

# The Power of Prayer

by R.C. Sproul

We are moved by the litany of faith that the author of Hebrews records in Chapter 11 of that book. There we have the "Roll Call of Faith," which catalogues the heroic acts of biblical men and women of faith. Their acts are partially summarized in verses 33 and 34:

Who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight . . .

The Scriptures do not provide a similar catalogue of the heroes of prayer, but such a list could easily be compiled. Using the same format as does the writer of Hebrews, let us examine a partial list of the accomplishments of prayer:

- By prayer, Esau's heart was changed toward Jacob, so that they met in a friendly, rather than hostile, manner (Genesis 32);
- By the prayer of Moses, God brought the plagues upon Egypt, and then removed them again (Exodus 7-11);
- By prayer, when Samson was ready to perish with thirst, God brought water out of a hollow place for his sustenance (Judges 15);
- By prayer, the strength of Samson was restored, and he pulled down the temple of Dagon on the Philistines, so that those whom he slew at his death were more than all he had slain in his life prior to that (Judges 16);
- By prayer, Joshua made the sun stand still (Joshua 10);
- By prayer, Elijah held back the rains for three and a half years, and then by prayer, caused it to rain again (1 Kings 17, 18);
- By the prayer of Asa, God confounded the army of Zerah (2 Chronicles 14);
- By the prayer of Hezekiah, God sent an angel and slew in one night 185,000 men in Sennacherib's army (2 Kings 19).

And time would fail me to tell of Abraham, who prayed for and received a son at the age of one hundred years; and Moses who received help at the Red Sea; and the Israelites, who were delivered from Egypt after much prayer; and David, who escaped the treachery of Saul by prayer; and Solomon, who received great wisdom as the result of prayer; and Daniel, who was able to interpret dreams, after prayer. People were delivered from peril, healed from diseases, saw loved ones cured, and witnessed innumerable miracles as the result of fervent prayer.

James, if anything, was understating the case when he wrote that the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

The power of prayer is neither automatic nor magical. Conditions are attached to the promises of

the Bible regarding prayer. At times Jesus uses a kind of "shorthand," delivering brief aphorisms about prayer to encourage His people in its practice. We are reminded of statements like "Ask and it shall be given to you"; "If any two of you agree on anything, ask and it shall be given"; and "Everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive."

Shorthand summaries like these have provoked bizarre theories of prayer when people have violently isolated these passages from everything else Jesus and the Bible say about prayer. Distortions also abound when we approach these aphorisms simplistically. Consider the earlier statement about any two people agreeing. It would not be difficult to find two Christians who agree that ridding the world of cancer or wars would be a good idea. Their prayer in this matter would not automatically accomplish their desire. The Word of God indicates that wars, poverty, and disease will be present at the time of Christ's return. To expect their absolute elimination before the appointed time is to grasp prematurely the future promises of God. What life will be like in heaven would be delightful to us now, but all our prayers cannot force God to give us this future situation in this present world.

We still must suffer the ravages of sin, disease, and death. We entreat God to comfort us, to deliver us, to heal us. But we cannot demand these things in an absolute way.

The idea that God "always wills healing" has been a destructive distortion in the Christian community. The pastoral problems emanating from this are enormous. I was once approached by a young man stricken with cerebral palsy. His Christian faith was vibrant, his attitude was contagious with pleasant optimism, his productivity exceptional. He had graduated from college with a superior record. His question to me was poignant: "Dr. Sproul, do you think I am demon possessed?" The question was accompanied by tears. The man's life had been hurled into chaos.

Aghast at this question, I replied, "Why would you even ask such a question?"

The young man proceeded to relate a series of events triggered by an encounter with some Christian friends who had "claimed" the promise of Scripture and "agreed" that the young man be healed of cerebral palsy. They had laid hands on him, praying "the prayer of faith" and claiming a healing for him. When it was apparent that he had not been healed, they first chastised him for his lack of faith. Next they claimed he was guilty of some heinous secret sin that was blocking the healing. Finally they concluded that he was demon possessed and left him with a tortured soul. His "friends" never considered that the error might be their own. They had given the impression of being zealous, Spirit-filled Christians. Their actions revealed at best immaturity; at worst, arrogance and presumption.

Prayer is not magic. God is not a celestial bellhop ready at our beck and call to satisfy our every whim. In some cases our prayers must involve travail of the soul and agony of heart such as Jesus Himself experienced in the Garden. Sometimes the immature Christian suffers bitter disappointment not because God failed to keep His promises, but because well-meaning Christians made promises "for" God that God Himself never authorized.

The simple summaries Jesus gives are designed to encourage us to pray. We have not, He said, because we ask not. The pattern seems simple. We are to ask and we will receive. Elsewhere the New Testament expands the conditions, giving us a fuller view of what is involved in effective prayer. Below are five texts with the conditions that qualify the statements Jesus gives.

1. John 9:31--We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.

(REVERENCE AND OBEDIENCE)

2. John 14:1--Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

(IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST)

3. John 15:7--If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.

(MUTUAL COMMUNION WITH CHRIST)

4. 1 John 3:22--And we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

(OBEDIENCE)

5. 1 John 5:14--And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

(ACCORDANCE WITH THE WILL OF GOD)

As these passages reveal, there is more to receiving what we desire from God than the mere asking. Trust in God is not enough. There must be proper reverence for God, obedience to His will, and an ongoing communion with Christ. The request must be made in accordance with the revealed will of God, in accordance with the nature and character of God.

The Bible enjoins us to pray "in the name of Jesus." The invoking of Jesus' name is not a magical incantation; its significance lies deeper. In the culture in which the Bible was written, a person's name indicated the sum total of his attributes and character. To ask for something in Jesus' name is not to tag on a phrase at the end of a prayer. Rather, it means that we believe that our request is what Jesus Himself would ask for. We are showing that we are so closely aligned with the mind of Christ that we can make our request in His stead.

We have seen that there are certain prerequisites we must follow as we pray. If we ask anything, we must trust in God, knowing that our request is in accordance with the will of the Father and the nature and purpose of Christ. We must have a proper reverence for God as well as the assurance that we are being obedient to what He has revealed to us. We must maintain continuous communion with Christ. After all of these prerequisites have been met, we may have confidence that our prayer will be answered. The crucial

thing to notice here is that if we are meeting these prerequisites, we will not ask for anything out of the will of God.

Another reason our prayers are not always answered as we desire is given to us in James 4:3. We are told that we don't have because we ask with improper motives, wishing to use that prayer request in the pursuit of wicked pleasures. God is not going to give us the things we would misuse. Nor is He going to answer those requests made in ignorance, which would prove disastrous.

Moses is a prime example. In Exodus 33:18, he prays, ". . . Show me thy glory." Moses has talked with God, seen God do various miracles: the burning bush, sending the plagues, parting the Red Sea, but now Moses wants the big one: "God, those other things were great, but now let me have it all. Let me see Your face!"

In verses 19 and 20, God says:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But . . . you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live."

God was doing Moses a monumental favor by refusing to honor his request. If God had granted Moses his wish, it would have cost him his life. No man can see God and live. Moses should have rejoiced that God said, "No."

Another reason that we fail to see the desired answers to our prayers may be because we are praying for things we already have in Christ. In John 4, Jesus is speaking with the woman at the well. He tells her that if she realized to whom she was speaking, she would have known what to request. The same is true of us. If we really knew who God is and all that He has already given us in Christ, our prayer lives would be far different from what they are.

We ask God for His presence, yet He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. We ask God to give us peace, but Ephesians says that Christ is our peace. Imagine sitting down to a marvelous Thanksgiving feast, a table overflowing with foods of all kinds, and asking the hostess for something to eat. It is possible to pray ourselves right into a state of unbelief by continuing to pray for those things we already have in Christ.

### **The Power Of Our Intercessor**

Prayer is the priestly function of carrying a petition to God. In Old Testament times two major classes of mediators functioned between God and His people: prophets and priests. Stated simply, the prophet was ordained by God to speak His divine Word to the people. The prophet spoke to the people for God. Conversely, the priest was ordained by God to be a spokesman for the people. The priest spoke to God for the people.

In the New Testament, Christ exercises the offices not only of prophet and priest but also of King.

In His priestly role He made the perfect sacrifice, offering the perfect atonement once and for all. Yet the cross was not the end of Christ's priestly office. In His Ascension He entered the heavenly holy of holies, and continues to act as our Great High Priest. There He prays for His people, interceding to the Father on our behalf. The power of Christ's prayers is immeasurable. It can be illustrated not only by the miracles He performed on earth, but also by His prayers of intercession during His earthly ministry.

Consider the cases of Judas and Simon Peter. Both were disciples who had committed acts of heinous treachery against Jesus in His darkest hour. Judas committed suicide, whereas Simon was restored and became the "Rock" of the early church in Jerusalem. Why?

One critical difference between these men may be seen in Jesus' announcements of their forthcoming treachery. About Judas He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." When the disciples asked Jesus to identify the traitor, He replied, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." Then Jesus dipped the morsel, gave it to Judas and said, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (see John 13:21,26,27).

Later that evening in His great prayer of intercession Jesus said, "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12). Here Jesus prayed about Judas, but not for Judas, and called him the "son of perdition."

In the case of Peter's denial Jesus announced to him:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:31,32).

Notice that Jesus did not say, "If you have turned again, strengthen your brethren," but "when you have turned." Jesus was confident of Peter's restoration. We cannot help but draw the conclusion that Jesus' confidence was in large measure due to His earlier words: "But I have prayed for you."

Jesus prayed about Judas. He prayed for Simon Peter. He made intercession for Peter. He acted as Peter's Priest. At this very moment Christ is acting as our High Priest, interceding for us. This is the jubilant conclusion of the author in Hebrews 4:16:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

May these words become life to our souls as we appropriate them for ourselves.

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