many our experience with prayer has been so inconsistent—sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't; is it coincidence or is it prayer?—that we lack confidence when praying. We may still pray, but we feel like

it's inadequate, like we need to pray more, harder, less selfishly, with more concentration, with more faith, or with more something.

Let me ask you this: how would you define prayer? That would be a good exercise for a Sunday School class. Spend an hour allowing people to share their definitions of prayer. Put them up on the board and talk about them. Here's my definition. Prayer is the act of being with God. Let me explain what I mean. We often hear well-intentioned people pray something like this: "Lord, be with us today as we worship." Or, "Lord, be with us today as we travel." We tend to ask God to be *with us*. But think about it. Isn't God always with us? One of the characteristics we ascribe to God is: omnipresence. God is ever present everywhere. So asking God to be with us is like asking the air to be present. The air is present whether we are aware of it or not. Likewise, God is present whether we realize it or not. The real issue is, *are we with God?* Prayer occurs when we focus our minds, our hearts, our being, on the presence of the Almighty. Prayer is the act of being with God who is ever present and awaiting our attention. The more appropriate words then for our prayer are, "Lord, help us to be present with you as we worship. Help us to be aware, conscious of, in tune with, your presence."

That is the act of being with God who is ever present everywhere.

Now, where and when can that happen? It can happen at church of course. I hope that when you come to worship you are keenly aware that what we do here is done in the presence of God. God is here because God is ever present everywhere. To the degree that we are aware of God's presence in worship, to that degree our worship is an act of prayer.

But you don't spend most of your time here, right? What about the rest of life? At work. School. Cleaning the house. Mowing the lawn. If God is ever present everywhere, is it possible for us to be with God during those times too? Most certainly. In fact, that is what Paul was attempting to say in our text. Pray without ceasing. It doesn't mean to devote 24 hours a day to prayer. It means to cultivate, to nurture, an awareness of God throughout our day every day. It means to discipline ourselves to see God in all of life—in the faces of people around us and in the beauty and wonder of creation. That kind of prayer may or may not involve words. It may or may not involve mental images. It is simply being with God. To pray without

ceasing means to be constantly aware that all of life has a spiritual quality to it, aware of Emmanuel, God with us, even in the mundane things of our day.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning got it right:

*Earth's crammed with Heaven,  
And every common bush aflame with God.  
But only those who see take off their shoes.  
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*

You know, I like blackberries. Sitting around plucking blackberries is not bad. But imagine how they would taste if we saw every blackberry bush as a reflection of its Creator and took off our shoes, knowing that we were on holy ground. That is what it means to pray without ceasing.

Today the Body of Christ around the world is being reminded that all of life is sacred. When that reality finally grasps us, then we *can* rejoice always. We *can* pray without ceasing. We *can* give thanks in all circumstances. And if we really can live on that level—aware of the sacredness of life, aware of the real presence of our God—then there is hope that one day the man-made barriers that separate Christian people will crumble into nothing and that we will act and speak with one voice, even as Jesus and his Father were one. May God grant that it be so!

#### Closing Prayer

O Lord, the shrubbery is aflame with your glorious presence, and we tend to see only boxwoods and nandinas. Forgive us and remind us that every aspect of creation points us to you, our Creator and Redeemer. Amen.