

Dr Lloyd-Jones on Praying in the Spirit

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I spent five years immersing myself in the sermons of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. It was truly a transformative season in my life. What was the biggest takeaway? The answer may surprise you. He taught me how to pray.

Those who really knew Lloyd-Jones will not find that answering surprising at all. His wife once said, ‘No one will ever understand my husband until they realize that he is first of all a man of prayer and then an evangelist’ (Bethan Lloyd-Jones). In particular, Lloyd-Jones, as a man of prayer, taught me how to pray in the Holy Spirit.

My hunger for learning how to pray in the Spirit came from a perplexing problem. I read Ephesians 6:18, ‘praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.’ This text really bothered me because I could parse the words and diagram the grammar, but I had this nagging sense that I was not experiencing the reality of it. Lloyd-Jones served as a mentor for me in making this verse a living reality. He led me on a three-stage guided tour of discovery: (1) what it is not, (2) what it is, and (3) how it is done.

What Praying in the Spirit is Not

First, he helped me see what praying in the Spirit means by contrasting it with its polar opposite: praying in the flesh. Prayer in the power of the flesh relies upon human ability and effort to carry the prayer forward.

We all know what it is to feel deadness in prayer, difficulty in prayer, to be tongue-tied, with nothing to say, as it were, having to force ourselves to try. Well, to the extent that is true of us, we are not praying in the Spirit. (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Living Water: Studies in John 4, p.99)

How do we overcome this difficulty in prayer? Praying in the flesh calls upon human ability and effort to push past the difficulty. If we are tongue-tied in prayer, we may try to overcome that difficulty with a stream of many words. Jesus warned us against thinking we would be heard because we use many words (Matthew 6:7). If we struggle with wanting to give up after a short time in prayer, we may focus upon how long we pray. Success in prayer does not depend upon how much time we can log in prayer. Sometimes people try to overcome deadness in prayer by focusing on how well we can pray. We subtly trust in having perfectly composed, doctrinally correct prayers that rely upon the right diction, cadence, language, emotion, or volume.

These attempts to push past the difficulty in the power of the flesh are attempts to imitate the liveliness that the Spirit gives in prayer.

The Spirit is a Spirit of life as well as truth, and the first thing that he always does is to make everything living and vital. And, of course, there is all the difference in the world

between the life and liveliness produced by the Spirit and the kind of artifact, the bright and breezy imitation, produced by people. (Living Water, p. 99)

If praying in the flesh is the counterfeit or imitation of praying in the Spirit, what is the genuine article? The second part of the guided tour was discovering what praying in the Spirit is.

What Praying in the Spirit is

Here is the key difference: in the flesh, we are pushing the prayers forward, while in the Spirit, we feel caught up in the way the Spirit carries the prayer forward. Praying in the Spirit is experiencing the Spirit of life bringing prayer to life.

Praying in the Spirit means that the Spirit empowers the prayer and carries it to the Father in the name of Jesus. The prayer has a living quality characterized by warmth and freedom and a sense of exchange. We realize that we are in God's presence speaking to God. The Spirit illuminates your mind, moves your heart, and grants a freedom of utterance and liberty of expression.

Lloyd-Jones frequently uses stark contrasts to make his point. He did not often go back and nuance the contrast between praying in the flesh and praying in the Spirit. He did not plot different degrees of experience; he simply posed sharp polarities to help us see the difference between the two.

It is helpful to acknowledge that there are varying degrees of experience when it comes to praying in the Spirit. It does not feel like revival every time we pray in the Spirit. There are varying experiences of feeling carried along or pushed forward. Sometimes praying in the Spirit will not feel electrifying at all. It will feel like groaning. The Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27).

I remember going on a bike ride where there was a gradual incline for the first half and a gradual slope down the second half. I sometimes think of that as the experiential difference between praying in the flesh and praying in the Spirit. Praying in the flesh feels like an upward climb in which we were having to power up the hill. Praying in the Spirit reflects the reality of the downward slope. Obviously, there are degrees of decline. But the basic awareness of a downhill energy and momentum are present in all of the different degrees of a downward slope.

When we pray in the Spirit, according to Lloyd-Jones, we experience being carried or driven in prayer to God by the Spirit, but how is it done?

How to Pray in the Spirit

Praying in the Spirit has three great aspects: (1) admitting our inability, (2) enjoying the creation of a living communion with God, and (3) pleading the promises of God with boldness and assurance.

Step 1: Admitting our Inability to Pray

We should start with confession: we must admit out inability to pray as we ought. We must come face to face with out tendency to try to pray on our own. We start with the

recognition that prayer is a spiritual activity, and the power of the flesh profits nothing at all. We should feel our dryness and difficulty and confess to him our dullness, lifelessness, and spiritual slowness and sluggishness (Living Water, p. 86).

But this step is not passive; it is the act of yielding ourselves to the Spirit. Confession leads to expectation and prayerful anticipation.

Step 2: Enjoy Living Communion with God

You are aware of a communion, a sharing, a give-and-take, if I may use such an expression. You are not dragging yourself along; you are not forcing the situation; you are not trying to make conversation with somebody whom you do not know. No, no! The Spirit of adoption in you brings you right into the presence of God, and it is a living act of fellowship and communion, vibrant with life. (Lloyd-Jones, The Christian Soldier, p. 100)

The place where you pray seems to be transformed. I start out praying in my living room, and suddenly I sense that I am in the throne room.

One of the key differences here between praying in the flesh and praying in the Spirit is that you don't feel the need to rush to say anything when you pray in the Spirit. The living reality the Spirit creates is the awareness of God's presence. Experiencing his presence will seem much more important than any petition you are going to make (Lloyd-Jones, Christian Soldier, p. 82). But the Spirit will not lead you merely to rest in God's presence in a passive way. There will be a holy boldness to plead the promises of God.

Step 3: Pleading with Holy Boldness

The result of the Spirit's work is that we bow before God as humbled children of God in awe of God. We don't bow before an unknown or far away god, and we don't skip into God's presence with breezy familiarity. We come with an awakened sense of intimacy and awe. The Spirit also breathes bold life into our prayers — a holy boldness that pleads the promises of God with God in the presence of God.

The beauty of this boldness is that it is a humble and holy boldness. There is no presumptuous sense of demand.

Do not claim, do not demand, let your requests be made known, let them come from your heart. God will understand. We have no right to demand even revival. Some Christians are tending to do so at the present time. Pray urgently, plead, use all the arguments, use all the promises; but do not demand, do not claim. Never put yourself into the position of saying, 'If we but do this, then that must happen.' God is a sovereign Lord, and these things are beyond our understanding. Never let the terminology of claiming or of demanding be used. (Lloyd-Jones, The Final Perseverance of the Saints, p. 155)

Don't Quench the Spirit

Lloyd-Jones once said that the quickest way to quench the Spirit is to not obey an impulse to pray. This point is very, very personal to me, so let me tell you a story from my own experience.

Once I was driving home from working at UPS. I worked the night shift during my doctoral days and never seemed to get enough sleep. I was driving home very early one morning, around 4:30, and falling asleep at the wheel. I tried everything to stay awake. I turned up the radio and tried to sing along. I even slapped myself. The next thing I knew, I woke up in my driveway. I was more than a little shaken. I didn't know how I got there.

I walked inside the house now eerily wide awake, and as I walked into our bedroom I noticed the strangest thing: my wife was wide awake, too. She would normally be asleep, but instead, she was sitting up in bed waiting for me.

She said, "Hi, honey, how was your drive?"

I said, "It's funny you should ask. I really struggled to stay awake on the drive home. In fact, I don't know how I got here."

She said, "Yeah I figured. . . ."

"Okay," I said, "please continue!"

"Well," she said, "I woke up at about 4:30 very suddenly, and felt this intense prompting to pray. I figured you must be struggling on the road since that is around the time you normally come home. So, I prayed for you."

I think I am still alive, and typing these words, because my wife did not quench the Spirit in that moment. She obeyed the Spirit's prompting to pray. I hope this story gives you a greater sense of what is at stake in prayer. Our tendency to quench the Spirit is not a small and inconsequential problem. Let us give ourselves to the reality of praying in the Spirit and renounce the temptation to try and pray in our own strength. And let us, after Lloyd-Jones's example, always obey every impulse to pray.

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