

Adventuring with God

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Praying Heaven Down

The church in North America has gone through some discouraging years. While growth in spiritual conversions has taken place in a few congregations, the vast majority of churches have experienced stagnation, even decline in their numbers. It seems to be difficult to get people's attention in the midst of so many distractions, and while some *are* hungry for spiritual reality, many of them don't turn to the church to find answers. Sometimes we can attract a crowd if we offer the right combination of consumer-savvy spiritual "products," but it's still rare to see sinners come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit to experience new birth.

In most cases, the lack of spiritual response isn't related to the skill of our communicators or musicians on the platform. Our greeters are doing their job in making visitors feel welcome, and most Sunday school teachers and children's ministers are well prepared with a helpful, biblically based message. There are myriad small group options and often choices in worship service styles and starting times as well. So what's the problem?

Perhaps our assumptions are wrong about how God moves among His people. We think if we set everything up right, if we bring in the "right" person (i.e., the one gifted to do the spiritual work), and we get people to come, we'll see God's power manifested and people's hearts will be changed. Yet, time after time we are disappointed in the results because we've neglected the most important work of the church—the ministry of prayer.

In all our attempts to be current and relevant, we've forgotten what the early church knew: Prayer is vital in

bringing the power of God to earth. From the beginning, church leaders saw prayer as one of the four crucial elements to their work. In Acts 2:42 it is listed with teaching the Word, fellowship, and breaking of bread.

Centuries later, John Wesley followed their example. The value he placed on prayer was so high that he once declared, "God does *nothing* but in answer to prayer." Here's why. Prayer, if genuine, is a frank acknowledgment that we're not relying on our own wisdom, talent, gifts, and other human resources. We understand how utterly dependent we are upon Him to do what we cannot do: bring conviction to the human heart and draw people into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Human pride and arrogance will drive us to try everything else but prayer. As Leonard Ravenhill observed, "The self-sufficient do not pray, the self-satisfied will not pray, and the self-righteous cannot pray." All too often, I find myself in one of these categories, wondering why I'm not seeing God move! But when Christ's body comes together to seek Him with fervency and humility, we say collectively that we know we cannot by all our cleverness produce a spiritual harvest.

Many of us might protest, "But we *do* pray! Before every church event and outreach, don't we ask the Lord to bless what we have planned? Don't we organize prayer chains to let each other know our specific prayer needs and hold weekly prayer meetings? (that admittedly, most of us don't attend!) And when we're facing serious problems, don't we go down to the altar to seek the prayer support of others in the body of Christ?"

While these are all good things, they represent only a small part of what God has called us to do in the area of prayer. Personal petition and devotional praying are vital to our individual spiritual development, but there is so much more that is possible if we will submit ourselves to the discipline of **corporate** prayer that seeks not our own comfort and desires but the advancement of God's kingdom on earth. Engaging spiritual forces that oppose God's purposes is a great privilege given only to the church. Driving back darkness and seeing the power of the Holy Spirit set people free is possible as we join our wills with God and pray **"thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"** (Matthew 6:10).

In Matthew 18 we find a rather lengthy teaching concerning the responsibility and privilege of prayer. In it Jesus makes this amazing statement: **"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven"** (vv. 18-19). Many of us shrug at such a claim, doubting its truth because we have seen so little evidence of it. Yet the promise is there, clearly stated by Jesus. If we choose to ignore it, we squander an infinitely valuable spiritual resource, both for the church and for the world at large.

Have you noticed the order of binding and loosing that Jesus mentions? Surprisingly, our prayer on earth *precedes* God's response from heaven. This seems contrary to our theology that God is in complete control of everything, and no person can influence His actions or make a difference in how history unfolds. But that view is more fatalistic than biblical.

While it's true that we cannot persuade God to do anything *contrary* to His expressed will in Scripture, we can see His will manifested on earth in response to our prayers. In matters concerning God's kingdom, Jesus seems to indicate that God *waits* on His people to pray His will before He acts. He welcomes our participation through prayer and doesn't see it as presumptuous or arrogant. In fact, it pleases God when we appropriate what is rightly ours, because it demonstrates that we believe Him and trust Him to deliver on His promises.

Obviously, the promise in Matthew 18 shouldn't be construed to include commanding material blessings to come our way or to gain our wishes at the expense of someone else. The word of faith movement has taken this teaching out of context and encouraged the wrong kind of zeal for prayer. In order for His people to agree and pray in His name and authority, they must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is a spiritual work, not a fleshly one! When the Holy Spirit reveals God's will to us as expressed in His Word, we can confidently ask for those things, knowing that when He answers, it will be for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom, not for our own agendas and egos.

Once we understand how vital our role is in bringing the kingdom of God to earth, what should be our response? I think about all the time I've wasted watching television shows, aimlessly shopping for things I don't really need, and engaging in other frivolous activities. These aren't sinful, of course, but how do they rank in terms of eternal importance? How many people could I be blessing by praying for God's purposes to be fulfilled in them instead of spending so much time on amusing myself?

I remember hearing a testimony by a teen many years ago that for a time really motivated me to pray more. She had just been on a short-term mission trip to a third-world country (I don't recall where it was). While there, the field missionaries told her about a wonderful revival that had taken place a few years before. In checking into the events, the missionaries discovered the revival occurred at the exact same time that their home church back in Canada was fervently praying for God to do something in that region. The revival was an obvious and dramatic response to their prayers. When the teenager told us this, I remember thinking, "Wow, why don't we pray more? What excuse can we offer to justify our unwillingness to make time for it?"

The reasons we don't pray more are many, all of them fleshly. As Jesus said, **"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"** (Matthew 26:41). As human beings, we find it hard to engage in something that cannot be seen, measured, or controlled. Often our minds wander, and it's hard for us to stay focused enough to pray. Most of us are much more comfortable with the idea of "God helps those who help themselves" because we'd rather

get out there and “make it happen” than wait on God’s answer.

But this is not how God designed things. As C.H. Spurgeon wrote, “Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the Kingdom.” Every revival and outpouring of God’s Spirit in church history was ushered in by fervent prayer offered in one accord by His people. When they became serious about the need for change and persistently pursued God’s purposes rather than their own, He always answered. Sometimes it was immediate, as in the case reported by the teen, and other times it required persistent prayer over a long period of time.

When and how spiritual harvest comes is God’s decision, not ours. But our prayers bind and loose the forces that bring it about. I can’t believe that He would trust His church with such great responsibility—such knowledge is too high for me—but we find this principle throughout His Word. Paul reminds young Timothy in his pastoral duty to make prayer a high priority, since through it God transforms individuals and cultures. **“I urge then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and**

holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

If we want to see spiritual change in our midst, the Lord Jesus Christ known and exalted among men, we must rediscover the power of corporate prayer. We can continue to limp along with small spiritual gains, experiencing a mere trickle of what God’s great ocean is capable of doing in our midst. Or we can choose to act in faith, as the early disciples did, answering spiritual opposition with faith-filled prayer that shook the building where they gathered. The concerns of their prayer in Acts 4:24-31 should inspire us to face the challenges of our culture with the same bold faith.

Our Father is ready to send **“times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord”** (Acts 3:19), but we must desire it enough to not just *wish* it were so but *ask for it* in faith, not taking no for an answer. The Holy Spirit will bring us to this place of fervency in prayer and knit our hearts together in agreement for the purposes of God to be fulfilled if we will let Him. Let’s rediscover the power, the joy, and the fellowship of praying together in one accord. As Jesus told His disciples, **“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them”** (John 13:17).

“There shall be showers of blessing”—this is the promise of love;
There shall be seasons refreshing, sent from the Savior above.

*Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need;
Mercy-drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead.*

“There shall be showers of blessing”—precious reviving again;
Over the hills and the valleys, sound of abundance of rain.

“There shall be showers of blessing”—send them upon us, O Lord;
Grant to us now a refreshing, come and now honor Your Word.

“There shall be showers of blessing”—O that today they might fall,
Now as to God we’re confessing, now as on Jesus we call!

*Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need;
Mercy-drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead.*

“There Shall Be Showers of Blessings” by Daniel W. Whittle, 1883 (taken from Ezekiel 34:26)