

THE PURPOSE AND POWER OF PRAYER

John 15:14-16

(NIV) "You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name."

INTRODUCTION

Bill Hybels is the founding and senior pastor of the vast Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois (about 30 miles northwest of Chicago), which averages 24,000 for Sunday worship. In his book, *Too Busy Not to Pray*, Bill says, "If the request is wrong, God says, 'No.' If the timing is wrong, God says, 'Slow.' If you are wrong, God says, 'Grow.' But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, 'Go!'" Which is your favorite prayer answer: "No, Slow, Grow, or Go?" Here are some questions sent to pastors by children. Which answer to prayer would they be most likely to hear from God? "Dear Pastor, I know God loves me but I wish He would give me an 'A' on my report card so I could be sure. Love, Theresa" (age 8, Milwaukee). [Grow]. "Dear Pastor, Could you say a special blessing for my Aunt Beatrice? She has been looking for a husband for 12 years and still hasn't found one. Yours sincerely, Debbie" (age 9, Duluth). [Slow]. "Dear Pastor, I say my prayer before I eat my supper but my mother still makes me finish my spinach and drink my milk, Julie" (age 9, Buffalo). [No or Grow].

If we place saving faith in **Jesus Christ** and are reborn into God's Kingdom, are we enrolled as a citizen of Heaven? Yes. We remain citizens of an earthly nation, as the U.S.A. Yet, all Christians can also say, "[B]ut our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (**Philippians 3:20**). One of our greatest privileges as citizens of Heaven is prayer in the name of the King of Heaven. What limits are there to the prayer answers we may receive? Far less than we might expect! As British poet, Alfred Tennyson, wrote, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

I was 18 in 1969 and a University of Arizona freshman when **Jesus** became Savior and Lord to me. One of the most thrilling lessons God taught me as a new believer was if our requests are right in His eyes, and the timing is right, and our hearts are right with God, there is no limit to what our Heavenly Father may do in response to our prayers. We might even say God is willing to move Heaven and earth to remove obstacles that would keep us from accomplishing His will whenever we are bold enough to pursue His will!

God called me into the ministry a month after saving me, but there was little money to send me to a Bible college. My Dad, Bob Huff, and a business partner had reopened Tucson Dragway in 1968, near Houghton Rd. and Valencia. The partner put up the money to buy the Dragway. My Dad had the expertise to run it. Profits were supposed to be split down the middle. By the end of their second racing season, however, Dad realized the partner was skimming off most of the profits. In September, Dad confronted his partner with the evidence of his fraud. Dad told this man if he signed the track over to him and left town, he wouldn't be sued. The partner admitted his fraud but claimed he had a right to recoup the money he'd invested as quickly as possible. He laughed at my Dad; telling him to go ahead and sue him. The partner said he could drag out the case for five years and my Dad might still lose in court and end up with nothing.

Psalms 34:15 declares, "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry for help." Do you believe this? **Jesus** claimed me in October, the month after Dad confronted the crooked partner. When God called me into the ministry in November, I began calling out to the Lord to make it possible to attend Bible college to begin training for the ministry. On Christmas Eve, a sudden change of heart came over the business partner. He called my Dad unexpectedly that night, came to our home, signed the papers Dad had drawn up giving Dad complete ownership of the Dragway, and agreed to leave town!

This was just the beginning. Time and again in the 1970 racing season (April-September), especially in the monsoon, God confounded weather forecasters to favor Saturday drag racing. His most dramatic intervention came in August, shortly before I was to leave for Bible college. A special event featured cars and fans from three states, but heavy rain was forecast. Any rain could keep fans away. A rainout would force rescheduling and most of profits would be eaten up paying many bills a second time. Clouds were already building when we opened the track at 3:00 p.m. At 4:00 p.m., I began selling tickets at the Pit Gate (giving access to the cars and drivers). Despite increasing clouds and darkening skies, several thousand people eagerly paid to watch the racing show. Each time I glanced at the skies, I could see it was raining somewhere and prayed harder. I learned that day scared faith is still good faith. A black wall of water passed south of us at I-10 & Houghton. Later, rain fell on the Rincon Mountains just east of us. Finally, just after 8:00 p.m., the line of people buying tickets let up. I took a long look around us. Over the entire city of Tucson, as far as I could see, there was only one patch of blue sky. Do you want to guess where it was? Right over the Drag Strip! As further proof this was God at work, it wasn't until the last two cars lined up to race, around 1:00 a.m. that a light rain began to fall on our property. This soon became a torrential downpour. But the show was in, the profits were made, and the money had been provided for me to begin training at a Bible college! If the request is right, the timing is right and we are right, God says to us, 'Go!'"

I. THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

The Purpose of Prayer is not just to bring the blessings of God *to us*, as wonderful as this is. It's also for God to bring His blessings *through us* to others. This is how we "'go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.'" The following Bible passages bring the reality of the spiritual world and the forces of darkness surrounding us into sharper focus. What do they suggest about how we should pray as followers of **Jesus Christ**?

Luke 10:17-19: "The Seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in Your name.'" 18 He said to them, ". . . 19 Look, I have given you the authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; nothing will ever harm you."

Luke 8:11-12: "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 The seeds along the path are those who have heard. Then the Devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Ephesians 2:1-2 (NIV): "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."

I Peter 5:8 (NASB): "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

Ephesians 6:10-12, 18: "Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by His vast strength. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. 12 For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. 18 With every prayer and request, pray at all times in the Spirit, and stay alert in this, with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints."

Here's an illustration based upon these Bible passages to help us grasp our responsibilities to engage effectively in spiritual warfare through prayer. Imagine yourself as living in Nazi-controlled France after June 6, 1944, when the Allied D-Day invasion put the handwriting on the wall for Germany's ultimate defeat in WWII. You are part of the French Resistance Movement. You've sought to hinder, disrupt, and ultimately defeat the Nazis ever since your country fell to Germany in June of 1940. Because of D-Day, you're now confident the Allies will one day rid your homeland of Nazi control and restore freedom to France. This bolsters your efforts to liberate individuals and families from the Nazis. But you are still behind enemy lines and could still be subjected to every conceivable Nazi cruelty. Your tactics, therefore, need to be wise as well as brave. Or, you could allow fear of the Nazis and of taking risks to control you so that you are disloyal to your homeland and do nothing to fight them and to free others from their cruelty.

The story is told of a man on his way to attend a costume ball one Sunday evening. He wore a bright red suit with a tail and a skintight mask with horns, looking much like the popular image of Satan. Caught in a sudden rainstorm, he sought shelter in a church whose service was just ending. When he ran into the building, he shocked the members. A flash of lightning and a clap of thunder added to the illusion he might be the real Devil. The congregation panicked and rushed for the rear exits. The intruder thought the church had been struck with lightning and was on fire, so he raced after them. Everyone got out except one elderly lady. Turning in fear, she stretched out her hands and pleaded for mercy, "Oh Devil, please don't hurt me. I know I've been a member of this church for 30 years, but I've really been on your side all the time!"

When God created Adam and Eve, Earth was our homeland over which humans would "rule" in God's name (**Genesis 1:26-28**). By our rebelling against God's authority, Satan has become "the god of this world." He has "blinded the minds of the unbelieving" to their need of salvation by **Christ (II Corinthians 4:4, ESV)**. Yet, as **I John 3:8 (ESV)** assures us, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." C-Day, **Jesus'** successful invasion against Satan's forces on the Cross, put the handwriting on the wall of Satan's ultimate defeat. **Revelation 11:15 (NASB)** promises it will one day be proclaimed, "'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.'" We have more confidence than the WWII Resistance Movement God's side will win and all godless tyranny will be crushed. But, like the Nazis, Satan can still inflict terrible casualties if we don't wisely and bravely resist him through prayer. Prayer is how we maintain communications with our Commander, the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (**Revelation 19:16**). Prayer is how we convey personal needs to Him and request supplies as His soldiers. Prayer is how we receive our orders where and how **Jesus** wants to deploy us to liberate people from the Devil. Is this not what **Ephesians 6** teaches us?

II. THE POWER OF PRAYER

We're no match for Satan's forces in our own strength. Was David as a shepherd boy a match for Goliath? Goliath "was nine feet, nine inches tall and wore a bronze helmet and bronze scale armor that weighed 125 pounds. His spear shaft was like a weaver's beam, and the iron point of his spear weighed 15 pounds" (**I Samuel 17:4-5, 7**). Yet, David understood he had all the authority of God behind him when he confronted God-taunting pagan Goliath "'in the name of the Lord of hosts'" (**I Samuel 17:42-45**). When **Jesus** said, "'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name," He was not promising us a blank check our Heavenly Father would honor regardless of what we asked. Our requests must still be right in God's eyes; consistent with His character. **I John 5:14-15 (LB)** clarifies, "And we are sure of this, that He will listen to us whenever we ask Him for anything in line with His will."¹⁵ And if we really know He is listening when we talk to Him and make our requests, then we can be sure that He will answer us." Thus, our prayers are not valid unless they are God-centered, not self-centered. A lad named Johnny was sent to his room after misbehaving. He came out a few minutes later and told his Mom he'd thought things over and had even said a little prayer. The mother was very happy and said, "If you asked God to help you not misbehave, He will help you." Johnny replied, "Oh, I didn't ask Him for help with that, I asked Him to help you put up with me." The essence of prayer is not that we say to God, "Your will be changed," but, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," as **Jesus** taught us to pray in the Model Prayer (**Matthew 6:10**)

Jesus instructed us to pray in His name in **vs. 16** because He understood better than anyone the vast and terrible power of the forces of darkness seeking to defeat us as we seek to carry out God's will. In Bible times, doing something in another's name meant you came by the *authority* of the one who authorized you to act for this person. The centurion whose faith **Jesus** praised in **Matthew 8:5-10** might have been as wimpy as Barney Fife. Yet, he had confidence the biggest and baddest of the soldiers in his command would obey his orders. Why? Because despite his personal weakness or shortcomings, all the authority of the Roman Emperor stood behind this centurion. This made the consequences of disobedience terrifying! Praying in **Jesus'** Name sends tremors throughout the forces of darkness because, "God . . . has . . . given

Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (**Philippians 2:9-11**, NKJV)!

Jesus also knew we needed His *standing* with the Father to enlist God's awesome power to back us against those who oppose God's will. Travel was slow and difficult in Bible times. Masters and rulers often sent people "in their name" to conduct important business in their stead. If a merchant in Jerusalem sent his agent to Alexandria, this agent would be treated as respectfully and as well as if the master himself had come. Any slight to the agent would be a personal offense to his master. By praying in **Jesus'** name, we are approaching God the Father in **Jesus'** stead. We can expect to be received as well as if **Jesus** Himself were making this request. Minutes ago you heard, "the Purpose of Prayer is not just to bring the blessings of God to us. It's also for God to bring His blessings *through us* to others."

CONCLUSION

Roger Simms was wearing his uniform for the last time. He would never forget the date: May 7. He flashed the hitchhikers sign to an oncoming car. But Roger was surprised when the black, sleek, new Cadillac stopped and the passenger door opened. He tossed his suitcase in back and thanked the handsome, well-dressed man as he slid into the front seat. "You're in luck if you're going to Chicago," the man said. I have a business there. My name is Hanover." Roger's home wasn't quite that far and was pleased this man would take him there. Roger had just completed his commitment to the U.S. Army but he remained active in the Lord's service. They'd talked about many things when Roger felt a compulsion to witness about Christ to this fiftyish, apparently successful businessman. He began to pray silently for his host and for wisdom and courage to share his faith. But he kept putting it off until he was 30 minutes from home. It was now or never. Roger cleared his throat, "Mr. Hanover, I would like to talk to you about something very important." He then explained the way of salvation and asked Mr. Hanover if he would like to receive Christ as his Savior. To Roger's astonishment, the Cadillac pulled over to the side of the road. Roger thought he was going to be ejected from the car. But the businessman bowed his head and received Christ. He thanked Roger and said, "This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me!"

Years passed. Roger married, had a son, and started his own business. One day, while packing his suitcase for a business trip to Chicago, he found the business card Mr. Hanover had given him and decided to look up Hanover Enterprises in North Chicago. A receptionist told him it was not possible to see Mr. Hanover but he could see Mrs. Hanover. A little confused by this, he was ushered into a lovely office and found himself facing a keen-eyed woman in her fifties. She extended her hand. "You knew my husband?" Roger told her how her husband had given him a ride when hitchhiking home. "Can you tell me when that was?" she asked. "It was May 7, five years ago, the day I was discharged from the army." Roger hesitated. Should he mention his witness about Jesus? He'd come this far and decided to take the plunge. "Mrs. Hanover, I explained the gospel. He pulled over to the side of the road and wept against the steering wheel. He gave his life to Christ that day." Explosive sobs shook her body. Getting a grip on herself, she said, "I had prayed for my husband's salvation for years. I believed God had spoken to my heart with the promise He would save him." "And," said Roger, "Where is your husband, Mrs. Hanover?" "He's dead." She wept, struggling with words. "He was in a car crash after he let you out of the car. He never got home. I thought God had not kept His promise." She sobbed uncontrollably again before adding, "I stopped living for God five years ago because I thought He had not kept His word! "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name."