



**We can't control the disasters of life, but we can control how we respond to life's challenges. Job loss, natural disasters, crime, and so many other difficulties plague the lives of believers. So, what do we do when facing tragedies and triumphs? We pray. And then we pray some more.**

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## Contents

Foreword	9
1. It Happens After Prayer	11
2. God Is Not a Sleepy Friend	25
3. God Is Not a Crooked Judge	45
4. The Wise Prayer of a Weak Man	63
5. The Kind of Prayer God Answers	83
6. Can You Handle an Answered Prayer?	103
7. A Godly Attitude toward Material Possessions	121
8. God's Answer for Your Anxiety	137
9. Praying with Spiritual Priorities	153
Conclusion	171
Notes	173
Acknowledgments	175



## CHAPTER 1

# It Happens After Prayer

*Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great  
and hidden things that you have not known.*

**JEREMIAH 33:3**

**L**ife happens. Faith weakens. Temptations attack. Satan oppresses. Needs overwhelm. Sickness comes. Finances disappear. Divorce looms. Loneliness suffocates. Friends betray. In addition, decisions paralyze. Worries strangle. Careers stall.

The challenges of life confront us all. You cannot cancel your appointment with trouble. And you do not know when pain will show up in your life. Just be sure it's coming. There is nothing you can do to stop it.

That's the bad news. Here is the good news: Though you may not be able to control what happens to you in life, you can control how you respond. This is the wonderful benefit of the Christian

life. To trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord does not bring an end to all of your troubles, no matter what some high-profile religious personalities falsely teach. To the contrary, following Christ will produce trials that you would never face otherwise (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12). Christianity is a battleground, not a playground. But faith in God ensures that you will never have to stand and fight alone (Ephesians 6:10–20). The believer can live with the assurance that the Lord is there (Psalm 46:1).

Yes, Christianity is a battleground. Yet *the presence of your divine Ally provides sufficient resources for every struggle you face.*

I repeat. There is nothing you can do to stop bad things from happening in your life. But you can determine your response.

You can turn the other cheek.

You can go the second mile.

You can love those who hate you.

You can bless those who persecute you.

You can forgive those who offend you seven times in one day.

You can overcome evil with good.

You can be steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.

You can give thanks in all circumstances.

You can count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds.<sup>1</sup>

In his little book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner defines what a Christian is for the uninitiated. “A Christian isn’t necessarily any nicer than anybody else,” he concludes. “Just better informed.”<sup>2</sup> Isn’t that wonderful? Being a Christian does not make me superior to the unbelievers around me. It does give me

options that the unbeliever does not have, or even know are available. Therefore, I do not have to respond to my problems as those who do not know God. I can choose to be happy. I can choose to trust. I can choose to love. I can choose to forgive. I can choose to hope again.

Some people are like thermometers. They only register the condition of their surroundings. Other people are like thermostats. They regulate the conditions they find themselves in. Their circumstances do not dictate how they think or feel or act. They have a spiritual “climate control” that enables them to be strong and stable and steadfast, whatever the situation.

The apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi, “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:12–13). That is the testimony of a thermostat.

How do you respond to life’s dangers, toils, and snares? Are you a thermometer or a thermostat? What do you do when life tumbles in on you? Do you try to manage the overwhelming circumstances of life with your own strength, wisdom, and resources? To try is to be like the young man who just received his plumber’s license. A friend took him to see the Niagara Falls. He stared intently at it for several minutes, and then whispered, “I think I can fix this.” No, you can’t.

Or do you endeavor to manage your pain and problems with work, money, toys, alcohol, drugs, entertainment, pleasure, or the

myriad of other vanities the world offers? This won't work either. John wisely warns,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

There is only one reliable option for responding to the things that you would change if you could, but you've tried and you cannot. It is what Moses did when the burden of leading the children of Israel got the best of him. It is what King Jehoshaphat did when he did not know what to do about the coalition of nations that were planning to attack God's people. It is what Nehemiah did when he received the bad news about the broken down walls of Jerusalem. It is what David did as he hid in a cave to escape Saul who sought to take his life. It is what Daniel did before an open window, even though he knew it would land him in a lions' den. It is what the church did at Mary's house, the night before Peter was to be put to death by Herod. It is what Paul and Silas did in the middle of the night, as they sat in jail on trumped-up charges. It is what Jesus Himself did in the garden of Gethsemane, as He agonized in the shadow of the cross.

You ought to pray about these things.

## **WHY PRAY?**

Why pray? Will God hear our prayers? Does He care? Does prayer really make a difference? What can we realistically expect from God when we pray?

There are many good and important reasons why you should pray. In fact, it would be of great benefit for you to study the Scriptures to find out what they teach about why you should pray. But that is not the focus of this book. This is not a textbook that explains the whys and hows of prayer. My goal is to simply challenge you to respond to the vicissitudes of life with prayer, to pray without ceasing, and to pray with great expectations. To that end, let me highlight just the two most essential reasons you should pray.

## **GOD COMMANDS WE PRAY**

You should pray because the Word of God commands you to pray. This should be all the reasoning we need to govern our attitude and actions toward prayer. As Christians, our chief concern in determining how we should view a subject is to answer this question: “What does the Word of God say about it?” If you are like me, you have a long way to go in submitting every area of your life to the authority of Christ. But our attitude must be there before our actions can catch up.

As a teenager, I was given a bumper sticker that reads: “If it’s God’s will, I will.” I still have it in my study to constantly remind me that He deserves and demands my total allegiance, unconditional surrender, and complete obedience. This is why I am committed to be steadfast in prayer, even though my flesh constantly

struggles against it. Prayer is an act of obedience to God. Even if there were no practical benefits to prayer (and there are many), we should be devoted to prayer simply because the Word of God commands it.

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**Prayer expresses our submission to and dependence upon God. The things you pray about are the things you trust God to handle.**

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Scripture does not present prayer as an optional response to life's challenges. Prayer is a divine mandate. The prophet exhorted, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). "Call to me and I will answer you," says the Lord, "and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (Jeremiah 33:3). In the Sermon on

the Mount, the Lord Jesus declared, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). The apostle Paul instructs, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). James asked, "Is anyone . . . suffering?" Then he advised, "Let him pray" (James 5:13).

Prayer is our Christian duty. It is an expression of submission to God and dependence upon Him. For that matter, prayer is arguably the most objective measurement of our dependence upon God. Think of it this way. The things you pray about are the things you trust God to handle. The things you neglect to pray about are the things you trust you can handle on your own.

Can you see why God commands us to pray? Prayer reflects our

confidence in the heavenly Father to care for our needs. When my kids ask me for something, I typically respond by reminding them their dad is a “poor black preacher.” But this does not discourage them in the least, even when they are asking for something I really can’t afford. Their confidence in their father’s ability to provide for them brings me so much joy. Moreover, God the Father delights in His children bringing their needs and wants to Him in prayer. It brings glory to the Father to respond to His children who pray in faith. But it grieves the Father when we take our problems to others but refuse to pray.

Believing prayer is our sacred duty to the heavenly Father. “Continuing steadfast in prayer,” instructs Paul, “being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). What does it mean to “continue steadfastly in prayer”? It means to be devoted, fervent, and persistent in prayer. Let me bottom-line that for you: Don’t stop praying!

Be constant in prayer. Do whatever it takes to maintain and sustain your prayer life. Keep your heart in a posture of prayer before God. Pray for the will of God by praying according to the Word of God. Set a time every day for prayer and Scripture intake. Establish a personal prayer list. Develop friendships with other believers with whom you can partner in prayer. Pray when you feel like it. Pray when you don’t feel like it. Pray until you feel like it. Ruth Bell Graham said it well: “Pray when you feel like it, for it is a sin to neglect such an opportunity. Pray when you don’t feel like it, for it is dangerous to remain in such a condition.”

The words of the beloved hymn “What a Friend We Have in

Jesus” have become a part of my personal theology. I know they are just words of a song, not the divine revelation of Scripture. But they are true, nonetheless.

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.<sup>3</sup>

I have lived long enough to know and accept the fact that some pain is necessary, inevitable, and even beneficial. I fully accept this reality. But I have determined that I do not want to experience any needless pains. If I do not *have* to experience it, I don’t want to. Yet the truth is that we have all suffered unnecessarily, because we did not take everything to God in prayer.

Before you read another paragraph, pause and simply renew your commitment to the duty of prayer. Ask the Lord to help you continue steadfastly in prayer.

### **PRAYER IS A PRIVILEGE**

After obedience to the Word of God, there is another essential reason you should be devoted to prayer. This second reason for the praying life is what the rest of this book is about. I hope you will read to the end. But here’s the point right up front. I can’t resist; this news is almost too good to be true. Better yet, it’s too good not to be true: Only a good and wise and sovereign God like ours would make prayer a duty and a privilege at the same time.

Let me say that again. Prayer is a privilege. It is not a burden-

some duty. It is a wonderful privilege. Even though Scripture commands us to pray, we should not view prayer as something we *have* to do. We should view it as something we *get* to do.

It is a privilege to have an audience before the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ has given us access to the throne of grace. Every redeemed follower of Christ is granted an open door before the Lord Almighty. We can approach God in prayer with confidence. There we can obtain the grace and mercy we need (see Hebrews 4:16).

Yet the privilege of prayer is greater still.

Not only does God command us to bring our needs to Him; He also promises to hear and answer our prayers.

“Why should I pray?” you ask. Answer: Prayer works! More accurately, God works when we pray. When we work, we work. When we pray, God works. Charles Spurgeon said, “Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the arm of omnipotence.”

In Ephesians 3:14–19, Paul makes some incredible requests on the behalf of the saints. In a prayer for spiritual enablement, he asks that the saints would be able to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (v. 19).

Come again? How can you know something that is beyond knowledge? That’s incredible. However, Paul’s remarkable prayer requests begin to make sense when you read the doxology in the next verse: “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly

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than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (v. 20). This truth applies to every prayer you pray. God is more than able to answer your prayers. What a promise! Whatever you are thinking about or asking for, God is able to do far more than that for you.

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**Whatever you are thinking about or asking for, God is able to do far more than that for you.**

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Do not misunderstand me. You should not view prayer as some rigged slot machine that gives you a jackpot every time you make a request. This book is not advocating “prosperity theology.” I am not claiming that you can write your own ticket with God by faith. Prayer does not guarantee your life

will be an unbroken cycle of health, wealth, success, and happiness. Prayer doesn’t work that way.

### **GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS ACCORDING TO HIS WILL**

I believe in the exhaustive sovereignty of God, which is just a fancy way of saying that God is God. That is, God is God alone. This means that our prayers do not put God under obligation to do whatever we ask. It does not matter how long you pray. It does not matter how loud you cry. It does not matter how many verses you quote or promises you claim. It does not matter how many so-called positive confessions you make. As you pray, you must remember who God is. You must also remember where God is. Our God is in heaven, doing whatever pleases Him (Psalm 103:19). This is the basis upon which God answers prayer. God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

I had a head-on collision with this reality when I was sixteen years old. I was invited to Detroit to preach a weeklong youth revival. This was a big deal. I had never been that far away from home for that long to preach. I was beyond excited. But when it was time to leave, I had mixed emotions. My father was in the hospital. It was the first time in my life my father had ever been admitted to the hospital. He would be in the hospital the entire week. He was scheduled to come home the day I would return from Detroit.

A week later, as I was flying back to home to Los Angeles—to my father and family—my dad died. My brother and a friend waited for me at the airport; they too were unaware of his passing. They had been instructed to rush me to the hospital to see my dad, hoping to get me there before it was too late. When we arrived and asked for my father's room, I was told someone would come out to speak with me. Before they could come, I was being rushed home. Still no one told me what was going on. But I sensed something was terribly wrong.

During that ride home, I prayed harder than I have ever prayed about anything in my life. I quickly came to grips with the fact that it was my father's last day in this world. Yet I had what I thought to be a simple request. "Lord, please let me say goodbye to my father." With everything that was in me, I pleaded with the Lord to give me the opportunity to give my love to my dad before he was taken away from me. But when we pulled into the driveway, a family friend was there to break the news to me.

This was the most fervent prayer I had ever prayed. And the answer was no. But I write the next sentence without any hesitation,

reservation, or qualification. God answers prayer. Today I am several decades removed from my father's death. And in the intervening years, God has done far more for me than I could ask or think. As I look at that experience in the rearview mirror of life, I thank God

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**Looking through  
the rearview mirror  
of life, I thank God  
that He did not give me  
what I desperately  
requested that day.**

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that He did not give me what I desperately requested that day. Before that experience, I believed prayer changes things. After that experience, I learned that prayer changes me. My life and relationship with the Lord were never the same since that day the Lord told me no. I am convinced that prayer works, even when it does not work the way you want it to work.

This is what the apostle Paul learned when he was “given a thorn in [the] flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7 NIV). We do not know what this thorn was. But the language conveys the fact that it hurt. Paul responded with prayer. He asked the Lord three times to remove the thorn in the flesh. The Lord refused to do so. He did not give Paul what he asked. But He gave him something better. “My grace is sufficient for you,” said the Lord, “for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This transformed Paul's perspective. He concluded, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

This can be your experience, too. It happens after prayer! What

happens after prayer? I'm glad you asked. "It" is a fill-in-the-blank that you can complete with any issue in your life. Whatever that special thing is that you need the Lord to do in your life, it happens after prayer.

Do you need faith to see beyond your circumstances?

Do you need divine intervention for a difficult situation?

Do you need relief from pain, grief, or sorrow?

Do you need strength to resist a temptation?

Do you need victory over some besetting sin in your life?

Do you need wisdom for a tough decision you have to make?

Do you need a door of opportunity opened for you?

Do you need healing or restoration of health?

Do you need reconciliation in some broken relationship?

Do you need grace to be faithful in a hard assignment?

Do you need assurance that God is on your side?

Each one of these happens after prayer! There are a lot of things you can do to fix your situation after you pray. But there is nothing you can do to fix the situation until you pray. Whatever it is you need God to do in your life, it happens after prayer.

A father and his son were riding their bikes together one day. As they rode down the trail, the father eyed a large branch that had fallen in the path ahead. Instead of riding around it, the father decided to use this as an opportunity to teach his son an important lesson. They pulled over, and the father instructed his son to move the branch out of the way.

The boy pushed and pulled, but was unable to move the branch. "I can't do it," he said, exhausted. "Sure you can, Son,"

replied the father. “Be sure to use all your strength.” The boy tried harder. But he could not move the branch.

Near tears, he said again, “I can’t do it.”

“Did you use all of your strength?” The father asked.

“Yes,” the boy answered.

“No you didn’t,” the father replied. “You didn’t ask me to help you.”

What is the obstacle in your path? What is it in your life that you have tried to move without success? Have you used all of your strength? No you haven’t—if you have not asked God’s help and prayed about it sincerely, diligently, and persistently.

It happens after prayer.

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