



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

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So, do you believe that prayer actually moves the hand of a sovereign God? I'm not asking if you know the right answer to the question; we're not taking a quiz. I'm asking, "Do you really believe that in your heart of hearts?" Let's think of it this way. What is the thing that's most heavy on your heart, the thing maybe this week that kept you awake at night, the thing that causes concern, that causes fear and anxiety, the thing that you would say is the thing that's most heavy on your heart? Did you really fervently pray this week, believing that it was possible that your prayers could move the hand of a sovereign God to do the impossible?

There's this fine line between believing in a sovereign God and crossing that line into some level of fatalism, where you just simply conclude that it's going to be what it's going to be, and God's going to do His thing, and my prayers don't change anything. And while we may give lip service to something contrary to that, deep in our heart of hearts we believe it's going to be what it's going to be. I can't change that—God's going to do His thing. Once we start thinking that way, we start redefining what prayer is. Prayer becomes kind of a therapy session where I don't know that it really moves the hand of a sovereign God, but it just kind of feels good to dump the load somewhere. So, it's therapy. Or we start talking about aligning our wills with God's will. Now that's a very important thing and that is true. But, if what we mean by that, deep in our hearts, is that prayer doesn't really change anything - I just need to get in alignment with God—I think that's untrue. I think somewhere along the way we've settled into some sort of fatalism and, in our heart of hearts, we don't really believe that prayer changes anything. Perhaps the littleness of our prayer life indicates deep down we really don't think it changes anything.

When I began to think about a series on prayer, I thought about, "Okay, what would be the best thing to talk about?" We could look at the Lord's Prayer and we could kind of dissect it and see all the pieces and that would be good. Or we could talk about how to pray, or different ways to pray, but there are lots of very good books that cover all that stuff. Isn't it possible that, at the end of the day, the biggest issue is whether or not we actually believe in the power of prayer? Is it possible that God has actually granted us an invitation to ask in such a way that it moves the hand of a sovereign God, and do we believe that?

So, our goal over the next week is very simple. It's to convince; it's to motivate; and it is to get us to think about the possibility that prayer actually does move the hand of God in a way that it otherwise simply wouldn't move. We're going to tell you five stories of how prayer moved the hand of a sovereign God and changed the world.

Our story takes place roughly ten years after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The church has continued to grow and prosper. There's been persecution; there's been a lot of threats. There have been some imprisonments and releases; there's been the martyrdom of

Stephen. But by and large the church has progressed forward. Eleven of the twelve apostles—you remember Judas committed suicide, so of the remaining eleven—ten years later all eleven are still alive, and all eleven are still leading the church. And there's a belief among the church that these guys are invincible, that the church is unstoppable and, "We're going to get this job done," until Herod shows up on the scene.

Now when we talk about Herod, it gets confusing because Herod is a title; it's not a first name. So, there are actually three different Herods in the Gospels and the epistles. The first Herod is Herod the Great. Herod the Great would have been the Herod during the birth of Jesus—Herod that the Magi visited, Herod that slaughtered all the babies. Herod the Great was a bit of a nut case; he was a lunatic. He killed many of his own family members, including his own son, because he thought he was after the throne.

The second Herod would be a son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas. This would have been the Herod who executed John the Baptist. This would have been the Herod that was part of the trial of Jesus. When Pilate sent Jesus over to Herod, it was this Herod.

The third Herod, Herod Agrippa, is the Herod of our story. He would be the grandson of Herod the Great. It was his father that his grandfather executed. Herod Agrippa was four years old when his grandfather killed his own son, which would have been Agrippa's father, and he has quite an interesting life. Tiberius Caesar didn't like Agrippa, so he threw him in prison. After he died, Caligula took over as emperor. He was actually a childhood friend of Agrippa, so he pulled him out of prison and gave him some responsibility. Caligula died; Claudius became emperor. Claudius also was a childhood friend of Agrippa, so he made him king of Judea. As king of Judea, Agrippa desperately wanted the Jewish people to like him. He wanted their favor, but they didn't like him. He did everything possible. When he was in Jerusalem, he was very orthodox in his behavior, but the Jews thought of him as a pagan. They just simply didn't like him, no matter what he did, until he arrested some of the Christians, including James the apostle.

Now this is one of the big three—Peter, James, and John. They were invincible until Herod arrested James and cut off his head. And this absolutely rocked the church! This isn't just another Christian; this is one of the big three. This is the invincible apostle of Jesus! And suddenly the church starts to come unraveled. Herod realizes this really pleases the Jewish crowd. Suddenly they liked him, and he had figured out, this is the way to gain their favor: I'll wipe them all out, get rid of the Christians, and the Jews will love me. So, he arrests Peter, the second of the big three, with every intention of executing Peter. Now the church is in disarray—suddenly it's coming unraveled. The apostles don't seem invincible and the church doesn't seem unstoppable. The only thing that prevented Herod from executing Peter immediately is, it was Passover. There's no way that he could violate Passover and win the favor of the Jews, so he had to wait for Passover, followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So, eight days he has to house Peter in prison, and, at the end of eight days, he can execute him—and the Jews will love him.

Acts, Chapter 12, Verse 1:

Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during

the days of Unleavened Bread. When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. So, Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

(*NASB, Acts 12:1-5)

So, Peter is arrested, but he (Herod) must wait, so he puts him in prison. There's language throughout this text that tells us Herod was doubling up everything necessary so nothing happened, so Peter didn't escape, in order that he might execute him. The squadrons—the four squads—is the idea of squads of four rotating every three hours. This was far more than a normal prisoner would have received. He was putting him in maximum security, in order to carry out the execution. Meanwhile the text tells us that the church was praying fervently. This word fervently is the exact same Greek word that is used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This wasn't Wednesday night prayer meeting as usual. This wasn't, "Anybody have a request?" This was the church coming unraveled; this was the church desperately afraid. One of the big three has gone down; the second one is about to come down; everything's falling apart. They are afraid! If this works, Herod will kill them all, and so this is a prayer meeting filled with fire.

We've often reminded ourselves that when we trusted Jesus as Savior, we did not board a cruise ship—we boarded a battleship! I can assure you that the prayer meetings on a cruise ship are really different than the prayer meetings on a battleship. The prayer meetings on the Love Boat gather for a few minutes. I mean you don't want to waste too much time praying on the Love Boat. And so, they pray that the hot tub will get fixed by tomorrow; they pray that the buffet will be a little better the next day; they pray that it doesn't rain; they pray that they have enough money to go to the gift shop. But on the battleship, prayer meetings are not like that. These are prayers of desperation; these are prayers of fear; these are prayers about whether or not I'm going to live one more day. The intensity level on the battleship would be much higher.

Verse 6:

On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, (meaning the night before the execution) Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. (That would be two of everything; it would be double what's normal every step of the way.) And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (*NASB Acts 12:6-11)

So, Peter's lying in a cell, sound asleep, the night before the execution. That alone tells us something about Peter. He wasn't tossing and turning. He had probably resolved in his own heart that this was the end of the story and he was fine with that. Like James, he would die for his faith. He's sound asleep. The angel shows up and it's interesting that the text says, "...struck him in his side". I don't know why the angel didn't just kind of shake him or call his name, but

it sounds like he kicked him one in the side. Peter is sleeping and he wakes him up and then he walks him through this process: “Okay, Peter, put on your shoes. Okay, Peter, put on your pants. Okay, Peter, put on your shirt; put on your coat; follow me; we’re heading out.” Now why does the text give us that level of detail? I think it’s to tell us that Peter didn’t expect “The Great Escape”. He hadn’t planned this out. This wasn’t the great escape from Alcatraz. He was sound asleep; he had resigned himself he’s going to die. And so, he’s awakened in the middle of the night and he’s confused, and so the angel has to say, “Put on your shoes; put on your pants; put on your shirt. Okay, follow me; we’re walking out.” And so, they walk past the guards. One of the interesting things in the story is there simply is no mention of the guards in any significant way. They just seem to be non-factors. The chains fall off; they walk out of the jail cell; they walk past the guards; they finally get to the gate that leads to the city and it opened by itself. The Greek word that is translated by itself is the word from which we get the word automatically. The gate just opened. Gates in the cities didn’t just open in the middle of the night, but it did, and Peter and the angel walked through and then suddenly the angel disappears.

And the text basically says Peter finally gets it—that God has set him free. It is a great story of God doing the impossible and releasing Peter from prison.

Cara: Okay, Bryan. So, the church just lost James and now Peter's life is on the line. So, they join together to plead with God for Peter's release. And God answers it in this miraculous way. But now I'm guessing that even though the church was praying fervently, they probably didn't even expect the answer to come the way that it did.

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. You can tell from the text, I think they were sincerely, fervently praying, but they were clearly shocked, surprised when Peter came knocking, and really struggled to believe it could be true.

Arnie: So, Bryan, what should our expectations be when we pray?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. I think a lot of people struggle with that, and I'd kind of summarize it in two words: believe and submit. And this is the challenge, is: I do want to believe prayer moves the hand of God and God can do the impossible. And part of my affirmation that I believe that is, I ask accordingly. But I also have to submit to the reality that God's ways are not my ways. And there's things I don't understand, and I don't always know why God does or doesn't do accordingly. It's that tension between believing but submitting or surrendering.

Cara: It's a lot of but's in prayer because you go, I want this miraculous thing, but... logically... I struggle. [Yeah.] I just really appreciated this message.

Bryan: I think we all struggle with that tension.

Cara: Yeah. The Angel arrives and he takes care of the locks and the guards, but then Peter still has to put his clothes on and walk down the street. Is there a spiritual principle on that we can relate to?

Bryan: Well, at least the fact that we have to do our part. God sent an angel and Peter had to respond, I think, kind of groggily. Is that a word? [The fact he was asleep], [He was waking up and trying to figure], yeah. Yeah. Isn't that amazing? He's sleeping the night before he's probably going to be executed. I love that part. But yeah, we have to do our part and I just think it's interesting how often we as believers end up explaining away what seems to be a genuine answer to prayer. We just struggle to believe it could have actually happened.

Arnie: So how do we strike a balance between asking for something specifically, yet remaining open to God's will?

Bryan: One of the things that really helps me is praying truth. So, rehearsing what I do know to be true. So, somebody's dying in the hospital or struggling in some way, I'm still going to go back to things I know to be true about God and His character and His power. I rehearse that. I always want to ask for God to do the impossible, acknowledging I believe He can, but just what you said, then recognize that may not be what needs to happen here, and I have to be willing to submit to that. So again, it's that same tension of asking and believing it. So that's contrary to those that teach that if you believe hard enough and if you have enough faith, you somehow can manipulate God, make it happen. It's like, it just doesn't work that way. There's nowhere the Bible teaches that.

Arnie: So, when you were struggling with your heart stuff, you know, several years ago, a couple of different times, were you praying for God to heal you, or His will, or how did you strike a balance there?

Bryan: Yeah, so it's both. [Okay.] I was praying for healing and would have been happy for that. But also understanding God may be up to something. Maybe it's something I needed. Maybe it's something that people around me needed. And if that's what it takes for my kids to grow in faith, if that's what it takes for somebody else to encounter Jesus, then I'm good with it and I have to accept that. So, it is the same tension, [same tension].

Cara: The Bible says that when Peter came to himself, he realized that God had rescued him. There are times in my life when God answers a prayer, but it does take me a while to realize that. And sometimes His answers are a lot different than what I think they would be.

Bryan: Right. I think that often happens. And sometimes it's only after periods of time we look back and realize God did answer my prayer, just not exactly the way I thought He was going to answer it. I think sometimes the crisis passes and God's done something and then we lose focus and just move on. It's helpful to note, I think, when God shows up and answers prayer, don't just move on, but note it. We tend to remember the negatives and we forget the positives so you can end up saying, "Well, God never listens. God never cared." It's like, "Wait a minute. There's a whole list of ways God has shown up and answered prayers." I just need to make an effort to remember those for the next difficult time to come.

Cara: I've actually heard that's the benefit of journaling. I'm not a "journaler", but then you can look back and see how God answered certain things that were going on in circumstances. [Yeah.]

Bryan: I think however it makes sense to you, there has to be some way to note those things and remember.

Arnie: We see that not only is Peter saved, but shortly afterwards, God strikes Herod down in a way that's really pretty gross. I mean, worms eating him up and he dies. What a way to die. It sounds like God was making a point, wouldn't you say?

Bryan: Yeah, I would say that's a pretty clear point. So "the worms" is debated as whether they're like internal intestinal worms or something like that, or whether it's something more graphic. But clearly that's what it was. And I think God is making a point. God wins. Herod loses. And the Church continues to go forward. It's pretty dramatic. [I'll say.]

Cara: Individual prayer is very important, but the Bible also encourages us to pray with others. What are the benefits of praying together in a group?

Bryan: I think there's support in a group. There's encouragement within a group. I think a group also offers a different perspective. So maybe somebody prays something different than what I was thinking and its kind of broadens maybe my own perspective. I think praying together creates perseverance. There's kind of an accountability to it, but I think there's also something really powerful in hearing others pray for something in my life, something I need. It's humbling; it's encouraging. And then I also think when God does the unexpected, there's more people to enter into the celebration: God gets more glory. And, you know, you think about, okay, a group's praying about something in my life and then God shows up and something powerful happens. Somebody in that group is going to be the next one whose bottom is going to fall out in their world. And that group prayer gave them something that will help them when it's their turn, in their hour of need. So, I think that's another benefit.