

# Praying With Power

By Dr. Wilson Benton, Jr.  
Adjunct Professor of Practical Theology  
Pastor of Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Mo.

---

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." ROMANS 8:26-27*

A father passing by his little son's room noticed his boy down on his knees beside his bed. He paused to listen and heard the child saying over and over again, "Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo." The father's heart leaped for joy. Was it possible that God was calling his son into missionary service? When the little boy finished and stood up he said, "Son, I heard you praying. Do you think God wants you to be a missionary?" "Oh, no sir," he said, "I was just praying to God about the geography test we took today and asking Him to let Tokyo be the capital of France." Been there – done that, haven't you? We don't know what to pray for.

## The Problem of Prayer

### Inability

Our first problem in prayer is our inability, or to use Paul's own word "our weakness." Weakness itself is not necessarily a sin. Sin is a barrier to prayer, but that's not the problem that Paul has in mind in this text. The weakness he describes is the frailty that is ours just because we are fallible human beings. He's not concentrating on our iniquity but on our inability. Our inability to function as we want to function; our inability to perform as we want to perform; our inability to pray even as we want to pray.

### Ignorance

Prayer is also a problem because of our ignorance: "We don't know what we ought to pray for." We don't know whether to pray that suffering be removed from the life of a loved one, or whether to pray that the loved one will be strengthened in the midst of the suffering. Because we don't know what will be, we are not often in a position to make very specific requests of God, and when we do we often regret it.

### Indifference

Sometimes prayer is a problem because of our indifference. A fifth-grade teacher walked into her classroom and wrote on the board A-P-A-T-H-Y. A little boy in the back looked at it, turned to his buddy and said, "What does 'apathy' mean?" His friend shrugged his shoulders and said, "Who cares?" That's often our attitude about prayer, isn't it? It's really not going to change anything. It's not going to make any difference, is it?

Does prayer ever change God's mind? The answer is "No, of course not." In fact no reasonable person would want prayer to change God's mind. If God's will is perfect in the first place, and He changes His mind, then it becomes imperfect and the whole world will fall apart.

Does prayer change things? The answer is “Yes, of course it does.” God has ordained the means as well as the ends, and prayer is God’s ordained means to the accomplishment of certain ends. That is what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door of mercy will be opened unto you. For everyone who asks receives” – means to an end – “and everyone who seeks, finds” – means to an end – “and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” – means to an end.

## The Power of Prayer

Although Paul addresses these problems, he doesn’t linger on them. Rather, he moves to focus our attention on the wonderful power that is ours for prayer. That power takes many forms.

### Instruction

Power in prayer may take the form of the Spirit’s instruction. If one of our basic problems is ignorance, then one of our fundamental needs is instruction. We need to be taught, we need to be instructed, and we need to be led and directed by the Holy Spirit. He teaches us to pray with reverence. He reminds us of the fact that we are approaching the great and sovereign Lord of the universe and we dare not come into His presence flippantly, carelessly, thoughtlessly, insensitively or insincerely.

Dr. Wilbur Chapman, a great evangelist, was conducting a series of services in England when he was told that a man known simply as “Praying Hyde” was going to ask for God’s blessing on those services. Dr. Chapman recalls the power of prayer in the following episode:

The audience was exceedingly small, but almost immediately the tide began to turn, the hall became packed, and in my first invitation 50 men accepted Christ as their Savior. As we were leaving I said, “Mr. Hyde, I want you to pray for me.” He came to my room, turned the key in the door, dropped on his knees and waited five minutes without a single syllable coming from his lips. I could hear my own heart thumping and his beating; I felt hot tears running down my face. I knew I was with God. Then with upturned face, while the tears were streaming down, he said, “O God,” then for five minutes more, at least, he was still again. And then when he knew he was talking with God there came from the depths of this heart such petitions for me as I had never heard before. I rose from my knees to know what real prayer was.

The Holy Spirit instructs us to pray with reverence and with regularity. How often is our prayer a last resort, rather than a first response? What a disservice we do ourselves when we do not allow the regular blessings of God to flow into our lives through the regular spiritual exercise of prayer.

### Inspiration

Sometimes power in prayer takes the form of the Spirit’s inspiration. It’s one thing to be taught what to do and another thing actually to do it. The Holy Spirit not only instructs us in prayer, He inspires us to pray. He stimulates us; He motivates us; He actually involves us in that spiritual exercise. Rest assured that if you ever pray, and I mean really pray, then you pray only because of the inspiration of God’s Spirit graciously moving you to do so.

### Insight

Sometimes power in prayer takes the form of the Spirit’s insight. He makes us aware of all the resources that are ours for prayer. He teaches us how to pray according to God’s will. Where do we find God’s will? In God’s Word. He teaches us

how to pray according to the principles and promises that we find in the Word of God. Many times growing up I saw my father on his knees with his Bible open upon his bed so that he could pray the Word of God to God.

### Involvement

Sometimes power for prayer takes the form of the Spirit's involvement. Three times in this passage we are told of His involvement: "He helps us," "He intercedes for us," and "He intercedes for the saints" with groans that cannot be expressed in words. What is that groan? Our English translations are technically incorrect. The word doesn't mean that the groans can't be expressed in words. The word actually means they are "wordless." They are inarticulate for us human beings. Do you know what that means for you and me? It means that the greatest prayer you may ever pray is the groan you feel within your heart that you cannot express in words. It means that the greatest prayer you may ever offer before God will be the tears that course down your cheeks because your feelings simply cannot be articulated verbally.

Just because you cannot put your feelings, thoughts and groans into words doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit cannot articulate them. He can, and He does. He takes our moans and our groans and our tears and our sighs and He interprets them and turns them into prayers to God.

### Intercession

Paul saves the best for last. He says sometimes powerful prayer takes the form of the Spirit's own intercession. An intercessor is one who pleads the cause of another. Jesus, we are told, constantly makes intercession for us. We have a wonderful illustration of that in His relationship with Peter.

When Peter was bragging about what he was going to do and what he was not going to do, the Lord looked him squarely in the eye and said, "Satan desires to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith fail not." Peter wasn't praying for himself. He didn't feel he was going to fail the Lord Jesus. It never occurred to him that he needed prayer. How wonderful that the Lord was praying for Peter even when Peter wasn't praying for himself, because Peter didn't fail. Oh he fell, but he didn't fail because – and only because – the Lord Jesus prayed for him. You and I won't fail because – and only because – the Holy Spirit Himself is praying for us even when we don't have sense enough to pray for ourselves. Does this mean then that we have no part to play in prayer? Does it mean that we have no responsibility to pray? On the contrary.

### The Practice of Prayer

Having talked about the *problems of prayer* and the *power of prayer*, Paul finally turns our attention to the practice of prayer. The fact that we have a responsibility to pray is seen in the verb that Paul uses. It is the word "helps." The Spirit *helps* us pray. The Greek word is really a combination of three words which mean: "along with," "in the place of," and "to take hold of." The verb describes the person who comes alongside of another to help him bear his own load.

But if all that is a bit too obtuse to you, just remember that God commands us to pray whether we understand all that is involved or not. We may have problems when we pray. We may have questions about the effectiveness of prayer, but that doesn't change the fact that we are supposed to pray. God's Word says, "Pray without ceasing." God's command is always a form of blessing; and when we disobey the command, we deny ourselves the blessing. It's not easy. Nothing in the Christian life is easy, so why should prayer be easy? If you've tried you know it is not.

Our contemporary American culture has conditioned us to look for and expect the quick fix. We want instant results. We want immediate victories. God has called us to struggle in the spiritual exercise of prayer, and the very fact that we persevere is itself a victory. Even when you don't feel like it – pray. Even when you don't understand all that's involved – pray. Even when you don't see the consequences you expect – pray. It's God's command to pray.

The Spirit prays, and we learn to pray with Him until our prayers become a part of that great symphony of the prayers of all the saints according to God's will. So what does this passage tell us? If you know that God's Spirit is praying with you and for you, and if you are praying with Him for God's will in your life, then you can rest secure for time and eternity.

*This article originally appeared in Covenant magazine, the quarterly magazine of Covenant Theological Seminary. Reprint permission is available upon request by e-mailing [covenant@covenantseminary.edu](mailto:covenant@covenantseminary.edu). Begin a free subscription to Covenant magazine at [www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp](http://www.covenantseminary.edu/contactus/subscription.asp).*

© 2004 Covenant Theological Seminary.



*Rooted in Grace for a Lifetime of Ministry*

12330 Conway Road, St. Louis, Mo., 63141 314-434-4044 [www.covenantseminary.edu](http://www.covenantseminary.edu)

National Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America