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LIFE-CHANGING PRAYER Michael B. Beough  
Acts 16:25-34 June 15, 2008  
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Our third Bedrock Belief says, "God changes lives through prayer." We have agreed as a congregation that this is one of our unshakeable anchors that keep us steady in the storms of life. Here is what we mean. When we pray, things happen. Prayer changes us and our circumstances. Reality shifts.

### IS YOUR PRAYER WORKING?

According to a Gallup poll, 90% of Americans pray. Over 50% claim to pray daily. But here is what I wonder. Are our prayers working? Are we any different today than we were ten years ago or last month? Is the world any different, any better? Are churches growing? Are marriages thriving? Are more children growing up to be disciples of Jesus? Are wars ceasing? Are the hungry getting fed?

I'll never forget the Sunday School teacher who reported to his class his success in prayer. Seems he had a ranch with some cattle on it. He was stressing out because the price of cattle had dropped. Then he prayed. And guess what? He got a great price and made lots of money. It was my first time to visit in the class and waited for the rest of the story. I hoped he was going to go on and say that God blessed him so he could give more to the church or more to missions or help someone in need. Or that he had learned a great lesson about how God wanted him to make a bigger impact for Jesus. After all, the man was a medical doctor with a long-established practice. He really didn't need the money he made off the cattle. But that was all he said. If you pray, God will bless you. If you ask, God will give it to you, whatever it is.

I wanted to stand and shout, "Wrong! God is not a genie in the sky. If he is, he's not doing so great!" Actually, I didn't say anything because although I knew what prayer wasn't, I wasn't so sure what it was.

Today, after umpteen years of experience, **I know what prayer is for**. I know why God invites us to pray. *So God can change our hearts and in changing us, can change the world around us.* We get all hung up over why God doesn't answer our prayers. If nothing is changing, if we are not being changed by prayer, it doesn't make me wonder where God is. It makes me wonder what 90% of us are praying. To whom are we praying? God answers prayer by changing us into life-breathing agents of the Kingdom of God.

You know, there have been scientific studies to prove whether or not prayer works. If you pray, will you get well sooner? Will someone else get better? To tell you the truth, I believe prayer does make a difference in that

way, but I can't prove it. The only thing I can prove is that prayer changes people who pray Jesus-centered prayers.

## **JESUS-CENTERED PRAYER**

Here is how you can know if your prayers are Jesus-centered.

Jesus-centered prayer releases us from self-absorption. God stops the kind of self-indulgence and self-centeredness that plagues us.

Jesus-centered prayer heals us where we are broken. It takes us from self-pity to aggressive hopefulness. It cuts right through the closed arteries of our dying spirit to pump new life into our hearts.

Jesus-centered prayer opens our eyes by giving God a chance to speak and be heard. It opens a window through which the howling wind of God's Spirit blows in.

When you pray Jesus-centered prayers, it is best to wear a crash helmet, because God will take you on a ride you never anticipated or even particularly wanted. When God grabs hold of you and won't let go as he drags you into some mission endeavor or into some recovery program or into the streets to tell others about the love of Jesus Christ, that's when you know you are praying Jesus-centered prayers.

Look at Paul and Silas in Acts 16. They got a good beating and were thrown into prison because they cast a spirit of divination out of a little girl. (Spirit of divination means she was a fortune teller.) Until then, her owners had made a decent living parading her around from town to town. They didn't care if she got all spiritual about Jesus. That was okay. But when it came to messing with their livelihood, that was a different story.

So the boys end up in prison, beaten and bruised for doing a good deed, and it says that around midnight, they could be heard praying and singing hymns to God. They had every reason to be mad, but they were praying. They had every reason to feel sorry for themselves, but they were singing church songs. They had every reason to ask God why bad things happen to two such decent fellows. Instead they were praising God.

And "suddenly there was an earthquake." So violent that it shook the very foundations of reality. The chains fell from the hands and feet of every prisoner. The doors swung open. The jailer pulled his sword to kill himself because he assumed everyone would run for the hills and leave him with some explaining to do.

Didn't happen that way. People who pray Jesus-centered prayers don't run away from trouble. They embrace it. They look for opportunities. They look for the leading of God even if they are beaten down and bruised and in

prison. Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners just stand there. Doors wide open. Chains gone. They just stand there. Because at least for Paul and Silas, what has happened is not for them. It is for the jailer. God is answering their prayer. God is answering the jailer's prayer. They shout to stop him from harming himself. They assure him no one is going to run away. "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" he cries in desperation. And Paul and Silas give him a reason not to kill himself. It is the same reason we can give people to keep them from killing themselves. What reason do we have for not taking our own lives tonight? *"Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."* One minute Paul and Silas are chained up like animals because they helped a little girl. The next minute they are telling a jailer about how Jesus can save his life. The man washes their wounds. He believes, and he and all his family are baptized on the spot. They now belong to God, forever.

I used to try to tell God in my prayers what I wanted God to do. I had long lists of people to pray for. Thought God might need some help in that. It is okay to do that. God doesn't mind. It is just that God has so much more for us than we can ever imagine or think to ask for. *Prayer is more about surrender.* It is about listening for the heartbeat of God in every circumstance. It is about being in love with God. It is just saying, "Here I am Lord." I am hurting, or down, or disgusted, or bent, or broken, or angry, or confused, or doubtful, or lonely, or crazy – but here I am. I am yours.

If you ever get to praying like that, watch out! Put on a helmet. Get ready for the ride.

### **JESUS-CENTERED PRAYERS**

Some of the best Jesus-centered prayers I know are in songs.

*Change my heart, O God,  
Make it ever true.  
Change my heart, O God,  
May I be like you.*

If you get to praying that prayer, watch out!

*Open my eyes that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me.*

*Have thine own way, Lord,  
Have thine own way.*

We saw the power of Jesus-centered prayer recently in our church. Do you know why this congregation has committed over \$1.8 million dollars for a new building that is going to help us reach others with the Peace, Purpose, and Promise of Jesus Christ? I can tell you without a doubt it was because we

prayed. For four months, we prayed, "Lord, what do you want to do through me?" We had lots of prayer, and God heard our prayers and he answered. He changed our hearts, and we have made a huge commitment.

Now we have a group trying to discern God's signature ministry for our church. It will be a mission effort to reach people with the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, to introduce people to the source of our healing and joy in life. Guess what that group is doing? They are starting a prayer team to pray for them that they might hear God. Once you see what God can do through Jesus-centered prayer, you just don't want to stop.

One of my favorite new stories is about a church that Gay Reese calls Benton Street Christian Church. She writes about it in a book on evangelism called *Unbinding the Church*. Seems that the church's new Evangelism Committee invited Gay to come help them get started doing evangelism. (Evangelism means telling others about Jesus and inviting them to give their lives to him.) What the committee wanted to know was how to do evangelism.

The committee was eager to get started. They were on fire for Jesus. But Gay did not tell them what to do. After getting a pledge that they would trust whatever she suggested, she told them to do nothing for three months – except pray. Meet every week and pray. *"Pray that you'll be open. Pray for each other and what's going on in your lives. Pray that God will show you what you're to do and that God will nudge the right people to help you. But promise that you won't make any decisions or do any work."*

They reluctantly agreed. In what she calls Agony and Ecstasy, they prayed together weekly for three months. Every morning at 7:30 a.m., they prayed individually wherever they were. When the church board asked them what their committee was doing, for three months they kept saying, *"Oh, we are still praying. . . We are praying for you all and the church and for the new people."*

After four months, Gay received a report from the original four Evangelism Committee members. They now had 50 people in the church helping with evangelism. Then the group grew to 65. The number of visitors began to increase. The number of baptisms began increasing. A computer analyst began keeping records. They decided to reach out to an apartment complex across the street. By the end of the year, the church had baptized 16 infants, 15 of whom were from new member families. And the church had received 80 new members, Sunday after Sunday people saying to the congregation, "Yes, I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."

God changes lives through prayer – and churches and communities and the world. God can change your life today or tomorrow or next month, and God can change the lives of your friends and family, those you love, and

even those you don't love, if you can just pray – alone and with others –  
"Change my heart, O God, Make it ever true. May I be like you."