

Relentlessly Pursuing God

Fervency and Practicality in Prayer

By Kie Bowman

David Brainerd, praying in the deep winter snow until it all melts 12 hours later from his body heat, is an example of fervency. Fervency is Leonard Ravenhill habitually rising to pray in the middle of the night for hours at a time. A church in Austin, TX, is led to pray 24/7 and has maintained that schedule non-stop for almost two years—that's fervency in prayer.

People may see these as exceptional and impractical examples because they require extraordinary commitment. Not many believers will ever pray for 12 hours in the snow. Only a few churches will dare to pray 24/7 for years.

Fervency in prayer is about praying daily, praying passionately, praying in faith, and praying without competing distractions. So, in light of the exceptional examples of fervency in prayer mentioned in Scripture and the obvious examples in history, is it still possible for ordinary Christians to pray with fervency?

The answer is yes, but fervent prayer is never ordinary!

Are We Praying Fervently?

An astounding number of people pray. A 2023 survey found that 61 percent of Americans pray.¹ Still, in spite of its popularity, prayer remains a challenge. Lifeway asked pastors what they need most, and 72 percent said they need help with the consistency of their prayer life.²

If pastors are struggling with consistency in prayer, it is likely their parishioners are too. A closer examination of the avalanche of numbers easily identifies a key misunderstanding about the discipline and fervency of daily or frequent prayer.

For example, it is simple to analyze who is praying and how often they pray, but it is harder to measure how intensely they pray. Fortunately, the latest research gives us a clue. Of the 61 percent of people who pray, 61 percent pray while driving their car! Think about that. During one of the most attention-demanding activities in our lives—driving—people are praying. In fact, more people report praying while driving than while in church.

Is there something wrong with praying while we drive? Aren't we supposed to pray without ceasing? Of course, praying while we go about our daily activities, including in the car, is desirable—even expected.

That kind of prayer, however, falls short of the standard of Jesus, who said, "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 6:6). If the average person is praying while distracted by anything that simultaneously demands their attention, they have not yet discovered the meaning of fervency in prayer. It is impossible to be fervent in prayer while focused on other things. There must be a better way.

Remember Hannah. She is one of our role models for both fervency and practicality in prayer. We can all learn practical lessons from Hannah to increase our passion and fervency in prayer.

Desperate Prayer Moves God

Leonard Ravenhill once said, "God doesn't answer prayer, He answers desperate prayer."

Hannah was desperate. She lived more than a thousand years before Christ in the time of the judges. Her husband, his other wife and her children, and Hannah made an annual pilgrimage to Shiloh where Israel gathered in those days for prayer, worship, and sacrifice. Hannah wanted children, and her husband's other wife added to her frustration by constantly provoking her about it.

Year after year while the family was at Shiloh, Hannah fasted and fervently prayed for a child. God heard her prayer, and eventually Samuel—the last judge and first prophet of Israel—was born to her in direct answer to fervent prayer (1 Sam. 1:10–20). Hannah knew she would never have her own children without a miracle. Her prayer rose from a passionate desperation.

Fervent prayer almost always carries a spirit of desperation—a settled belief that if God does not do it, it will not get done. Desperate prayer is not motivated by a lack of faith. Instead, it is massively dependent upon answered prayer—and nothing else—as the solution to our current dilemmas.

Think, for instance, of George Whitefield praying for revival. His diary from his days at Oxford records that he often spent “whole days and even weeks” on his face before God in prayer. His desperation to experience revival was eventually realized in the First Great Awakening in America.

God still does extraordinary things in response to extraordinary prayer.

Fearless Prayer

Hannah also ignored other people's opinions of her highly intense commitment to prayer. Her husband tried to console her with his affection, but it was not enough (1 Sam. 1:8–11). Later, the old priest at Shiloh saw her praying with such quiet intensity he concluded she was drunk (vs. 12–16). But she corrected his misperception and testified that she was

ferently praying for a miracle (vs. 15–16). True, she did not want to be judged as “a worthless woman” (vs. 16), but she did not mind persisting in prayer regardless of other people’s prejudices.

Fervent prayer seems to disregard its surroundings or social norms in favor of a passionate fellowship with God. Contemporary Christians are often too easily offended by even the slightest social ridicule. The fear of other people’s opinions is the opposite of a bold witness.

As Billy Graham reminds us, “God Himself is the power that makes prayer effective. When prayers are answered and we glorify God, this is a strong testimony for the power of prayer in the name of Almighty God. The unbelieving world watches how we live our lives. They may laugh and make fun of our commitment to Christ, but it pleases the heart of God to see His followers living in obedience to Him no matter the consequences.”³

Relentless Persistence in Prayer

Charles Spurgeon once offered this pastoral observation: “He who prays much will pray more, and he who prays little will pray less.” One of the truths most frequently taught in Scripture concerning prayer is the necessity of persisting in it. Hannah apparently prayed for years for her miracle (vs. 3–11).

Fervency in prayer is not measured in a single half-hearted prayer but in repeated requests over days, weeks, months, or even decades. Prayer persists by believing that God’s delays are not the same as God’s denials. Your persistence in prayer will be determined by how much is at stake if God does not answer.

Persistence in prayer may be one of our biggest devotional challenges. That is why Jesus spoke to it specifically (Luke

18:1–8) and why Paul insisted upon it (1 Thess. 5:17). The late Tim Keller admitted to struggling with consistency in prayer. In order to discipline himself, he adopted a plan to pray five times a day.⁴

How you develop your commitment to persist in prayer will be determined by your circumstances, but no one can be described as fervent in prayer without persistence.

Outrageous Faith

Hannah expressed incredible faith. When did she start to believe that if she prayed God could give her a child? Did Hannah have a godly mother who filled her young heart with stories about Sarah, who miraculously gave birth at 90 years of age (Gen. 18:9–14)? Did Hannah learn at an early age about Rebekah, who could not have children but conceived as a result of prayer (Gen. 25:21)?

We may never know exactly how Hannah came to believe, but she exhibited outrageous faith in the face of her painful circumstances. As a godly Jewish woman, she knew the stories of God's miracles in the lives of other women. Did those biblical stories give her faith to pray with an outrageous trust in God? How could it be otherwise?

Fervent prayer is always baked in the live coals of God's Word. As Warren Wiersbe said, "We live on promises, not on explanations."

Fervent prayer believes that the God who moved in the past is the God who can hear my prayer today. If you want your prayer life set on fire, turn to Scripture. Read about who God is and what He can do. Perhaps then you will start to pray with the fervency of Hannah. Maybe you will believe what A.W. Tozer said:

Anything God has ever done, He can do now. Anything that God has ever done anywhere, He can do here. Anything He's ever

done for anyone, He can do for you.

You may think you cannot pray with fervency because you are not a biblical character like Hannah. But remember, we know almost nothing about Hannah except that she fervently prayed—and her prayer changed history.

What will the future say about us if we fail to pray fervently? What miracles await if, like a young wife named Hannah who lived 3,000 years ago, we choose to pray fervently?

Isn't it time to find out?

¹Michael Foust, "61 Percent of Americans Pray, Poll Shows: It's More Common Than People Expect," <https://christianheadlines.com/contributors/michael-foust/61-percent-of-americans-pray-poll-shows-its-more-common-than-people-expect>, accessed 12/5/23.

²Aaron Earls, "U.S. Pastors Identify Their Greatest Needs," <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/11/u-s-pastors-identify-their-greatest-needs>, accessed 8/27/23.

³"Answers," 1/7/21, <https://billygraham.org/answer/how-should-i-respond-when-co-workers-mock-my-faith>, accessed 8/27/23.

⁴Tim Keller, "How Tim Keller Seeks to Pray Without Ceasing," 10/22/19, accessed 8/27/23.

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