

Extraordinary Power for the Ordinary Christian

If you were to visit an electrical production plant, you would find giant turbines 100 feet long and 10 feet tall, whirring at 3,600 revolutions per minute. They generate enough electricity for entire cities. A visitor to one such plant in Texas, asked the chief engineer, “Where do you store the electricity after you generate it?”

He replied, “We don’t store it, we just make it.”

So, it works like this: when a light switch is flipped on in Dallas a hundred miles away, it literally places a demand on the system which registers at the generating plant and prompts greater output.

And guess what? This is how God’s power works as well. It cannot be gathered and stored or saved for a rainy day. It is inexhaustible, but it comes in the proper amount at the moment of need.¹

Here, at the end of James’ letter to the early Christians, he reminds them of the source and availability of God’s power for them. In the troubling days we live in, this is crucial information. James teaches us the When, Why, and How of Prayer. First ...

I. When We Should Pray.

James’ point here is not to list every conceivable circumstance in which it is appropriate to pray. No. James’ message is, “It’s ALWAYS appropriate to pray.” When should you pray? ALWAYS – when you’re in trouble, when you’re happy, when you’re sick, when you’ve sinned. Don’t wait! Pray now! Pray always!”

This is such a simple truth, but one that we so quickly forget, isn’t it? We often don’t put prayer first; rather, we put it last. That fact is confirmed by the idiom we all use, “Well, I guess all we can do now is pray!” Have you ever said that? I have. I usually say this when I come to a dead end in some effort or project or even, some ministry. It all looks hopeless. There’s nothing more I can do to fix the situation or make it better. I’ve tried it all, used all my energy and nothing has worked. I finally have to admit that I’m nearing the end and so I say, “There’s nothing else I can do now but pray.”

At which point God gives me a nudge and says, “Son, once again you’ve got it exactly backwards. You’re not at the end. Now, finally, you’re at the beginning!”

I’ve been a Christian for a long time, most of my life. So, I have many examples of being stupid this way. One classic example was while Liz and I were on staff in a church in Minnesota. Our senior pastor, Ross, had a terrible accident one winter. After shoveling his driveway, he went up on his roof to remove snow. He slipped and fell directly on his head on the driveway, two stories below. When Liz and I found out, we rushed to the hospital. Many people were already there with Rae Ann, his wife. We talked, we comforted, we listened but you know what? We never prayed with Rae Ann!

The next day, the news got worse. The surgeon who had flown in from Chicago said it was the worst head injury he had ever seen in someone who survived. It looked absolutely hopeless. Finally, we came to our senses and we began to pray. We enlisted the whole church to pray. Ross was unconscious for three months, so for three months we prayed and prayed and prayed without ceasing. And God in his wisdom and grace, heard

our prayers. There is no question that Ross could have died. Instead, God chose to release His healing power and restored him. One year after the accident, Ross returned to the pulpit and he continued to minister there for several more decades.

But it's not just panic or pain that causes us to put prayer last on our priority list. Blessings and good times can tempt us to put it there as well. In fact, it's when things are really going well that we most often 'forget.' We don't really forget though, do we? We DECIDE not to pray, not to praise.

You know, our prayer cards here each week are filled with prayer requests for people in pain or in trouble. Why don't we have an equal number of requests for praise every week? "Thank God with me for my health." Or "Praise Jesus with me for a great week at work." "Hallelujah for the great vacation the Lord provided my family!" James says:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. (James 5:13)

Praise is a form of prayer. Do you realize that? The right time to pray, in any form, is all the time. Paul says in 1 Thess. 5:17, ... **pray continually.** (NIV) Why? Because a prayerful attitude demonstrates a heart that's facing in the right direction – towards God. Is that where your heart is facing today?

That's when we should pray, now ...

II. Why We Should Pray.

There are many ways and reasons to pray. Probably the first thing we think of when it comes to prayer is to pray for someone who is sick. And that's the first reason to pray that James brings up. In verse 14 James says: (James 5:14)

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church ...

This instruction is for the saints, for Christians in the church. Now, there is some confusion about what this passage is saying because in the next verse, verse 15, it says:

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. ... (James 5:15)

Some believe that verse 15 is a guarantee that if you have the right kind of people (the elders) pray the right kind of prayer, (the "prayer of faith"), it will ALWAYS bring about physical healing. Is that what James is saying?

I believe that's NOT what James is saying. Why do I not accept that interpretation? First of all, let me say that I DO believe and I HAVE experienced IN THIS CHURCH, people who have done this and were healed.

But I've also seen people who have followed this formula to a "T" and they were not healed. The apostle Paul is one example. He was stricken with what he called a "*thorn in the flesh.*" What was it? We don't know specifically, but it was clearly some kind of physical malady. He asked God to remove it three times. It was not removed. Did not Paul know how to offer the "prayer of faith?" Of course he did. The simple truth is that God chose not to heal him. And Paul tells us why God chose not to heal him. He said it had to do with the supernatural experience he had of being caught up to the third heaven. Listen to what he says about that in 2 Cor. 12:7-9

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God chose NOT to heal Paul but instead allowed him to have some kind of physical disability to keep him humble. And Paul then chose to view his disablement, not as a curse but as a vehicle through which the very power of Christ would rest upon him, not to heal him physically, but to enliven him spiritually to make him more effective as a warrior in the battle for human souls.

Oswald Chambers explains it this way:

The greater answer to prayer is that I am brought into a perfect understanding with God, and that alters my view of actual things.²

So, if this verse isn't promising that everyone will be physically healed if they follow the right formula for prayer, then what is it promising?

A simple rule of Bible interpretation is to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. In other words, when one verse puzzles you, look for other verses that speak to the same subject. And guess what? There are hundreds of other verses that speak about why and how Christians should pray. For example, Jesus taught us to pray:

... Our Father in heaven, hallowed (holy) be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done ... (Matt. 6:9-10)

Jesus himself asked to be spared from physical suffering. Just before the crucifixion, He asked His Father to “take this cup from me.” Was that a prayer of faith? It sure was. Did God do it? He sure didn't. But note this: Jesus also prayed: “... **not as I will, but as you will.**” (Matt. 26:39) Was Jesus' life spared? No. Was God's will done? Yes. By Jesus' not being spared from suffering, the power of God the Father fell upon God the Son, which made it possible for all of us to be saved from eternal suffering. Which would you rather have, a painless life or a life with suffering that includes being effective in saving human souls for eternity? God's will for your life and mine might need to include some suffering in order for us to be effective for His kingdom.

So, why does James tell Christians to pray when they're sick? Because there are times when it will be God's will to heal and even heal miraculously. Unless you ask, unless you pray by faith, you'll never know if healing is His will for you.

Many of you who have been around Valley for a while know about some of the dramatic healings we have seen here. Cherrie Herrman, Jon Jackman, Ginger Jefferis—a all of them were facing a medical death sentence but their lives were spared because righteous people prayed. In every one of those instances, the elders from this church anointed them with oil and prayed, and they were miraculously healed.

Has every person that the elders anointed and prayed for been healed? No. Some people say, “That's not fair! He heals some but not others? What an unfair thing to do!” Friend, if you think that, you're simply confused. Think about it—some Christians He heals and they stay here on earth for a while longer. Those he doesn't heal, He brings to live with Him in paradise. So, who's actually getting the better deal?

A related questions is this: Who should pray? Is prayer only for Christians? Does God ignore the attempts at communication from desperate sinners who have foolishly wasted the precious gift of their lives? Is there a hotline in heaven reserved for the prayers of the saints while the last-ditch prayers of sinners are routed to some angelic AI-operator? Is it even worth it for a sinner to pray? Verse 5:16 (NIV) says: ... **The prayer**

of a righteous person is powerful and effective. But what about the prayer of an unrighteous person, a sinner?

Here, at the end of this most practical, no-nonsense letter from “bottom-line” James, he continues to give it to us straight. In fact, he gives us the whole Gospel in just fourteen words from verses 15 and 16:

... And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins ... (James 5:15-16)

If there is such a thing as a hotline to God, I’m convinced it’s not for forgiven sinners, the Christians, but for unforgiven sinners. You see, we Christians don’t need a hotline because we have a 24/7 companion, the very Spirit of God who lives inside of us. But unforgiven sinners don’t have that! So, when a sinner prays, even a pathetic prayer like, “Jesus, if you’re real, please help me!!” I believe alarms go off in heaven, lights flash, everything in the Holy of Holies goes dead silent, the angels hold their breath as God Himself picks up the prayer phone and listens intently to a human soul crying out in desperation.

In 2002, 14-year-old Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped one night at knife point from her bedroom. Remember this? Can you imagine what it must’ve be like when the phone rang nine months later in her home? Her father picked it up to hear a weak but very familiar voice say, “Daddy? It’s Elizabeth.” Dear friend, multiply Mr. Smart’s reaction a hundredfold and you’re just beginning to know the way your Heavenly Father feels about you! He’s been waiting for your call for so long, in some of your cases, for a lifetime. But if you will just call and admit to him that you were not kidnapped like young Elizabeth but, of your own free will, you just walked away from His love. If you will admit that, confess it as sin to Him today, He will forgive you and bring you back home. Your heavenly Dad is waiting by the phone right now. When will you call?

Why should you pray? Saint or sinner, you should pray because today is the day of salvation. Your Father in heaven can’t wait to hear your voice.

Lastly, James gives us an even more practical teaching. He teaches us ...

III. How We Should Pray

In perfect sync with the rest of his letter, James defines prayer for us, not as an indoor, sittin’-around-the-house activity; but as very much an outdoor, interactive activity. In the first century, elders didn’t sit at home and pray, they were out doing hands-on (literally) visitation. Fellow Christians weren’t staying isolated in their little hovels, they were out interacting—confessing, forgiving, praying for each other. Christians weren’t shunning the sinning brothers; they went out after them like a shepherd searching high and low for a lost sheep. To James, prayer was not a parlor game. It was a spiritual adventure sport.

How have you been defining prayer? Do you think of prayer as the Christian equivalent of knitting? Have you avoided it because the last three times you tried it you fell asleep? Have you personally experienced the reality-shattering power of prayer? If not, could it be because you have the whole thing reversed? The power in prayer is not dependent upon you (the words you say, your physical posture, the time of day). The power is in the object of your prayer, not the subject of your prayer. You’re holding the wrong end of the extension cord! You’ve got to have the end with the rectangular holes, not the end with the two little metal thingies. He plugs into you, not you into Him. Listen to Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Lord’s Prayer, how Jesus taught us to pray:

**“Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what’s best –
as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You’re in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You’re ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes.”** (Matt. 6:9-13 The Message)

Oh friends, let’s be done with our ‘hidden-agenda’ prayers, our “I-wish-I-had-a-pony” prayers, our “poor-miserable-me” prayers. Let’s begin to pray as He taught us! Phillips Brooks puts it this way:

Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.³

*Satan trembles when he sees,
The weakest saint upon his knees.*⁴

Why is that? Is it because you learned to pray like Elijah? No! The power was not FROM Elijah. It was IN Elijah. The power is in the object, not the subject of prayer! Satan laughs when you flex your muscles at him, but he runs like a momma’s boy when you drop to your knees. Let’s send a shiver through Satan’s dark kingdom right now, right here! What do you say? Hasn’t he been pushing you around long enough? Take hold of the right end of the power cord of prayer and come now with me to the Father who loves you. The enemy will run from your life for even He knows that what will come through you now is extraordinary power available to even the most ordinary Christian. Right now, right here, let us pray.

¹ Edward K Rowell, ed., *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p.158

² Oswald Chambers,

³ Phillips Brooks, *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 2.

⁴ Anonymous, found in George Sweeting’s *Who Said That?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994,95), p. 360