

# What is 'praying in the Spirit' and how do we pray in this way?



Stuart Olyott

4 minute read

There is such a thing as 'praying in the Holy Spirit'. How do we know this? It is clearly taught in the Word of God, both in Jude v.20 and in [Ephesians 6:18](#). That is not all. These two verses are commands. God expects every Christian on earth to pray in this way. Do I? Do you? Do we see evidence of this sort of prayer in our church prayer meetings? We need to answer these questions, because our verses make clear that such prayer is linked both to our own spiritual growth and to our success in spiritual warfare.

## What it is

Sometimes we have so much to say to God that we tell him everything that is on our mind without any sense of shame for our sin or any conscious reliance on the Person and work of Christ. We pour out our heart without kneeling at the cross. We talk and talk without a tear on our cheek and without a sight of a crucified Advocate sitting at God's right hand. This is not 'praying in the Spirit', because it is the Spirit's constant ministry to convict us of our sin, to draw attention to the Saviour and to glorify him ([John 16:8-11, 14](#)).

Sometimes we spend time in prayer, but the great themes of the Lord's Prayer are mostly or entirely absent, from what we have to say. This is not 'praying in the Spirit', because the Word that he has inspired tells us what themes our Saviour expects us to cover ([Matthew 6:9-13](#)). Yes, the whole Word of God is of use in directing our prayers. By instruction and example, it shows us how to pray for a vast array of subjects. But the themes contained in the Lord's Prayer will obviously and always have special prominence.

Sometimes we find ourselves simply 'saying our prayers', but our heart is not in it. We are cold and listless. We have no fervour. We have no faith. We have no energy. We know that there is no chance of us praying with importunity. This is not 'praying in the Spirit', because his Word constantly shows us that when people really pray, their whole soul is in what they are doing. Their emotions are engaged ([Psalm 63](#), [Philippians 1:3-11](#)), they lay hold of God's promises ([Exodus 34:12-23](#), [James 1:5-8](#)), and they pray on and on until they receive what they are asking for ([Genesis 32:22-32](#), [Luke 11:5-13](#)).

Sometimes when we come to pray, we simply do not know what we should pray for. Nothing comes to mind. Despite our knowledge of what the Scriptures teach about prayer, we find ourselves completely at a loss. This is not 'praying in the Spirit', because when he is at work in a dumb heart he stirs up 'agonising longings and which never find words' (J.B. Phillips), but which impel the heart in a God-ward direction, and which become unspoken prayers in line with the will of God ([Romans 8:26-27](#)). The believer's heart, awestruck, silent, and prayer-filled, becomes conscious of being a holy sanctuary.

So it is, by reflecting on what 'praying in the Spirit' is not, we come to discover what it *is*. It is approaching God as a failure and a sinner, and expecting to be received by him on no other basis than that 'the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me' ([Galatians. 2:20](#)). It is praying in accordance with his holy Word, giving prominence to the themes contained in the Lord's Prayer. It is praying from the heart, with fervour, faith and importunity. And it is more than words. There is a consciousness of inner constraint. The desires of the heart are being moved in a particular direction. Something is happening deep down inside me which is too wonderful to fully describe. In the name of God the Son, God the Holy Spirit is talking to God the Father, and this intercession is somehow taking place inside *me!*

## Doing as we are told

These things being so, and seeing that it we are commanded to pray 'in the Spirit', how can we learn to do it?

For myself, I have always been helped by the old Puritan adage: 'Pray until you pray.' This means that we get into the place of prayer and begin to pray. We do not hurry. We reflect on what the Scriptures say about prayer and begin to put it into practice. We take our time. We confess our sins and look away to Christ. We reflect on what it means to have God as our Father in heaven. We express our desire to see him glorified and to see his kingdom spread. We submit ourselves to his will. We commit to him our physical needs. We are open and honest about our failures. We yearn to be sinless. We revel in his kingdom, power and glory. And somewhere along the line the spirit of prayer gets hold of us. The Lord comes to meet us. Fervour, faith and importunity invade our souls. We feel ourselves to be animated; humbled yet exalted, exhilarated but exhausted, weak but very strong, mortal yet immortal!

Our inmost being is engaged. And constraints come upon us. There is the unspoken groaning we have already mentioned. But we also feel ourselves to be moved to pray for specific people, needs and events. As we continue in prayer, we come to have an inward assurance that certain things we are praying for will definitely come to pass. And usually, our time of prayer ends in physical and emotional exhaustion, and blissful, holy silence.

To experience praying this way under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit is the birthright of every believer. It is not the preserve of a tiny elite. We may all enjoy seasons where heaven is more real than earth, where Christ is more precious than anything or anyone in the universe, where the Scriptures come to life in a way we could never have imagined, where we no longer fear our many enemies, and where we want to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind.

The door is not closed to any of us. We have a heavenly Father who loves to give us good things and who will never play tricks on us. All he requires is that we should ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, knock and keep on knocking. In his time, we shall surely receive, find, and walk through the door. 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?' ([Luke 11:9-13](#)).

Stuart Olyott 1<sup>st</sup> published in the Evangelical Magazine November/December 2016 page 10

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