

“BLESSING OTHERS WITH YOUR PRAYERS”

Acts 12:1-17, Matthew 6:5-8

April 28 & 29, 2018

“His nightmares began each day when he awoke.

“James Stegalls was nineteen. He was in Vietnam. Though he carried a small Gideon New Testament in his shirt pocket, he couldn’t bring himself to read it. His buddies were cut down around him, terror was building within him, and God seemed far away. His twentieth birthday passed, then his twenty-first. At last, he felt he couldn’t go on.

“On February 26, 1968, he prayed for it all to end, and his heart told him he would die before dusk. Sure enough, his base came under attack that day and Jim heard a rocket coming straight toward him. Three seconds to live, he told himself, then two, then...

“A friend shoved him into a grease pit, and he waited for the rocket to explode, then there was only a surreal silence. The fuse malfunctioned.

“For five hours James knelt in that pit, and finally his quivering hand reached into his shirt pocket and took out his New Testament. Beginning with Matthew, he continued through the first 18 chapters.

“When I read Matthew 18:19-20,’ he said, ‘I somehow knew things would be all right.’

“Long after Jim returned home, as he visited his wife’s grandmother, Mrs. Harris, she told him a night years before when she had awakened in terror. Knowing Jim was in Vietnam, she had sensed he was in trouble. She began praying for God to spare his life. Unable to kneel because of arthritis, she lay prone on the floor, praying and reading her Bible all night.

“Just before dawn she read Matthew 18:19-20: *If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them.*

“She immediately called her Sunday school teacher, who got out of bed and went to Mrs. Harris’ house where together they claimed the Lord’s promise as they prayed for Jim until reassured by God’s peace.

“Having told Jim the story, Mrs. Harris opened her Bible to show him where she had marked the passage. In the margin were the words: *Jim, February 26, 1968.*”<sup>1</sup>

How many of you can say that you have been blessed by the prayers of another, you know, folks have prayed for you and it helped in a particular situation? I am blessed to have so many of you praying for me, and I can assure you, your prayers are making a difference.

We are called to pray for one another, but do we really do it? Are we actively praying for the lives of those around us so that they might be surrounded by God’s guidance and direction? Are we willing to bless another through our prayers, much like Jim was blessed with God’s protection in the opening story? I know there have been times when I’ve awakened in the middle of the night and know that God is calling me to pray for folks. Sometimes it’s easy, and other times it’s hard. For some people prayer comes naturally, but for others it just is not something they can do easily.

So today I want to lead you through four common questions that come up when we begin to look at how we can bless others with our prayers.

1. The first question is “**When I pray is it all up to me or not?**” Am I the one that is making the difference in another person’s life by praying for them? Whose power is at work – mine or the Lord’s?

As we look at the lesson of Acts 12, we see an interesting account of prayer warriors gathering to lift up Peter and his protection. Herod Agrippa had arrested him seeing the delight that the Jews showed when he first put James to death. Herod thought he could increase his “king rating” among the Jews by systematically arresting and killing Christian leaders. And Luke, the writer of Acts, details nicely the whole event so that we could see the result of praying together.

But as these Christians were praying, whose power was at work? Was it the power of that corporate prayer group praying Peter’s protection that made the difference? Or was it the

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<sup>1</sup> (Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson, 2000] pg. 627-8)

Lord God hearing their prayer and answering them affirmatively? Sometimes we think that if we just say the right thing, or use the right words, or pray hard enough or long enough that the Lord God HAS to answer us. In this way we begin to treat God like a vending machine or a gene in a bottle. We put our prayer out there, and God has to answer it just the way we want it answered. WELL, NO! We are not the ones with the power to do anything.

We are assured by Paul in Romans 8:26 that “...*the Holy Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit Himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express.*” So it is not about US getting the credit for the answered prayer, but it is GOD who receives the credit for answering our prayers and providing the great power to do a marvelous thing. We need to get out of the way, give our requests to God, and then let Him answer in His way and in His time.

So when we pray, remember it’s NOT up to us for the answer to come about. **When you pray, you can RELAX.** You can resign from trying to be the god of the universe and let God do the work that brings Him the glory and the honor for answering our prayers. After all, it’s all about His power, not ours.

2. The second question to address is “**When I pray, should I be formal or not?**” Most of all the prayers in the Bible don’t have the actual prayer written, but just the note of who was doing the praying. Here in Acts 12 it tells us (vs. 5) “...*but the people of the church were praying earnestly to God for him.*” We don’t know what the words were. We’re just told that they were praying earnestly for Peter. Don’t you wish we had the words of those folks? Then we could say, Hey, I’ve got the right combination of words, the right tone of voice to use, and the just the right prayer to get God’s attention and have Him answer. If we prayed just the right way, God would certainly have to answer us for what we were asking. RIGHT?

Well, if it were just up to following a particular formula, that would be too easy. But we want to know how to pray so that God will pay attention. Jesus instructed His disciples how to pray in Matthew 6. Listen to what Jesus tells them about prayer. **(READ Matthew 6:5-15)**

Jesus tells us not to make a spectacle of ourselves when we pray, but rather to pray in secret, alone in our room. And when we **are** asked to pray in groups or in public, Jesus says keep it simple. It's not the number of words, but the intent of the words. And Jesus gives us A MODEL of prayer to direct our prayers. Jesus doesn't say "Pray THIS." He says, "Pray LIKE this." The prayer He gave to us as a model, the Lord's Prayer, gives us the guidelines of how we are to pray, not what to pray.

Keep it simple! Don't try to impress anybody. Remember the prayer is between you and God. If anyone happens to be listening in, great, but don't pray to impress others. That's what Jesus was concerned about when He addressed the issue of prayer in the first place. **Relax when you pray** and then pour out your heart genuinely to God in real prayer. He already knows what's going on. Allow the Holy Spirit to move in you as you develop a close relationship with the Lord God. Sometimes the most articulate prayer is just the tears rolling down your cheeks, and the Holy Spirit of God will put that prayer into words. **Just BE REAL.**

3. The third question is "**When I pray is prayer effective or not?**" Once again as we look at Acts 12, the account begins by saying that Herod had already arrested and killed James. Certainly there were many who were praying for him, too. Yes, there are many times when many people pray and God brings about the request they have been praying. But there are times, too, when we can question the effectiveness of our prayers because when we pray we don't get the answer we were hoping for.

I like the way that I John 5:13-15 says about prayer. "*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before [God], that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*" As we pray according to God's will, He not only hears us, but answers us, and we can be confident that we will have the request that we have asked of God. So these disciples of Jesus were praying hard for Peter and God heard them, and

marvelously answered them with the protection and deliverance of Peter from prison.

I'm reminded of the recent events that called us to pray for Pastor Saeed Abedini when he was being held captive in Iran from 2013 to 2016. Many people earnestly sought out the Lord's deliverance, similar to Peter's deliverance. Pastor Abedini was in Iran building another orphanage when he was arrested for engaging in Christian activities in that Muslim country. Prayers were lifted up and God answered by having Pastor Abedini released after 2 ½ years in prison. We prayed and God answered.

And I remember the report of one of the young adults at the Zion UMC in Forest Junction who spent 6 months in Kenya with Youth With A Mission ministries. She was working with a group of Christians operating a Vacation Bible School for the local children of the area. One day a young girl attended the VBS and it was very apparent that she was suffering the effects of late term AIDS. She had sores all over her head; her hair was falling out and she was at the end of her strength. Yet she had come seeking to know Jesus Christ.

The group was elated and they shared Jesus with her and she accepted Jesus as her Savior. Before she went home that day, everyone gathered around her and laid hands upon her and prayed that God would heal her so that she might be a powerful witness to other children of what the Lord can do when they let Jesus into their hearts as Savior and Lord.

The very next day the same girl came back to the VBS, and the difference was amazing. The sores on her head were almost all healed, her hair was beginning to grow again, and she had much more energy. It was truly a miraculous healing. The team had lifted her up to the Lord for His glory, they prayed genuinely for God's healing, and the effect was tremendous! God heard and answered their prayer.

You see, God responds when we "*cast all our anxiety upon Him because He cares for us*" (I Peter 5:7). When we're praying for other people we get to stand in the middle and we take the hand of the person who needs prayer and we're holding the hand of God and we feel what's going on with both of them. We feel the pain and the temptation and the addiction and the

brokenness of the person, but we feel the love and compassion and care and the power of God. As we intercede for one another we become partners in His work in order to bring about His purpose so that His Will is accomplished. *“When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow”* (Romans 12:15). Since we all face tough situations, it is always nicer to know there are others praying for us so that we will not be alone. God invites us to stand in the gap for each other to encourage and uplift and support in prayer so that God’s will can be accomplished.

I would invite you to keep these four young people in your prayers as they make this big step in their lives. Emily, Jana, Tayloranne and Jonah have professed their faith in Jesus Christ before you. They now have put a target upon themselves for the enemies of Jesus to take aim at. Satan wants to keep them from growing close to Jesus Christ, and he will do whatever he can to prevent these young people from growing in their faith. So we need to pray for them, inviting God to make Himself known to them so that they may stand strong in Jesus Christ amidst this very difficult and faithless world. We need to pray God’s protection over them, seek His deliverance for them from the temptations of the world, and diligently request that God guide and direct them in the way they should go to be servants of Jesus Christ. Can you do that with me? Can you pray for these four young people?

**When you pray, be assured** that God not only hears your prayers, but will answer them in His time FOR HIS GLORY. It is ours to humble ourselves before Him and seek His will.

4. The last question today on prayer is **“When I pray, can I mess it up or not?”** Certainly none of us here are perfect, so if it were required us to be perfect for God to answer us, there’d be no sense in us praying. We don’t have to use perfect words, because when we pray in His will, God helps us out.

But there are things in our lives that can prevent our prayers from being effective in blessing others. These are things that if we’re doing will bust our prayers and the effectiveness will be gone. Some call them **Prayer Busters**.

Prayer Buster 1: **Prayerlessness.** James 4:2 is very clear about this one; “...*You do not have because you do not ask God for it.*” If you take the pronoun “you” out of that and insert the personal pronoun “I,” we might begin to get the picture. “I do not have because I do not ask God for it.” Unless we ask, there is no reason for God to give it to us. The reason our prayers aren’t being answered is we haven’t prayed them yet. We haven’t asked.

And that is exactly what is missing in our prayers – we’re not asking! We have to ask. Researchers tell us that 25% of the people say that prayer is their last resort – “I only pray if I have to.” These folks are trying **everything else before** they ask God for it. And we wonder why we aren’t having much effect? Why aren’t we blessing others with our prayers? Some of it is we haven’t asked.

So here are a few hints for those of you struggling with this. Pray immediately when someone asks you to pray for them. Don’t just say you will; do it, right then, right there. It may freak people out, but that way you don’t forget. Do it right away no matter where you are. Pray with them.

Then email your prayers. So many people send prayer requests to others over the internet so as you pray for them, write the words down and send it to that person. Then you can say to them, “I just prayed for you!” It’s just like you were there with them praying.

Or, if you can’t sleep at night, instead of watching the TV or reading on the IPAD, pray! I promise, if you start praying in the middle of the night because you can’t sleep Satan will put you to sleep. He doesn’t want you praying. So pray when you can’t sleep.

How about praying when you’re in the shower, or washing dishes, or driving, or during commercials. Make a practice to pray wherever you are. The point is to be in God’s presence all day and pray unceasingly, as the Apostle Paul states it (I Thessalonians 5:17). Get into a rhythm of praying because God is always listening, and He’s always ready to answer.

Prayer Buster 2: **Selfishness.** James 4:3 explains this one, “*If you ask and don’t receive you’ve asked with the wrong motives.*” We may be asking God for things, but we’re asking with

the wrong motives – we’re being selfish in our request. Much of what we pray for is selfish because we’re seeking something only for ourselves. We want life to be easier, with less pain and struggle, with better perks or less headaches. We want life to be easy, but God accomplishes great things when life is difficult. Those people in the house praying for Peter may never have seen the power of God unless Peter had been arrested in the first place. Our struggles in life bring us to the point when we realize it’s not about us, and we are driven back to God. Without distress, hardship, toil, or discomfort, we might forget about God altogether. The pain in our lives helps us to see the need for God to be in control. So our selfish prayers (it’s all about me) and our lack of prayer combine to produce very INEFFECTIVE prayers. If we are asking God for His help, we’re asking for the wrong things. It’s when we align ourselves with God’s will and God’s ways that we begin to see God answer our prayers. If we align our desires with God’s desires then our praying is focused and more powerful and effective.

Prayer Buster 3: **Unconfessed Sin.** Isaiah 59:2 exposes this, “*Your iniquities have separated you from God. Your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear.*” When we are rebelling against God, refusing to follow His ways, and reject His truth as valuable, we are turning our backs on God. When we do this God is not about to give us what we are seeking.

Sin is what turns God away from us. He hates sin and when we come before Him with our sins hanging out all over, God will only turn away from us. He will not tolerate sin in His presence. So if we come before Him in prayer, but have sinfulness in our lives, it’s not likely that He is going to respond positively to our prayer. First we must humble ourselves, seek His forgiveness and then seek His help.

Prayer Buster 4: **Broken Relationships.** Anger and bitterness in our lives will prevent us from being effective in prayer. When we are at a distance from one another, we are probably separated from God, too, and whatever we pray will be received by God as angry and vengeful. So when we have grudges against one another, when we have relationship issues, it’s not likely



that God will hear us because we will be praying selfishly, holding onto unconfessed sin. When we find it hard to love each other, we'll probably not pray for one another, either, and that hinders our prayers. Jesus tells us that before we can expect to find a good relationship with God, we must first have a good relationship with one another. Then as we reconcile with each other, our heart will soften and our minds will clear, and we will be able to once more seek God and ask for His work and His will to be done.

Prayer Buster 5: **Lack of Faith.** When we look at Acts 12 once more, we see that when God answered their prayer and Peter was released from prison through the help of the angel, he goes to the house where they were praying, and they are surprised that he is really there. They give Rhoda such a hard time when she tells them that Peter is at the door (Acts 12:13-15). They didn't believe her. Here they were, praying that God would release Peter, and then they can't even believe it when God does the very thing they've asked of Him. But we do know something, however, there was at least one person there who had faith. Maybe it was Rhoda, but because of faith, God answered the prayer.

If we have no faith in what we're praying, then how can we expect God to answer us? We must faithfully come before God with our requests, knowing that He hears us, trusting that He will respond to us, and expecting God to do the very thing we're asking.

Whenever we see Jesus do miraculous things for the people who reached out to Him, we hear Him tell them, "*Your faith has healed you*" (Matthew 9:22). Hebrews 11:6 is clear, "*No one can please God without faith, for whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek Him.*"

So when you pray keep believing! Make it your best effort to mend the relationships you have with others. Humble yourself before God and confess all that is sinful in you. Seek the Lord's work and the Lord's way rather than just your own wants and wishes. And stay constant in prayer, wherever you go. When you do these things, there's no way you can mess up your prayers, for "*the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*" (James 5:16).

You can become a tremendous blessing in the lives of others as you pray for them. And the greatest prayer you can pray for anyone is for them to come to know Jesus. You have been blessed by the prayers of those around you so that you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior. It's the best thing that you can pray for another.

Who do you know that needs to know Jesus Christ? Who has God put on your heart so you could begin praying for them to receive Christ into their life? The bottom of your sheet has a space for the name of one that you can begin to pray for.

Therefore, as you have been blessed by the prayers of others, be a blessing to others around you and pray for them, in the name of Jesus Christ our Risen Lord and Savior. AMEN.