
Exegesis 13: Prayer in the Holy Spirit

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A consideration of Jude 20 and prayer in the Holy Spirit as a bulwark against apostasy.

‘The most neglected book in the New Testament’, is the way that one writer has described the letter of Jude.¹ Such neglect is a great pity, for as part of the canon of God’s word, Jude is ‘profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness’ [2 Tim 3:16, NKJV].

Structure

Crucial for a proper understanding of this letter is careful attention to its structure. In v 3, Jude issues an appeal for his readers to ‘contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ [NKJV]. Then, in v 4, he proceeds to indicate why he is issuing this appeal:

Certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ [NKJV].

The verses which follow this statement, vs 5-19, go on to provide a full-length portrait of these false teachers. It is not until v 20, however, that Jude returns to the theme of v 3 and explains what is entailed in ‘contending for the faith’. Thus, vs 5-19 ‘are intended to awaken Jude’s readers to the dangerous reality of their situation which makes Jude’s appeal necessary.’² It is only when Jude has outlined the serious situation which has called forth his letter that he gives positive directions on how to face this situation. Seen in this light, vs 20-23 constitute the very climax of the letter.³

If this basic structure of the letter is overlooked, one easily comes away with the impression that the chief means in opposing heresy is verbal denunciation of heretics.⁴ Not so; the major way to resist doctrinal and moral error is to put into practice the admonitions of vs 20-23. While vs 22 and 23 delineate the attitude which the Christian community is to take towards false teachers and those who have come under their influence, it is in vs 20-21 that Jude prescribes the antidote to error:

Beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life [NKJV].

Interpretation

Of the four admonitions contained in these verses it is the second one which is probably the most difficult to interpret. What exactly does Jude mean when he urges his readers to pray in the Holy Spirit [v 20]? First, whatever its precise meaning, it definitely presents a contrast to the graphic statement with which Jude has just concluded v 19. There Jude is able to declare with confidence that the false teachers about whom he is warning his fellow believers are men devoid of the Spirit of God. It is quite probable

that these false teachers claimed to be spiritual men, men who possessed the Spirit of God.⁵ Possibly they connected this claim to the fact that they were the recipients of visions, a point to which Jude alludes when he describes them as dreamers in v 8.⁶ Be this as it may, Jude does not hesitate to deny their claims. For a careful observation of their lifestyle reveals not the fruit of holiness, but immorality, the end product of ungodly desires [vs 4,16,18].⁷ To Jude, such a lifestyle was impossible for men who had drunk deeply of the Spirit of God, whose pre-eminent characteristic is holiness [see 1 Thess 4:3-8, espec v 8]. It naturally follows that the false teachers, as men devoid of the Spirit, could not possibly fulfill Jude's exhortation to pray in the Spirit.⁸

There are some authors who feel that by praying in the Spirit a special type of prayer is being indicated, namely, praying in tongues. According to this interpretation Jude is urging his readers to include praying in tongues as part of their arsenal in the fight against heresy. But, if this were the case, Jude certainly hints at it in a rather obscure fashion.⁹ Moreover, when the Apostle Paul, in Eph 6:18, also urges believers to pray in the Spirit, he adds a significant qualifier: '*With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit*' [NASB]. Every conceivable type of prayer which a believer might pray, including the simple cry from the heart 'Help!', is to be uttered in the Spirit.¹⁰ Nor is it, as a Canadian author has recently argued, 'simply surrendering to the Spirit when we pray, forsaking any self-effort.'¹¹ For prayer does require strenuous effort. As John Bunyan (1628-1688) related in his classical discussion of prayer:

Verily, may I but speak my own Experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of Praying to God as I ought; it is enough to make your poor, blind, carnal men, to entertain strange thoughts of me. For, as for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so loth to go to God, and when it is with him, so loth to stay with him, that many times I am forced in my Prayers; *first*, to beg of God that he would take mine heart, and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there (Ps 86:11). Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am so blind, nor how to pray I am so ignorant; *onely* (blessed be Grace) *the Spirit helps our infirmities*.

Oh the starting-holes that the heart hath in the time of Prayer! none knows how many by-ways the heart hath, and back-lains, to slip away from the presence of God. How much pride also, if enabled with expressions? how much hypocrisy, if before others? And how little conscience is there made of Prayer between God and the Soul in secret, unless the *Spirit of Supplication* be there to help?¹²

Meaning

What then does Jude mean when he exhorts his fellow believers to make prayer in the Spirit an integral part of their lives? There is a vast difference between prayer in the Spirit and prayer that is not in the Spirit. Prayer in the Spirit reaches the ear of God, for it goes 'through Christ,' whereas prayer that is not in the Spirit does neither. Jude 20 needs to be linked with Paul's statement in Eph 2:18, 'through him [that is, Christ] we...have our access in one Spirit to the Father.' Through Christ, that is solely on the basis of his sacrificial death, which Paul has just outlined in Ephesians 2, believers as one united body have access to God the Father. In Jesus only 'do we have our introduction into the Divine presence. All prayer that is acceptable and reaches the ears of God, therefore is prayer that is conveyed to Him through Jesus Christ. For sinners the atonement of Christ lays the only basis for real prayer.'¹³ And it is the Spirit, the

Spirit of Christ, who makes this work of Christ a subjective reality in the lives of believers both corporately and individually; for 'by one Spirit ... we have access to the Father'. The believer's privilege of worship and prayer, purchased by Christ at such great cost to himself, finds its guarantee and outworking in that Spirit who indwells the believer. So, to pray in the Spirit means nothing less than to claim and make use of this access to God which Christ's death provides.

Second, prayer in the Spirit is inseparably yoked to a deep awareness of the fatherhood of God. When a person prays in the Spirit he or she is vividly conscious that the God to whom he or she is praying is not a distant figure, but One who is very close, in fact, One who is his or her Father. Bunyan, speaking of this aspect of prayer in the Spirit, could declare:

Here is the life of Prayer, when in, or with the Spirit, a man being made sensible of sin, and how to come to the Lord for mercy; he comes, I say, in the strength of the Spirit, and cryeth, *Father*. That one word spoken in Faith, is better than a thousand prayers, as men call them, written and read, in a formal, cold, luke-warm way.¹⁴

This conviction that those who are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ can approach God as their Father with freedom and reverent familiarity was one of the key Biblical truths rediscovered at the time of the Reformation. According to H Wace, 'one thing was the centre of all the life and all the teaching of the Reformers - that God was speaking to them as their reconciled Father, and they were in direct communion with Him.'¹⁵ The testimony of Veit Dietrich to the manner of prayer of the German Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) offers an excellent illustration of this point:

He prays as devoutly as one who is conversing with God, and with such hope and faith as one who address his father. 'I know,' said he, 'that thou art our God and Father ...' When I heard him utter these words ... my heart burned within me for great joy, because of the familiar and devout tones in which he spoke with God.¹⁶

Third, prayer in the Spirit is prayer that the Spirit empowers and directs.¹⁷ For most of us regular, private prayer is the most difficult aspect of our lives as Christians. The reason is not hard to find. As Richard Lovelace astutely notes: 'our fallen nature is actually allergic to God and never wants to get too close to him. Thus our fallen nature constantly pulls us away from prayer.'¹⁸ Specifically, prayer reveals the believer's innate poverty as well as his dependence on Another. More than anything else prayer makes us conscious of our limitations and weakness. Naturally, we tend to shy away from such a revelation. So it is that we need the Spirit's empowering in prayer, both to pray and to persevere in prayer. Here though, one must heed the words of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), the eighteenth-century Baptist theologian, who commenting on the very phrase we are considering from Jude 20, states:

The assistance of the Holy Spirit ... is not that of which we are always sensible. We must not live in the neglect of prayer at any time because we are unconscious of being under Divine influence, but rather, as our Lord directs pray for his Holy Spirit. It is in prayer that the Spirit if God ordinarily assists us. Prayers begun in dejection have often ended in joy and praise; of this many of the Psalms of David furnish us with examples.¹⁹

A desire to be led by the Holy Spirit in prayer does not entail forsaking all effort in prayer and 'simply surrendering to the Spirit.' Rather, it should actually lead one to increasingly give oneself to prayer, and so experience the empowering of God the Holy

Spirit as he or she prays.

What does Jude mean when he urges his readers to pray in the Holy Spirit? Nothing less than to experience true prayer as we are brought by the Holy Spirit into the presence of God our Father to hear his voice address us through the Spirit of his Son, and to speak with him with boldness and reverence. Without such praying, Jude assures us, the defence of orthodoxy will avail for little.

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