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Prayer That Works

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CHAPTER ONE
PRAYER THAT WORKS



EVER SINCE I WAS A LITTLE GIRL IN WAR-TORN ENGLAND, sitting on a three-legged stool in front of my house waiting for the bombs to fall, I have wanted my prayers to work. I remember praying, “Oh, God, please stop the war.” He didn’t, and I remember feeling very disappointed with him. Maybe you have prayed that God would stop the conflict raging around you or in your own life, and he hasn’t, and you feel disappointed with him too. This book is all about prayer that makes a difference. About prayer that works.

You may wonder what the words *prayer* and *work* are doing in the same sentence. Surely that sounds like an oxymoron! Do you know what an oxymoron is? It’s when you put two seemingly contradictory words together, like jumbo shrimp, civil war—or child safe! Prayer and work seem to be opposite concepts. Yet I have discovered that prayer that doesn’t work, doesn’t work! It takes work to step out of time into eternity—and work to learn the art of leaving things undone so that the greater thing can be done.

Prayer that works isn’t merely a matter of personality or gift, although some people have a propensity for praying or have the gift of prayer (and this gift is something that worries the devil very much). Prayer itself is a gracious gift of God in the sense that he made it possible for us to walk right into his presence and talk to him as our Father. Every child of God has that right and privilege.

But if Satan has his way, the first thing to go in our devotional life will be our devotional life! As the little couplet says, “The devil trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.” He will do

anything to stop us praying. Sometimes he doesn't have to do anything at all, however, because we assist him by doing away with our prayer life all on our own.

WHEN GOD DOESN'T SEEM TO ANSWER

Often, one of the reasons we stop praying is that we're disappointed with the whole concept of prayer. When we urgently request something from God and he doesn't come through for us, we feel hurt and even betrayed that our prayers have not been answered. That's what happened to me when I was small.

I remember that first urgent attempt to call on the Almighty. The need arose when I became aware that someone was trying to kill me! The Second World War was in full swing, and I had the misfortune to live in Liverpool, a dangerous place. Ships supplying us with food from our allies brought their precious cargo to this seaport, making it a target for the enemy. I was very young, but I was aware that there was a God in heaven, and somewhere deep down in my heart I knew he was perfectly capable of stopping wars and conflicts. I decided one day that I would ask him to stop these terrible airplanes from dropping bombs all over my life.

That night the air raids were particularly vicious. While we were huddled in our underground shelter like little moles, I confidently asked God to intervene. The answer came immediately: The bomb dropped far too near for comfort, damaging the back of our house and sending us running for shelter in the safer environs of the English Lake District. *What went wrong?* I asked myself furiously, trying in my six-year-old mind to make sense out of this nonsense. Had God not heard? Had I said my prayer with the wrong words or in the wrong way? Then came the unwelcome thought: *Perhaps God didn't hear me because he was too busy doing other things, like keeping the stars in place.* And last came the worst thought: *Maybe he couldn't help me because he couldn't help me. He wasn't big enough or strong enough.*

Well, one way or another my fervent request had been ignored, and a huge sense of betrayal gripped me. Somewhere deep down in my six-year-old heart I determined not to try again. Not a few

adults have faced similar dilemmas. At the first disappointment they quit without finding out what is happening and what makes prayer work.

If this is the case, the first thing we should do is pray about this. In fact, we should pray about anything that hinders our prayer life. You might want to stop this moment and ask the Lord to identify whatever has caused you to stop talking to him. Then, when you have an inkling of what the blockage has been, talk to him about it.

PRAYER IS PART OF A RELATIONSHIP

Prayer, after all, is the speaking part of our relationship with God. Our relationship with him depends upon our birth, while our fellowship—the quality of our relationship—depends upon our behavior. We must be born of God—“born again”—to be able to talk to God as his children in the first place. After that, our fellowship will be determined by our behavior. Stuart and I have two sons and a daughter. Our blood runs in their veins. Our relationship with them depends upon their birth. If they mess up, our fellowship may be disrupted, but they will always be our children—our estranged children perhaps, but still our children.

Make sure you have been born again. Read the third chapter of John’s Gospel and think about it. Pretend you are Nicodemus. What did Nicodemus need to do after talking with Jesus? What do you need to do after talking with him? Be born again. I’ve provided a simple outline in the form of an acrostic.

Be still inside. Find a quiet place where you won’t be interrupted. Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2, NKJV). This might have been because he didn’t want anyone to see him, but the fact that he came by night also meant that he and Jesus would be alone so they could talk.

Open your mind to thoughts from God. The psalmist prayed “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps. 119:18, NIV). Pray, “Lord, Nicodemus came to ask you

questions. He had an open mind. Help me to understand what you want from me.”

Recognize that God is good—and you are not. Nicodemus was a good man, a clever man, a great teacher of truth. But the best man in the world isn’t as good as God wants him to be (see John 3:9-10).

No one is good enough to go to heaven or too bad to be forgiven. Everyone needs to be born again or born from above (see John 3:3-8).

Admit your shortcomings, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, NIV). Ask God now to open the eyes of your heart. Ask him to enlighten your mind to understand the good news of the gospel (Eph. 1:18-22; Rom. 3:24). The good news is

- God is good and you are not.
- God loves you and gave Christ to die as your substitute.
- If you believe that Christ died in your place and that God punished him instead of you, you will have eternal life (John 3:16).

Give God your life. Pray, “Here is my life, Lord—all of it. I give you my past—forgive it. I give you my future—secure it. I give you my present—fulfill it.”

Accept God’s life, eternal life. Pray, “Please come into my life, Lord Jesus, by your Holy Spirit, right now.”

Invite him to “fuel and rule” your life from now on. He is the *Lord* Jesus Christ. If he is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all.

Nourish your new relationship with God. Pray to God and read and apply the Bible every day. “Pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (I Thess. 5:17-18, NIV). “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (I Pet. 2:2-3, NIV).

Once you have established your relationship with God through Jesus Christ, you are ready to work on developing your relationship with him. This is where your devotional life really begins—and prayer is such a large part of that.

MASTER THE ART OF LEAVING THINGS UNDONE

The first thing you need to learn as you begin to pray prayers that work is to master the art of leaving things undone. Many of us suffer from “Martha syndrome.” Martha was a woman who loved Jesus very much, but her “much serving” distracted her from focusing on him (Luke 10:40, NKJV). It’s hard to leave the urgent thing to attend to one’s soul, but the Lord calls us to just such a duty. You have to learn to do it in the middle of the muddle! Martha had good reasons not to sit at Jesus’ feet, but those reasons were not enough for the Lord. He said to her, “Martha, Martha, . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42, NIV). Many of us can get so excited about the work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work, as someone has so aptly said.

Not only do we have to learn the art of leaving things undone, we need to practice the discipline of leaving things uneaten! If we are to work at prayer that works, it may cost us a little belt tightening. Jesus apparently expected us to follow his example in this regard because he said, “when you fast,” not “if you fast” (Matt. 6:16). If we are to learn how to step out of time into eternity, there will in all probability be many a breakfast or lunch that will need to go uneaten.

What is more, we may have to leave some hours unslept! Jesus got up a great while before daybreak to meet with his Father (Mark 1:35). It will do us no harm at all to set the alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier each day in order that the most important things are attended to. Sleep deprivation is, after all, better than God deprivation!

SIMPLY GET STARTED

But where do we start when we meet with God? One of the reasons some people avoid personal devotions is a fear of incompetence.

Whatever shall we say when we enter his throne room? they wonder. Maybe we've always had a problem talking to important people. How do you address the King of kings and Lord of lords? The first thing to do is find a place and time for such an important conversation. Prayer must be planned. There is a sense in which prayer can be engaged in all day long. But time must also be put aside in order to visit with the King, and so plans should be made.

May I suggest that you take your calendar at the start of the week and pencil in time with the Lord every day. To see that appointment there in black and white sometimes helps you to keep it.

Finding a place can be more of a challenge. When I had young children, it was almost impossible to find a quiet spot. In desperation one day, I took the kids out of their playpen and climbed inside! This became a lifesaver for me, and in the busy days after I'd discovered this safe haven, the children learned to leave me alone. They decided that Mommy was a whole lot nicer Mommy when she got out than when she got in!

LEARN TO BE STILL

But I still haven't addressed the problem of what to do when you actually get everything in order and are ready to pray. For instance, what do you do about wandering thoughts?

Let me give you an illustration. We have a cute grandchild, Stephen, who learned at an early age to avoid his mother's eyes when she wanted to talk to him. This necessitated his mom catching up with him and capturing him in her arms. She then turned him around and, taking his little face in a firm grip, got down on his level. Then she said gently, "Look at me, Stephen!" Stephen's eyes rolled to the left, then to the right, then right up to the top of his head until only the whites could be seen! Judy kept at it, holding his little face until, slightly dizzy with all that eye rolling, Stephen finally focused his eyes on his mother's face, and she could tell him what she wanted him to hear. The first thing she said was, "I love you, Stephen." Then she told him what she needed to tell him.

When you begin to pray, imagine that you are Stephen! Think

about God, your heavenly Father, taking your face lovingly in his hands and holding you firmly right there in front of him. Imagine him saying to you, "Look at me, Stephen." Stay still until you focus. In other words, be still and know that he is God (Ps. 46:10). When your thoughts are settled on the Lord, you will be ready to pray. It is a good idea to start every time in God's presence with a period of silent prayer.

Try to form a habit of meeting with God without an agenda. So many of us have to teach or care for others that it is hard to come to God without thinking about them. Oh, we think, this Scripture would be excellent for Mrs. Smith. But God has things to say to us as well as to Mrs. Smith. We need to listen to God's voice without thinking of others and what would be good for them. First, God wants to tell us what is good for us. Listening to God is an important part of prayer. Try settling down to spend time quietly. Before you even begin to get down to the work of prayer, see if you can hear a thought, enjoy the stillness, or receive a new idea God wants you to think about.

In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 6, he gives a contemporary rendering of Jesus' words on the subject:

Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. (*The Message*)

In prayer, you have passive parts and active parts. Yet even the passive parts take work for some of us! It takes a huge effort to stop and be still, especially if we are active by nature. In the book of Hebrews, for example, the Lord says, "Make every effort to enter that rest" (Heb. 4:11, NIV). Here Paul puts two words together that do not appear to belong together at all, *effort* and *rest*. That sounds like another oxymoron. I am a very active person. It takes a big effort on

my part to be quiet and still, but I must work at resting if I am to have any power in my prayer life. It is only after quieting our spirit that we will know what to pray and how to pray.

LOOK AT THOSE WHO PRAY WELL

There are many ways of learning about prayer. One way is to look at the lives of people who seem to have gotten a handle on it. Who prays prayers that work?

It is said that James, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, had a nickname that was given to him by the early church. He was called “camel knees”! The obvious inference is that James’s knees resembled those of a camel because he was always kneeling! Hearing this caused me to wonder what my nickname might be!

We’re going to take a close look at a prophet named Elijah. James pointed out that “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (James 5:17-18, NIV). Now there is a prayer that worked!

What sort of person do you need to be in order to be effective in your prayer life?

First, You Need to Have Been Forgiven by God

Notice that it is the righteous man who has power with God. “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16, NIV). Another way of looking at that word *righteous* is to realize that it means, among other things, that a person has been forgiven. Are you forgiven?

Years ago I invited a good friend to a meeting. She was not a believer, and she listened carefully to a clear explanation of the gospel. Realizing she was a sinner needing salvation, I introduced her to the speaker at the end of the service. He shook her hand and then said to her, “Tonight you will either sleep as a forgiven sinner or an unforgiven sinner!” She was startled but thought about it and decided to sleep forgiven. Praying a simple prayer of repentance, she

asked the Lord Jesus to enter her life, which he graciously did. Now she was ready to pray prayers that were effective.

Second, You Have to Learn to Be Passionate in Your Praying

Elijah “prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain” (James 5:17, NIV). Elijah’s heart was in his work. Many times we kneel to pray and we really don’t care if God hears and answers us or not. Fervency is a condition of the heart that is developed through our growing relationship with God. As we grow to love him, we find ourselves caring about the things he cares about. Prayer turns our thoughts away from our selfish concerns because we are putting ourselves into the presence of a selfless Being—and a little of that rubs off.

Third, You Need to Be a Persistent Pray-er if You Are to See Your Prayers Work

Elijah prayed continually about the work of God. He climbed a mountain and got to work. He set himself to watch and pray until the rain came (I Kings 18:42-46). Most of us give up far too soon when we are praying. We hit an obstacle such as unanswered prayer and stop dead in our tracks. When Elijah set himself to pray on the top of Mount Carmel, you get the impression that he settled down until the answer came. God likes us to be persistent. Jesus told a story about a woman who persistently asked a judge to grant her request (Luke 18:1-8). And Jesus commended the persistent, blind beggar (Luke 18:35-43). He wants us to go on asking until it’s the right time to get an answer.

I think that prayer is a bit like jogging. Years ago I took up running. Everyone in my family was into the sport in a big way, and I didn’t want to be left out. They talked enthusiastically about “going through the wall.” I wondered what they meant. They explained that if you persisted when you felt you just had to give up, then you went through an invisible wall and got a second wind. It only happened to me once, but I do recall the sense of exultation and the sudden belief that I could run on forever.

I think there is a wall as we engage in prayer as well. It’s my belief

that when many Christians practice prayer, they live on this side of the wall. They get to what I call the point of push, and they stop instead of pressing on. Next time this happens to you, press on; be persistent and you will find yourself in a new country, a land of joy and freedom, with new hope and expectations. Persistence takes your prayer life into a whole new orbit. “Are any among you suffering? They should keep on praying about it,” James tells us (James 5:13).

PRAY WHEN TROUBLE TROUBLES YOU

There should be no excuse for any of us. It’s not as if we have nothing to pray about! God has allowed enough trouble in all of our lives to keep us on our knees. And yet for some this could be the sticking point. It’s hard to pray when trouble troubles us. Yet James sets his remarks about prayer in the context of trouble. “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray,” he says (James 5:13, NIV). We should, but do we? It has been my experience that my prayer life seizes up as soon as trouble pokes its ugly head into my life. But in the end I look back and recognize that without the trouble there would have been very little praying at all. If we are desperate enough, trouble forces us to spend time with God.

When we first came to live in America, our children were thrilled with the music programs in the public schools. All of them wanted to play an instrument. “I want to play the drums,” seven-year-old Pete announced! I was aghast and hastily signed him up for clarinet! This was a serious mistake. The net result of all this was that he never practiced because he didn’t want to play the clarinet; he wanted to play the drums. One day he came whistling into the room carrying his clarinet. “Pray for me, Mom,” he said. “It’s tryouts at school for band, and I want first chair clarinet!”

“I can’t pray that for you, Pete. You haven’t practiced in months.”

“If I’d practiced, I wouldn’t need you to pray,” he retorted! Many of us are like Pete. We never practice prayer, but when urgent business arises, we expect to know exactly what to say and how to say it. Trouble gives us the grand opportunity to practice for the concert.

What sort of trouble was James talking about? All sorts. Little troubles and big ones. He mentions relational troubles: “Confess your sins to each other” (James 5:16); and he deals with sin troubles: “Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (v. 20, NIV). Is any among you hurting? Has your spouse left you? Has someone mistreated you at work? Have you been passed over or gotten the bad part of a deal? Is there someone out there friendless, loveless, childless, cashless, jobless, powerless, clueless? “Is anyone in trouble? He should pray!”

Trouble is a great growth hormone. It takes us from being spiritual dwarfs to spiritual giants—if we respond rightly to it, that is. A few years ago, our family moved into crisis mode. I listened to myself praying. I was shocked. I heard myself praying like an unbeliever. I was praying panic prayers, indulging in angry tirades, and using bargaining language. “Where is my prayer life just when I need it the most?” I asked God. Hard on the heels of that thought came the realization that this trouble was going to do wonders for my prayer life! And it has. Trouble can, in fact, jump-start our prayer life. If we respond to divinely permitted trouble instead of reacting against it, we will find that the situation does two things for us. It will show us that our devotional life isn’t working, and it will show us how to work on making it work!

God is such a God of grace. Sometimes he must feel very like the father whose son was in college and who only got in touch when he wanted money! Does the Lord hear from you and me only when we want something? The amazing thing about the Lord is his patient love. He will hear us out whenever we get around to approaching him.

So when trouble comes, don’t resist it as if it is an enemy; rather, welcome it as a friend. Let it drive you to your knees. Think about it. If trials persist, it just may be that you will persist in prayer. One day I may write a book about the prayers God didn’t answer at once. Looking back, I can see how constant pressure kept me in the Lord’s presence, and for that I am grateful.

LEARN TO PRAY IN THE DARK

Let's talk about sickness for a moment. James presumes that when we are sick we would want to pray. However, he was probably very aware that it can be difficult to find the energy or the will to turn to God when you are unwell. That's where the church can help. There are some things we should keep in mind when we pray for healing. For one thing, God can heal. He is the source of all health and well-being. The elders of the church can support the weak person by praying for him or her, especially when the sick one is too sick to pray. God can heal, there is no doubt about it. But God may or may not heal. Think of Paul. The apostle had the gift of healing, yet he himself had a "thorn in the flesh," some handicap that God did not see fit to heal even though Paul asked him to. When you can come to the point of saying that this thorn God has allowed to irritate you—this thorn that has not been removed—is a good thorn, then you will find that in acceptance lies peace. At that point, pain can become the seedbed of prayers that work.

But God is sovereign, and that is the most important thing. It is also the most sure thing. When God seems to be taking his time to decide if he will answer our prayers or not, we should get on our knees and affirm what we know to be true: God is sovereign, and he truly has everything under control, despite all seeming evidence to the contrary. It is hard to believe this if nothing is happening in answer to prayer. Yet as commentator Matthew Henry says, "God is sometimes a God who hides himself but never a God who absents himself, sometimes in the dark but never at a distance." So you and I need to learn to pray in the dark. Praying in the dark is soul-building work.

It's difficult to think of God's glory in the dark. But we must learn to think in this way. God's glory is what real prayer is all about, after all. We want him to get the glory for everything in our world, and when he doesn't answer our prayers at once, we are concerned that his reputation will suffer. But God is so clever! He is working on so many fronts all at once. God, unlike us, is other-conscious; he looks around the situation we find ourselves in and

sees all the players in the drama. He is considering what effect answering our prayer will have on those who are watching. Take Lazarus, for instance.

Lazarus was sick. He was so sick that his sisters sent for Jesus, who was in a nearby town, to come quickly before their brother died. Jesus, hearing that his friend whom he loved needed him, stayed exactly where he was until he was sure Lazarus was very dead indeed! He told his puzzled disciples that the reason he did this was for the glory of God (John 11:4). Here is a good example of unanswered prayer that would eventually result in the glory of God.

After Jesus finally turned up and raised Lazarus from the dead, he explained that he was doing all this for the sake of the watchers (John 11:42). The watchers were those who would be convinced of Jesus' divinity because of the miracle he would do for Lazarus.

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12:9-11, NIV)

You see, God is working on many fronts.

Let me illustrate this. When I was a student, I ended up in the hospital. The girl who shared my room was a Christian. One day her pastor came to see her. He prayed that God would heal her. At that time, I was not a Christian, and I was fascinated by what was going on in the bed next to mine. However, God did not see fit to answer that particular prayer that particular day and for good reason. Shortly afterward this girl—who didn't get healed right away—led me to Christ! I was one of the watchers, you see. It really helps to think about this when God appears to be silent. In my case, that girl went through hell so that I could go to heaven. God is superconscious of all the players on the stage of life.

Never be afraid to ask God for the stars, but when God says no

or wait, be willing to say, “thy will be done,” and ask the Lord for strength to live well in difficult circumstances. As we try to discover the secrets of prayer that works, it is my prayer that we will find our prayer life revolutionized.



A PRAYER ABOUT LOSTNESS

*Oh God of love,
who would not that “any” should perish,
but that all would come to Christ and be forgiven:
Hear us now in this quiet moment.
Convince us that your word is true
and that choices are for now,
that there is a heaven where you live
and a hell where you do not.
Jesus said so.*

*Thank you, Savior,
that we can have you in our hearts
and lives forever.*

*We pray for our missionaries, pastors, and teachers,
that they would be bold to tell the bad news—
the reality of our lostness—
and then the good news that we can be found,
saved from our sins,
our emptiness, and our wishful wishes.*

*We pray, too, for our children,
that they believe while young,
grow quickly into Christian maturity,
and serve you till they see you face-to-face!
In Christ’s name,
Amen.*

Discussion or Journal

These sections can be used by individuals, families, or study groups. If you use this book in a group, then designate a guide leader and follow the outline. If you use the application pages for yourself, then buy a notebook to record your prayers, answers, and discoveries, or use the “notes and ideas” page at the end of each chapter.

1. Can you remember a prayer you prayed that didn't work?
What was your reaction?
2. Which of the following phrases caught your attention and why?
 - Prayer that doesn't work doesn't work
 - The art of leaving things undone
 - Learn to pray in the middle of the muddle
 - Sleep deprivation is better than God deprivation
 - Look at me, Stephen
 - Meet with God without an agenda
 - Going through the wall
 - We must learn to pray in the dark
3. Review James 5:13-20. Using the passage, make a list of all the things James says about prayer.
4. Why is it hard to pray when you are in trouble? Why is it hard to praise God when things are going well?
5. Look up John 11:41 and John 12:9-10. How do these two verses relate?

Time to Pray

1. Spend time praying about your prayer life.
2. Tell God about your disappointments in prayer.
3. Pray about the phrase from this lesson that spoke to you.
4. Praise God for the examples of prayers in the Bible.

PRAYER THAT WORKS

5. Discuss how hard it is to pray when you are in trouble.
6. Sit in silence until you sense God's grace.

To Do on Your Own

1. Read I Kings 18:41-45.
2. Practice praying every day.

Notes and Ideas