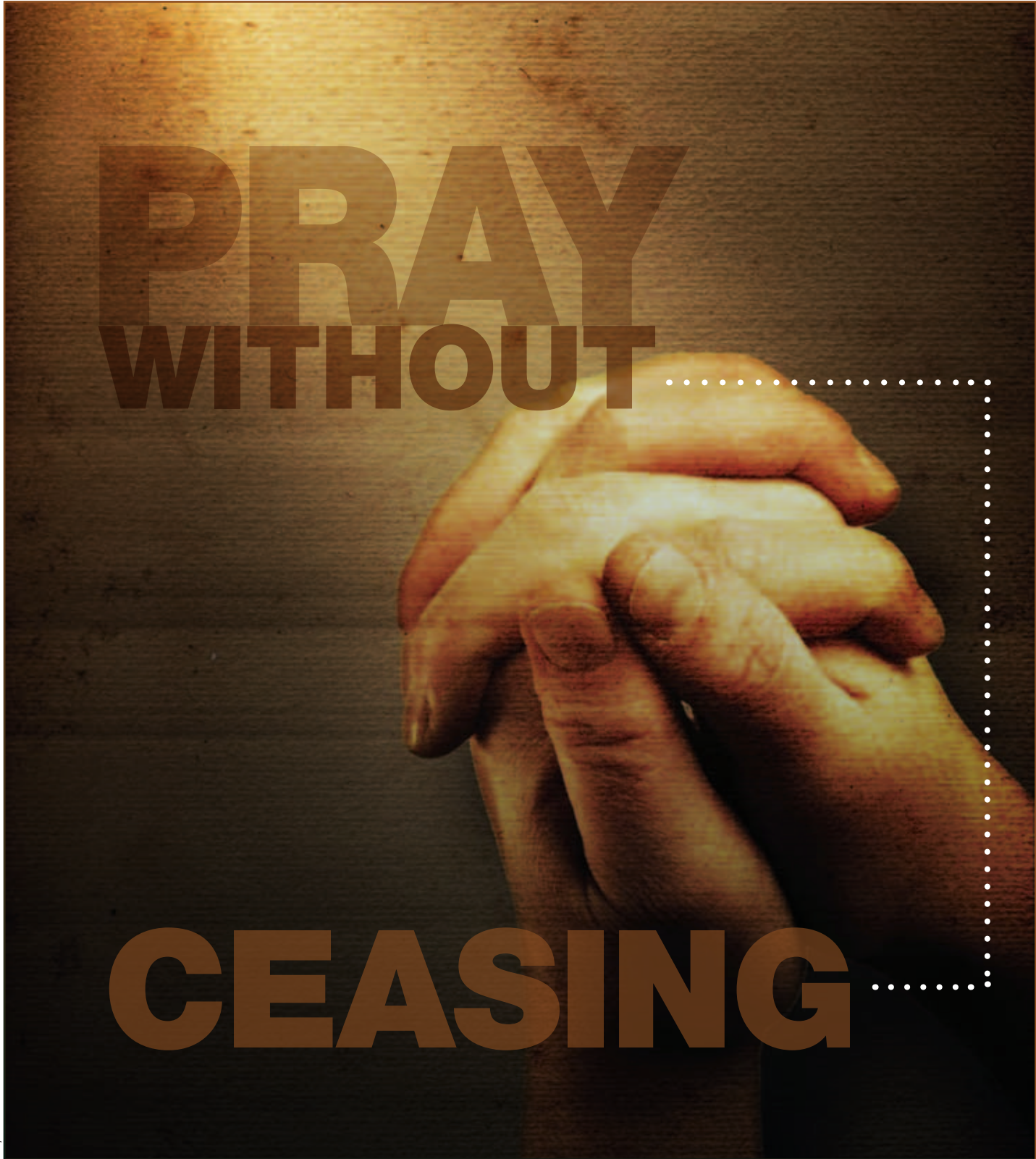


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PRAY WITHOUT

CEASING

ONE OF THE FEW SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES agreed upon by Christians regardless of denomination is the importance of prayer. Christianity and Judaism share the belief that prayer is a necessity and a privilege as well. Both religions are based on a relationship with the God of the Universe and recognize that communication is critical to its success. And both acknowledge that such communication would be difficult, if not impossible, without the foundational instructions found in the Bible.

Depending on the translation you might be reading, the word prayer (praying, prayed, etc.) is found nearly 600 times, and the concept even more frequently. As a matter of fact, the Bible is quite preoccupied with the idea. Furnishing examples, enforcing precepts and declaring promises, both Testaments give the communication between God and man a great deal of attention. Within the first few pages, we are introduced to the idea as Adam and Eve walk with Him in the cool of the evening, and clearly, He used the time to express to them His parameters for life in the Garden. And so with each succeeding generation, from Adam to Noah to Moses and the prophets; from Matthew to Paul to the Revelation given to the Apostle John, we repeatedly encounter the importance and necessity of prayer.

Abraham spoke with God as a man speaks with a friend; Daniel distinguished himself in captivity as a man of prayer; Moses argued on behalf of the Israelites in the wilderness; David cried out to the Lord with incredible whole-hearted passion; Jeremiah interceded with great anguish for all Israel; Elijah on the mountain, Yeshua in the Garden, Paul in the dungeon...virtually every book of the Bible reveals the importance of intimate communion with God our Father. No wonder the writer of 1st Thessalonians in the Newer Testament encourages Christians to “*pray without ceasing*” (5:17).

Exploring the Meaning of Prayer

Christians throughout the generations have struggled to arrive at the proper, practical interpretation of the instruction Paul gave to the Thessalonians. How does one pray without ceasing? For some, it came to mean a solitary life, far from mainstream society, dedicated to prayer and meditation as a part of religious orders established for such a purpose; but many others have simply tried to “do their best,” praying when possible and feeling guilty for not praying more. Perhaps a look at the languages of the Bible will put the concept in proper perspective by helping us understand what it meant to the ancients who said it first.

There are actually seven Greek words that express the concept of prayer, translated also as intercession, supplication, request, etc. Greek scholars have explained that these words actually do not refer to different kinds of prayer since writers of the Newer Testament held one basic definition, but rather to different aspects within that definition.

The word *proseuche* appears over 80 times and is a general word for prayer; emphasizing, however, that prayer is only valid when offered to the one true God of Israel. Anything else is blasphemy. *Aitema* indicates a petition, while *deesis* refers to making one’s needs known. *Enteuxis* speaks of boldness in prayer; *eucharistia* conveys the need for thanksgiving and gratitude, while *euche* refers to the expression of the wishes of one’s heart. *Hiketeria* is translated supplications and speaks of humility and passion.

And finally, in his book *A Word for the Day*, J. D. Watson tells us that *proseuchomai adialeiptos* means to pray without ceasing. Translated literally, these two Greek words combine to mean “without a gap.” That may not help relieve our guilt until we realize that the term was used in ancient Rome to describe someone with a nagging cough. Of course, it didn’t mean that the individual in question never stopped coughing. But it did mean that he or she had become a “cougher,” coughing every little while but always aware of the condition that caused the cough. So should we become “pray-ers.” Our times that are set apart for intimate communion with the Lord are critically important, but so are prayerful outbursts, reactions to the circumstances and situations of life. And all the while, we should walk in continuous consciousness of the presence of the Lord who is the impetus and the object of our prayers.

In Hebrew, there are two words most often translated prayer. The first and most common is *tefilah* which interestingly comes from a root which means to judge. The rabbis tell us this is because an integral part of prayer is introspection, looking inside ourselves to discern our needs, our desires, and our motives. Such judgment



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PRAYER

is necessary to come into the Lord's presence in the proper frame of mind, one of confidence, humility and gratefulness.

The second word is *berakhot*, or blessings, and comes from a root which means knees. It refers, of course, to the act of showing respect to the Lord by bowing one's knees in His presence. Many people unfortunately believe that Judaism is a legalistic religion which encourages a meaningless prayer life based only on rote prayer. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Although communal prayer and specified prayers and prayer times are parts of the Jewish experience, spontaneous prayer is also considered an integral part of every day life. The rabbis teach that a person should find at least 100 reasons every day to praise the Lord by reciting *berakhot*. One's day should begin with prayers of thanksgiving even before getting out of bed; blessing the Lord before eating, when wearing new clothes, seeing something beautiful, hearing thunder, seeing a rainbow, when receiving something good and even something bad; and at least 92 other times, the Jewish heart is encouraged to burst forth with thanksgiving. And such "pray-ers," like Paul and the Thessalonians, do so with a constant awareness of God's faithful presence.

In other words, Paul was not encouraging the Thessalonian believers to become monks. Rather, in keeping with his Jewish heritage that formed the foundation for his Christianity, he was stressing the importance of communion with God that included communal prayer, private or "closet" prayer, spontaneous prayer, praying Scripture, and expressing one's heart to the Lord. But he was also encouraging them to cultivate a view of life that saw everything in relation to God. Such conditioning would fill their hearts with joy and hope, an awareness of their dependence on God, and of His extravagant goodness toward them. With the resulting constant consciousness of the Lord's presence, they couldn't help but pray without ceasing.



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OUR FATHER

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Prayer—Communion with the Father

Paul’s Jewish upbringing and education gave him insight and understanding, which the Gentiles to whom he spoke lacked. Raised as part of the vibrant covenant community that was first-century Israel and fully versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, he was very aware of what the Bible taught about prayer. He would have had large sections of *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) committed to memory and had heard the stories of Moses, David, and the prophets repeatedly throughout his life. At the Temple, in the synagogue, and at home, he would have learned about prayer at an early age. But even more important than his knowledge of *how* to pray was his understanding of *to whom* he was praying.

Watson further gives the following five basic principles of fatherhood that the Jewish people attached to God as their heavenly Father:

1. They saw God’s Fatherhood in terms of His begetting. 1 Chronicles 29:10 gives Him a title, “*Lord God of Israel our Father*,” and views Him as the one Who has begotten the nations.
2. They saw God’s Fatherhood in terms of His nearness to them. As a Father, they recognized that He was closer than any other relative or friend. In Psalm 68, God is viewed riding through the clouds with His 20,000 chariots and angels. But then the psalmist pulls back from this mighty grandeur to a very personal thrust—“*a father of the fatherless*” (v. 5). What a contrast.
3. They saw God’s Fatherhood in terms of His loving grace. They saw Him as forgiving, tenderhearted, merciful, and gracious. “*As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those that fear Him*” (Ps. 103:13).
4. They saw God’s Fatherhood in terms of His guidance. Jeremiah wrote, “*They shall come with weeping and with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, in a straight way in which they shall not stumble, for I am a Father to Israel*” (Jer. 31:9).
5. They saw God’s Fatherhood in terms of their obedience to Him...After much rebellion and corruption, Moses said to Israel: “*Do you thus deal with the Lord?...Is He not your father who bought you?*” (Deut. 32:6). “After all that God has done for you,” Moses thunders, “this is how you repay Him? You dare to rebel and disobey His Word?”



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The Greek word for father is *pater*. From it we get such words as paternity and paternal. In ancient Greece, it referred to the patriarchal head of the family. In Hebrew, however, the word is *abba*. It was the familiar term children used for their fathers in ancient Israel and is still used today. If one visits a beach or park on a warm summer day in Israel, calls of “*Abba, Abba!*” echo constantly as children of all ages call out to their fathers. It is much more common, actually, than to hear a call for “*Ima,*” the Hebrew word for mother. Israeli fathers, like their ancient predecessors, are very involved with their children, and are often very affectionate with them, even in public. The word *abba* appears three times in the New Testament and indicated then, as today, a relationship that is close and tender.

The average ancient Israeli child would have had such a relationship with his father. From the age of three, he would have begun studying the Hebrew language with his *abba*, then *Torah*, then a trade. He would have listened to his father repeat the stories of the heroes of the Jewish faith and watched him as he prayed, went to synagogue, and led the family in worship and prayer every *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and on each Jewish holiday. The relationship would have been marked by compassion, tenderness, and love. And though intimate, respect and obedience were inculcated from birth. It is unfortunate that many Christians today have begun to insert the word “Daddy” where *abba* is used in the Scriptures. Although there are similarities, that English word carries none of the respect and reverence implied in the Hebrew.

When that Hebrew child read in the Scriptures that God was his father, his life experience told him this was a God he could trust; a God who would love and encourage him, who would patiently instruct him and faithfully protect him; a God he could approach with joy and laughter; a God he would love and serve, reverence and obey. Such was Paul’s history; it must have been difficult to impart such principles to pagan converts whose own lives may not have provided the same foundation. Judaism was unique in the value it placed on children, families, fatherhood, and each human life in general, and those values shaped the early church.

Hallmarks of a Constant Prayer Life

As Paul’s instruction and the revelation of the Holy Spirit helped the Thessalonians grasp the nature of the God to whom they were praying, their lives would have been dramatically transformed. Eventually, praying without ceasing would become second nature. And as they matured in this process, Christianity’s Hebraic foundations would provide other hallmarks of a new prayer life.

ACCESS—The Greek word *prosagoge* means to open a way of access. In ancient times, it referred to the individual who provided access to the king. Somewhat like the situation Esther found herself in, one could not, on pain of death, simply appear before a king without proper introduction and permission. Each court had an individual whose responsibility it was to screen the visitors and introduce to the king those he felt were most worthy or most likely to be welcomed by the monarch. The Christian Scriptures tell us that Yeshua has filled that role for us and, through Him, we have access to the throne room of God Himself. What an incredible privilege and how grateful we should be that we, who are altogether unworthy, have now been made worthy to come before the King! The book of Ephesians speaks of *prosagoge*, and combines it with confidence and boldness.

The Greek word for boldness is *parresia*. It appears over 30 times in the New Testament and refers to the act of speaking. It was often used in relation to political situations in the ancient world, and spoke of what we today would call “freedom of speech.” It meant that the speaker had the right to say anything that was on his mind. It is used in relation to the speech of Yeshua, as well as the apostles and other believers, and meant that they had the right to speak the truth freely and openly. This adds a profound element to our understanding of praying without ceasing. We have received our introduction and have been welcomed by the Monarch. We have free access to the throne room of God Most High, without which prayer without ceasing would be impossible. And we are instructed to come with confidence, trusting in our own position as welcomed guests, and with boldness. Whatever is on our hearts, whatever we are fearing or desiring, whatever has upset us or blessed us... we have complete freedom of speech.

Such a privilege is hard to comprehend. And how important that we remember our earlier discussion of prayer and the appropriate attitude for entering the throne room! We must come with confidence, yes, and in freedom, yes, but with humility and reverence. We must never confuse boldness with presumption or treat the incredible privilege of access with flippancy.

JOY—Another hallmark of one who prays without ceasing is joy and it could be no other way. We have already determined that to pray constantly requires a constant consciousness of the presence of the Lord. And Scripture tells us that in His presence, we will find fullness of joy.

The *Holman Bible Dictionary* defines joy as “the happy state that results from knowing and serving God.” A number of Greek and Hebrew words are used in the Bible to convey the ideas of joy and rejoicing. We have the same situation in English with such nearly synonymous words as joy, happiness, pleasure, delight, gladness, merriment, felicity, and enjoyment. The words “joy” and “rejoice” are used most often to translate the Hebrew word *simcha* and Greek word *chara*, found over 150 times in the Bible. If such words as “joyous” and “joyful” are included, the number swells to over 200; and the verb “rejoice” itself appears well over 200 times.

These words are used to describe a wide range of human experience from childbirth to marriage, a good harvest, a military victory, and even the drinking of good wine. We are told that God Himself experiences joy, while His actions in history, such as the deliverance from Egypt and the return from Babylonian captivity, were a source of joy for His people. David speaks repeatedly of joy in the book of Psalms, rejoicing that God has delivered him from the hand of his enemies. The Christian Epistles are filled with references to it, and Yeshua is said to have experienced joy even as He suffered the horrendous pain and humiliation of crucifixion. It sometimes refers to the extreme happiness with which the believer contemplates salvation and the bliss of the afterlife. Believers rejoice because God has surrounded them with His steadfast love and brought them to salvation. Joy is a response to God’s word, His reward to believers, and their strength as expressed in the book of Nehemiah.

In both the Hebrew and the Greek, the concept of joy captures the essence of happiness, of feeling good, of that which is pleasant. But the biblical understanding of joy goes well beyond these mere human feelings. Happiness is a temporary condition entirely dependent on circumstances. If the source of the good feelings is removed, the happiness flees along with it. However, joy is a permanent state of being, found even in the midst of pain, suffering, and affliction. Unlike the self-indulgent pleasure-seeking that the world often confuses with happiness, true joy allows God’s children to continue rejoicing even when troubles come. Simply put, joy is the fruit of a right relationship with our *Abba*.

HOPE—The confidence and joy that we have discussed as hallmarks of constancy in prayer are only possible when one is filled with true biblical hope or confident expectation. Unfortunately, modern usage has robbed the word “hope” of its true biblical definition and significance. Today, it has come to mean a strong desire, often fueled by a sense of impotence, that lacks any trust that our wishes will be fulfilled. A comparison of various dictionary definitions shows us that our understanding of hope actually bears much more resemblance to hopeless: having little or no expectation of success.

However, the word appears up to 175 times in the Bible, with nearly half of those instances in the Newer Testament. Sadly for many believers, these words don’t fill their hearts with the joy of expectation. Rather, they are filled with a sense of uncertainty as they understand hope to be a kind of wishful thinking.

In the ancient world, however, the concept of hope was not some vague sense that something might happen. Just the opposite, it carried the connotation of certainty. If you had hope, you had immutable confidence in the outcome. In both the Hebrew and the Greek, hope implies a deeply held confident expectation, and absolute assurance.

Therefore, the message from the beginning of the Bible to the end, whether in Greek or Hebrew, is clearly the same. The hope that we have in the Lord’s promises to us, in His tender love and care for us, in His forgiveness, in His sovereignty over our lives, and in His promise of eternal life is not wishful thinking. It is certainty. And that



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■ International Headquarters
P.O. Box 1093
Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

■ Australia
P.O. Box 1785, Buderim
Queensland 4556
Tel: 07-5479-4229
adminaust@bridgesforpeace.com.au

■ Canada
P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2
Tel: 204-489-3697
Toll free: (1) 855-489-3697
bfp@mtns.net

■ Japan
Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku
Tokyo 130 0012
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfpj.org

■ New Zealand
P.O. Box 768
Whangarei 0110
Tel: 09-430-2943
bfpnz@orcon.net.nz

■ South Africa
P.O. Box 1848
Durbanville 7551
Tel: 021-975-1941
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

■ United Kingdom
18 Heol Ty Gwyn Industrial Estate
Maesteg, Wales CF34 0BQ
Tel: 01656-739494
ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com

■ United States
P.O. Box 410037
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Product orders: 888-669-8800
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unwavering assurance not only comforts and encourages us, but it empowers and compels us to live lives of joyful obedience.

When the writer of Romans 15:13 tells us, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit,” he is actually talking about a life that prays continuously.

The psalmist tells us in Psalm 33:18, “Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who **hope** in His loving-kindness.” (NASB). Again, we find the elements of prayer without ceasing. We can walk in a constant state of awareness of His presence because His attention never strays from us.

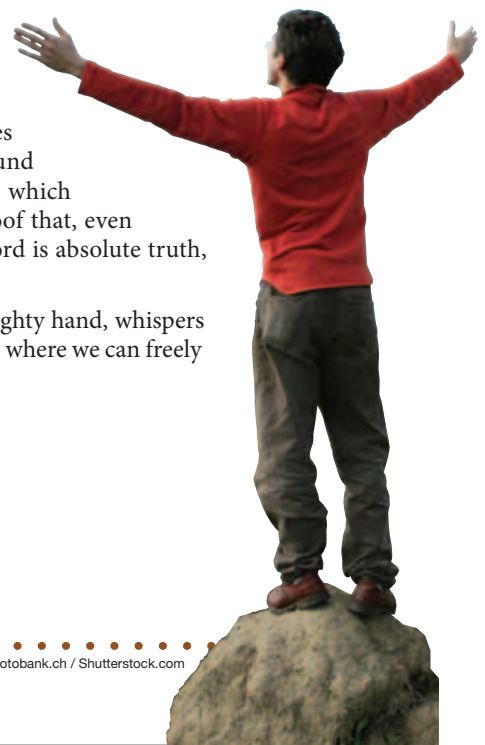
Finally, Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “*faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” How very different our lives as believers might be if we could but grasp what the writer of Hebrews is really saying. The word “substance” in the Greek means “reality” and the verse isn’t so much a definition of faith as it is an explanation of how faith and hope should impact our lives.

God’s Faithfulness Empowers Us

Our relationship with the Lord should fill us with unwavering certainty of who He is and who we are in Him. We know who our Abba is; we can have absolute trust in His passionate, extravagant love for us, and total confidence that every word He has spoken will come to pass. That remarkable knowledge empowers us to live those lives of faithful obedience, very different from the lives of those around us. Such faithfulness is based on the reality of those things which we confidently anticipate. And therein we find absolute proof that, even though He is an unseen God, He is real, He is alive, His Word is absolute truth, every assurance He has made is positively certain.

He is our *Abba*. He holds us gently in the palm of His mighty hand, whispers tenderly of His love for us, and draws us into His throne room where we can freely commune with Him...prayer without ceasing.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer
International Development Director



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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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