



5

ACTIVATE THE POWER OF PRAYER







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(Luke 6:12)

A few years ago at Ginghamburg, we informally surveyed our church family to determine which spiritual discipline they felt was most important to their faith journey, as well as which discipline they struggled the most to practice. In both cases, prayer seemed to be either number one or number two on the list.

Prayer is also the discipline I admittedly can struggle with the most. As a busy pastor who also wrestles with attention deficit disorder, I find that it's all too easy to neglect prayer in my rush

to meet and complete the urgencies of each day. Yet, I know that prayer is foundational to my relationship with God and was also Jesus' most practiced discipline.

JESUS AND PRAYER

The Gospels—the four short books describing Jesus' mission and ministry on planet earth—reference Jesus praying more than sixty times. Jesus, who “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7), knew that prayer was key to the power exercised in and through his life.

After healing the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda, Jesus was accused by the Jewish leaders of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus defended himself, saying, “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19). Jesus reiterated this belief a few moments later when he said, “By myself I can do nothing” (v. 30). Jesus further proclaimed his reliance on God's power, accessible through prayer, in John 8:28: “So Jesus said, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.’”

This is why we find Jesus praying at crucial moments in his ministry. Jesus spent the night in solitude and prayer before selecting the small group of followers who would be most key in founding the church: “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles” (Luke 6:12-13). Prayer also preceded Jesus' most remarkable miracles. In John 11:41-43,

when Lazarus had been dead for four days, Jesus prayed before calling out to Lazarus to exit the tomb. This same power of prayer demonstrated by Jesus is essential to the miracles that God will do in and through our own lives.

FOUR ESSENTIAL DYNAMICS

In the pages ahead, we will explore four essential dynamics of prayer: wait, obey, expect, and act. I know of no better example of these four dynamics at work than Joshua 3:1-8 in the Old Testament, Scripture with which Jesus would have been quite familiar.

After escaping slavery in Egypt under Moses's leadership, the original generation of former Hebrew slaves was forced to wander in the desert for forty years. This occurred because of the Israelites' repeated acts of disobedience toward God's directives and their constant grumbling about God's provision, accompanied by occasional bouts of longing to return to their "safe" bonds back in Egypt. In Joshua 3, the new generation, led by Moses's successor Joshua, was ready to enter God's Promised Land. Yet even then, after forty years, there were barriers to cross and enemies to battle. After all, the forces of resistance always stand between the people of God and their inheritance. The people's first challenge would be to cross the Jordan River during harvest season, while the river was at flood stage.

The people would not cross the Jordan alone; the ark of the covenant would precede them. Joshua instructed the officers to tell them,

"When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you



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*will know which way to go, since you have never been
this way before.”*

(Joshua 3:3-4)

The ark carried the stone tablets that had been inscribed by God’s own hand with the Ten Commandments, and the Israelites believed that the ark represented the active presence of God in their midst. So holy and powerful were the ark’s contents that even the priests and Levites who carried the ark could not see it directly; as it traveled, it was always hidden under a veil of skins and cloth.

The Jordan River was not an exception to the “ark first” strategy; the ark and its carriers always led the way whenever the people broke camp and traveled to their next God-directed place. Each time before the ark was moved, the people offered the prayer that Moses had initiated in Numbers 10:35:

*“Rise up, LORD!
May your enemies be scattered;
may your foes flee before you.”*

Given the sacredness of what the ark represented, the people were required to keep their distance. In fact, Joshua directed the people to keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between themselves and the ark, or the length of seven to eight football fields including both end zones!

Wait

When we want to make our next move to find God’s miracle in or through our own lives, we too, like the Hebrew people, need to place a holy space between our seeking and our action. In the busyness and distractions of daily life, it’s easy to miss the most important voice. We would rather move quickly to pursue our own

“good” rather than wait to attain God’s great. It’s critical that we learn to wait in prayer, not moving ahead of God’s directive.

Waiting in prayer is not a time of speaking but of listening. It’s not the moment for praying “help me,” “heal me,” or “hear me.” Instead, as Psalm 46:10 directs us, we are to “be still, and know that I am God.” When we fail to make this holy space, when we jump to action, our prayer life is likely to devolve into praying, “Lord, save me from the messes of my own making.”

As a person who is quick to move, I sometimes have to remind myself just to breathe as I await God’s next plan for my life or the lives of those I care about. In fact, as pointed out by Franciscan friar Richard Rohr, the word *Yahweh*, the unspeakable name for God in Hebrew, is an “attempt to replicate and imitate the very sound of inhalation and exhalation.” In other words, in the very act of breathing to sustain life we are speaking the name of God. Rohr writes, “This makes God our first and last word as we enter and leave the world.”¹ As the lyrics to popular Hillsong praise music proclaims, “This is the air I breathe, your holy presence living in me.”² I find that breathing in and out the name of God helps me to wait in prayer and remember that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). As Jesus declared, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Frankly, we *should* do nothing unless first we have waited for God in prayer. God is not only with me; God is in me. The holy space of waiting reminds me, as it did King Jehoshaphat, that “the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15). This day and the battle belong to the Lord.

We don’t want to get ahead of God. Like the Israelites and the ark, we want to be sure that the Spirit of God goes before us. We can’t win the battle—force the miracle—by relying on our own



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strength: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

The New Testament also shows the power of waiting in prayer. In the Book of Acts, just before Jesus was taken into heaven, he commanded his disciples,

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

(Acts 1:4-5)

The followers spent the next ten days praying together in one place up to the day of Pentecost. They trusted Jesus enough to wait for the gift that the Father had already promised.



I'm not sure I would have been as patient in waiting as those early, committed followers. My temptation is always to get ahead of God, both creating and then living under the illusion that I can control whatever situation or circumstance I am confronting. As a pastor, dad, and grandfather, I like those in my care also to believe that I am confident and capable at all times and in all circumstances.

Two years ago in late January, my family and I were busily preparing for a long-planned cruise that would depart from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and then make its way to the Bahamas, St. Thomas, and St. Maarten. Carolyn and I, our children, their spouses, and all our grandkids were to sail the seas together. Normally such a trip would have been unaffordable, but I had been able to arrange this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as part of my retainer for serving as one of the educational cruise's speakers. Plans for the cruise had been fourteen months in the making. As you might imagine, the grandchildren in particular were excited. For months their moms and dads had been promising this exotic

vacation and a great time with their cousins, aunts and uncles, and Papa and Nana.

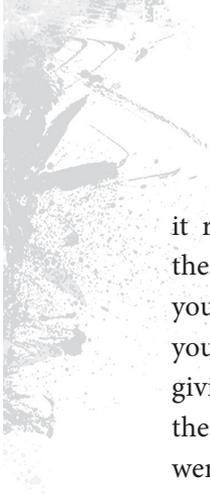
At the time my son, Jonathan; his wife, Stacy; and their two (now three) children lived in Philadelphia, a city that was predicted to be hit by a huge blizzard on the same day their flight was scheduled to leave for the start of our vacation. Jonathan, an orthopedic surgeon, called me a few days before, asking what he should do. Should he reschedule his pending surgery patients with other surgeons, not a great option, and have the family catch an earlier flight? Jonathan knew that his kids, and all of us, would be deeply disappointed if this long-anticipated vacation plan were ruined.

It was one time when I managed to practice what I preach. I said, “Jonathan, let me pray about this.” For the next twenty-four hours I stopped, waited, and listened—not my typical MO. A day later I called Jonathan back and said, “This is what I am hearing from God. We are to wait, be still, and see what God will do.” Jon stayed in Philadelphia to perform his surgeries, and he and the family left Philly on Friday afternoon, on one of the last flights safely out of the soon-to-be-closed airport.

It was just a cruise, a family vacation, and not a matter of life or death. But God delivered on the promised gift. I don’t understand it; I was just glad to accept it. May I always do the same when the stakes are high and a miracle is needed. For forty years Moses prayed every time before the ark was moved, “Rise up, LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you” (Numbers 10:35). Don’t get ahead of God.

Obey

Joshua’s first instruction to the Hebrew people had been to wait, by following behind the ark and the presence of God that



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it represented. In Joshua 3:5, he gave his second directive to the people as they prepared to cross the Jordan: “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.” Joshua was telling the Israelites to sanctify themselves, giving themselves completely over to God’s will before they took the first step toward realizing God’s miracle. In other words, they were to obey.

Consecrate means to be set apart wholly to God for God’s purposes. If there is anything I have learned in my nearly five decades of following Jesus, it’s that God won’t bless disobedience, but God certainly will honor obedience. The psalmist put it this way:

*For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
(Psalm 84:11)*

In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century church, we have developed some mistaken ideas about prayer, paying less attention to the priority of obedience. We rely on easy “believism” instead of following Jesus in the way of the cross, and we toss out prayers of convenience instead of understanding the priority of obedience in alignment with God’s will. Jesus indicated in John 14:13, “I will do whatever you ask in my name.” This does not just mean tacking “in Jesus’ name” on to the end of each prayer; in fact, when we use that phrase without yielding fully to Christ’s authority, it’s a violation of the fourth commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7 KJV).

When we dare to pray in Jesus’ name for a miracle, we had best be submitting ourselves fully to God’s will. In essence, we are praying “I pledge my obedience, I pledge my allegiance, I pledge

my life.” Not my will but yours be done. John Wesley’s covenant prayer still gives me chills each time I read it.

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what thou will, rank me with whom you will. . . .
I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine, and I am yours.
So be it. . . . Amen

(Methodist Worship Book, p. 290)

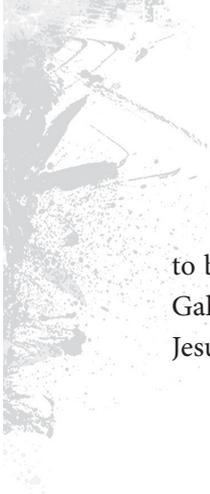
We are to consecrate ourselves, committing to obedience, before we ever know what God’s answer to our prayer may be.

Expect

When Joshua directed the Israelites to consecrate themselves, he added “for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you” (Joshua 3:5). Expectation determines outcome.

When I arrived at Ginghamburg Church in 1979, it was a semirural congregation of fewer than ninety people with a \$27,000 annual budget. Today, it is a thriving multi-campus movement of over four thousand. Sometimes people ask me, “Are you surprised that this happened, especially here in this unlikely place?” Honestly, I have to answer no. I expected it.

One chilly spring day shortly after my arrival, I spent the day alone in a field behind the church seeking God’s face, asking for the vision of what God wanted to do through this place. God obliged! Today I am delighted but not surprised. I also can’t take credit. I sum it up to folks by saying, “I am simply the donkey that God rode in on.” I also still believe that greater things yet will happen in this place.



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In Mark 6, Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth to boldly proclaim the gospel, fresh off of accolades elsewhere in Galilee. Yet his former neighbors were simply aghast. Who did Jesus, this carpenter's son, think he was? They asked each other,

*“Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?”
And they took offense at him. . . . He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.*

(Mark 6:3, 5-6)

Their low expectations determined their minimal outcomes. What a missed opportunity!

Jesus, by contrast, directed us to pray with great expectation: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24). How easy it can be to forget that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

My life experience has proven to me repeatedly that where God gives vision, he also gives provision. My time in that Ohio field is but one example. But there are still occasions when I have to watch the downsized, misplaced, or disappointing expectations that come into my head. Perhaps it's one reason that when I have a serious matter for prayer, I sometimes take it to the small, original chapel that thirty-nine years ago was the only Ginghamburg Church. I find it easier to pray with faith and expectation when I'm in a place where I've already witnessed God perform a miracle.

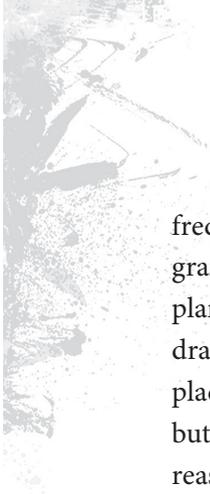
The Old Testament prophet Elijah is a great example of the miracles that happen when we pray with expectation and trust.

In First Kings 17, Elijah told the evil king Ahab that a drought would overtake the land for the next few years as a result of the royal couple's allegiance to the god of Baal. True enough, the drought started as promised and lingered. In the third year Elijah, having made God's point, returned to Ahab and wound up in an unfair matchup between Elijah's God and the false prophets of Baal. Unfair, of course, meaning that there was no possibility of the living God losing that bout. Once Elijah through God's power had demonstrated Baal's complete inefficacy, he felt confident that ending the drought would be clearly understood by all witnesses as a demonstration of God's power, not Baal's.

Before Elijah even prayed for God to send rain, he was completely expectant that God would deliver the miracle, and so he told Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain" (1 Kings 18:41). Elijah then proceeded to pray. Rain did not begin immediately, but Elijah persevered, and ultimately a little cloud rose up from the sea, "as small as a man's hand" (v. 44). Still not discouraged, Elijah kept praying, and a short time later "the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling" (v. 45). Elijah knew what it meant to pray with perfect expectation.

We see this same confident expectation when Nehemiah, after fasting and waiting in prayer for several days, asked God to provide for a seemingly impossible and dangerous mission to rebuild the destroyed wall surrounding a crippled Jerusalem. We see it in Daniel when he ignored the royal decree to pray only to the king of the land and instead continued his regular discipline of praying to the one true God three times daily, in spite of being taken to the lions' den. In both cases, God answered their prayers.

My daughter-in-law, Stacy, has always done a great job of helping Carolyn and me be engaged, long-distance grandparents,



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frequently sending us pictures and videos of our young granddaughter and grandson. During the time when we were planning the family cruise I described earlier, Stacy texted us a drawing by my granddaughter Addison that still holds a special place in my memory. It was a fine drawing for a five-year-old, but what made it so memorable was what Stacy had written reassuringly at the top for her daughter—and really for Carolyn and me as we anxiously awaited the next grim weather report: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Amen. Our faith in God’s answers should never be dictated by circumstances, but by God’s promises.

Too often we stop praying because we don’t see any tangible difference that prayer has made. We become impatient for a miracle. We allow circumstances to get between God and us, instead of putting God between us and our circumstances. Pray and be expectant, standing on the promises of God.

Act

Let’s return to the story of Joshua.

And the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan’s waters, go and stand in the river.’”

(Joshua 3:7-8)

Simple enough, right? All the priests had to do was to enter the river to usher in God’s miracle. But, no! We read a few verses later, “Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest” (Joshua 3:15).

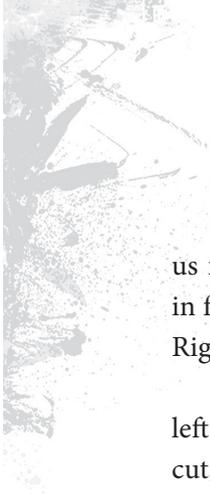
Have you ever seen a rapidly flowing river at flood stage? The thought of stepping into the strong, churning current would be intimidating at best and life-threatening at worst. Why does it seem that God always asks us to do something that is hard? Why couldn't the Israelites have reached the Jordan during a drought?

The difficult circumstances in which God may direct us to act often produce immediate doubt. But it's only when the Jordan Rivers in our lives are at flood stage that God's supernatural miracle is both possible—and evident. At "flood stage" we clearly can't claim the credit for success, because the solution seems impossible. In normal circumstances it's not a miracle, because the solution is easy.

If you are like me, you tend to first see and then believe. But, where is the faith in that? God's miraculous intervention in and through our lives happens when we first believe, and then receive. Remember, a miracle has two components: divine intervention and human initiative.

Naaman, commander of a powerful king's army, would never see his leprosy miraculously healed until he humbled himself, trusted in God's directive through the prophet Elisha, and washed himself in that same Jordan River (2 Kings 5). Likewise, the poor widow would have been forced to turn over her two sons for slavery if she had not followed Elisha's instructions, gathering as many jars from her neighbors as possible so her small amount of oil could be miraculously multiplied and sold to support her family and settle her debts (2 Kings 4:1-7).

In the story of Joshua, the River Jordan would not stop its rushing flow until the priests did their part, trusting in God's promise to Joshua. "Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing" (Joshua 3:15-16). Note that the miracle was triggered when the priests touched the water.



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How often do we let fear, doubt, or simply disobedience derail us from experiencing God's miracle? Instead, we are to risk out in faith, step into the rushing water, be willing to get our feet wet. Right now, this day, where are you failing to act in faith?

Karen Perry Smith serves at times as my writing partner. Karen left a well-paying corporate position in 2002, took a 40 percent pay cut, and joined the Ginghamburg staff team. On the surface this was not a wise decision for the primary breadwinner of a family, and Karen almost backed out. She shared with me once that as she prayed and read the Word, seeking God's direction on this major decision, the following scripture stopped her in her tracks, and has served as a life verse ever since: "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). Taste and then *see*. Believe and then *receive*. Karen, a careful risk manager in both her professional and personal life, had wanted it to work the other way around. If we are going to seek God's directive in prayer for miracles in and through our lives, then we had better be prepared to act on what we hear! It's not a wait and see; it's an act and see.

One of the saints in the church during my early days at Ginghamburg was Gertie. Gertie was much beloved within the congregation, a kind and generous woman who radiated warmth. As we became acquainted, I asked Gertie about her family. When I saw her at church, she was always alone. She shared with me that she had been married to her husband, Denver, for sixty years, but that Denver was not much of a churchgoer. I asked if I could stop by sometime and meet Denver, and she agreed, somewhat reluctantly, implying kindly that Denver did not have much use for churches, or pastors for that matter. I had a great visit with Denver. He was warm, friendly, and enjoyed showing me around his home and talking about his pastimes and pursuits. I invited him to join Gertie in worship with us sometime.

As it turned out, a few weeks later I looked out into the congregation and there sat Denver right next to Gertie. A few weeks after that he chose to be baptized, and Denver became a strong Jesus follower, tither, and servant. I knew that for sixty years Gertie had been praying for Denver to know Jesus. Curious, I finally asked Denver why he had never come to church with Gertie before. He replied, “She never asked. You did.”

The fourth dynamic of praying for miracles is to do what God is telling you to do. As Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

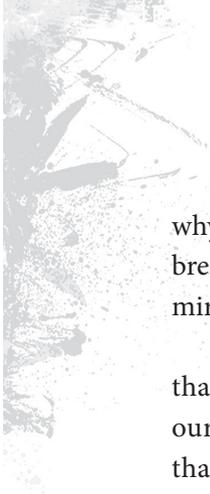
Where are you seeking a miracle in your life? Finances, relationships, improved health? Listen to the apostle Paul: “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

It’s time to act on what you have heard God say.

DAY-TO-DAY MIRACLES

Prayer is not just something to pull out from our Christian toolbox and brandish when urgent miracles are needed. The seed for show-stopping miracles begins in praying for and appreciating the humbler miracles each day, remembering our daily dependence on God.

This is why, as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, the miracle of the manna occurred each day. “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day’” (Exodus 16:4). The people needed to be reminded of their daily dependence on God’s provision, not enabled to stockpile accumulated stores that would allow them more easily to forget “from whence cometh my help” (Psalm 121:1 KJV). This is also



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why Jesus reminded his disciples to pray, “Give us today our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). Perhaps God doesn’t trust us with major miracles until we understand our reliance on the small ones.

Ann Voskamp’s book *One Thousand Gifts* emphasizes the role that gratitude plays in realizing and recognizing miracles in our daily lives, repeatedly noting that “*eucharisteo* [giving of thanks] always precedes the miracle.”³ The giving of thanks for what God has done and continues to do daily in and through our lives provides fertile ground for future miracles. The psalmist assures us,

*“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice
glorifies me;
to one who orders his way rightly
I will show the salvation of God!”*

(Psalm 50:23 ESV)

We see day-to-day miracles in practice from Jesus as he prepares to feed five thousand households with five loaves and two fish. “Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people” (Luke 9:16). Before calling Lazarus from the tomb, “Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me’” (John 11:41-42).

The apostle Paul counsels the Ephesians, “Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:19-20). Gratitude, the giving of thanks, is not optional. We certainly are to thank God for the big miracles, but also for the small ones. As Paul implied in his letter to the

Ephesians and declares outright in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, we are to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Some of those circumstances may include times when we don’t receive the specific miracle for which we have been praying. Faith means trusting God even when the answer appears to be no. It means trusting God’s heart when we can’t see God’s hand, being assured of “how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:9-11).

When I think about God seeming to say no, I find it instructive to consider my own parenting experience. When we love our kids, we like them to be happy. It’s easier to say yes and be rewarded with smiles than to say no and be met with grumbles and gripes. It took energy and perseverance on my part to say no and watch my popularity rating plummet even lower than it already was with a thirteen-year-old daughter; it would have been easier if I had chosen the path of least resistance, acceding to every wish and whim no matter how impractical. Yet, as a responsible parent, I knew it was my job to sacrifice the easy for the important if I really loved my kids.

God always answers prayer, but God may not honor our self-selected strategy. God is not a vending machine with prayer as our required payment for plopping out that bag of kettle-cooked salt-and-vinegar chips we’ve been craving. But this same Father will be only too happy to provide us this day our daily bread.

Seeing God in the day-to-day will make it easier to trust God in a crisis. Jesus reminds us, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. . . . Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:22, 32).

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PRAYING GOD'S MIRACLES INTO THE WORLD

Jesus pronounced his mission statement, which he shared while reading from the Book of Isaiah in the synagogue:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

(Luke 4:18-19)

In the original, Isaiah goes on to prophesy that those restored will “rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated” (Isaiah 61:4).

In these scriptures, God is not only inviting us to wait expectantly in prayer, to obey, and to act in anticipation of miracles in our own lives and the lives of those around us; God also wants us to be part of his “kingdom of God” mission to all of planet earth—to be part of God’s rescue team. How are we to identify and engage in the larger miracles that God wants to do for the world that God so loves? The bottom line is that God plans to accomplish his miracles through us.

Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you” (John 15:16).

Nehemiah gives us a great example of how prayer precedes progress when it comes to miracles of restoration. Nehemiah, as

mentioned earlier in this chapter, initiated a mission to restore the wall around Jerusalem, a project that held economic, political, and spiritual implications for the Jewish people living in captivity. Talk about a place long devastated! The walls had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar more than a century before. Plus, the physical and logistical task itself would be no small feat. The year was roughly 445 BC, almost 2,400 years before the invention of the backhoe!

Nehemiah's first action was to sit down. He understood the importance of waiting in prayer and pausing to assess, take inventory, and face the reality and magnitude of the job at hand. After assessing the situation, Nehemiah wept. In our comfortable lives and our familiar pews, it's easy to ignore the world's pain. Perhaps we should cry more. God uses people to bring about miracles when their hearts break for the same things that break God's heart.

We then read, "For some days I mourned" (Nehemiah 1:4). Nehemiah was experiencing what it's like to help carry God's pain for the least and the lost. In addition to mourning, verse 4 tells us that Nehemiah "fasted and prayed." The fasting reminded Nehemiah that he was hungry for something greater. He had reached a point of utter dissatisfaction with the comfortable complacency in which he had been living. In prayer, he then made himself available for God's greater purpose. Sound familiar? We can draw a number of comparisons with Jesus' urgent time of prayer and surrender in the Garden of Gethsemane for God's greater purpose.

Nehemiah began his prayer in verse 5, first acknowledging God's greatness: "LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God..." Nehemiah knew that a prerequisite for a miracle is embracing God as ultimate authority and creator, greater than any obstacle or resistant force, deserving of all respect. Trusting

forward for the miraculous is almost impossible when we make our God of unlimited power and resources too small for the opportunity at hand.

Nehemiah continued his prayer in verse 5 by recognizing God as the One “who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” As God had earlier reassured Abraham, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7). This covenant was an unbreakable promise, an unshakeable agreement, about which the apostle Paul later proclaimed, “God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

In verse 6, Nehemiah rightly identified his role in God’s kingdom as “servant,” one who works at the will and call of the master, not a volunteer who deigns to stack a few stones on top of the wall according to his own packed and self-prioritized schedule.

Nehemiah then confessed the sins of his heart, his house, and his country. Coming clean, being honest, trusting God with our stuff—and we all have stuff—is a potent part of any prayer life, especially when we are in the miracle business. Such heart integrity allows us to align our thoughts, motives, actions, and lifestyles with our stated beliefs and commitments. Confession means declaring we will not rationalize or compromise. It’s more than saying, “I’m sorry.” It’s repenting, literally turning and going the other way.

Nehemiah next prayed, “LORD, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name” (v. 11). In essence Nehemiah was praying, “Are you in this, God? Is this a God thing or just a good thing?” In asking this, Nehemiah recognized that the outcome ultimately depended upon God. Nehemiah would not move out in

front of the ark of the covenant, so to speak. As Moses before him had said to the Lord, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here” (Exodus 33:15 ESV).

Have you confirmed that that for which you’ve been praying is where God is moving? Have you asked God, “Is this where I am supposed to be?” Remember, miracles have two components: divine intervention and human initiative. The latter alone will never result in a successful miracle-making endeavor. We can’t do it by ourselves, no matter how good our intentions or committed our hearts are toward the desired outcome.

Nehemiah ended his prayer with commitment: “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man” (v. 11). Immediately afterward, Nehemiah followed his prayer with action, requesting permission from the pagan king he served to leave his post and work on restoring the wall. By acting, Nehemiah demonstrated that prayer is not an end in itself; it is a prelude to action, the opening door to a miracle.

Where on earth is God inviting you to be part of God’s restorative purpose? Where can you be God’s coworker in bringing about extraordinary miracles that will redeem the lost and set the oppressed free? Both everyday miracles and miracles of biblical proportion are possible when we activate the power of prayer in our lives.

REFLECTION

How will you transform your prayer life in your journey with Jesus?

- Name an important decision that you believe you will be required to make within the next three to six months. How will you prioritize prayer to seek God's best instead of your own best?
- Where might low expectations be holding you back from experiencing God's miracle? Which promise of God do you need to remember is a yes in Christ Jesus?
- Are you struggling to experience the power and promise of God in your prayer life? Where have you witnessed God's miracles in the past, so that you can revisit that place for a time of focused prayer and listening for God?
- Name three or four "day-to-day" miracles in your life. Upon waking this week, take time to thank God for each miracle.
- What are you observing in the world around you that is tugging at your heart right now? How will you wait, obey, expect, and act to be part of what God wants to do through you?