

How to Pray So As to Get What You Ask

R.A. Torrey:

“The church was earnestly praying to God for him.” Acts 12:5

Our Subject is, “How to Pray So As to Get What You Ask.” I can think of nothing more important that I could tell you. Suppose it had been announced that I was to tell the business men of this city how they could go to any bank here and get all the financial accommodation they desired any day in the year, and suppose, also, that I knew that secret and could really tell it, do you think that the business men of this city would consider the information important? It would be difficult to think of anything that they would consider more important. But praying is going to the bank, going to the bank that has the largest capital of any bank in the universe, the Bank of Heaven, a bank whose capital is absolutely unlimited. And if I can show you this morning how you can go to the Bank of Heaven any day in the year, and any hour of the day or night, and get from that bank all that you desire, that will certainly be of incalculable importance.

Now, the Bible tells us that very thing. It tells us how we can go to the Bank of Heaven, how we can go to God in prayer any day of the year and any hour of the day or night, and get from God the very things that we ask. What the Bible teaches along this line has been put to the test of practical experiment by tens of thousands of people, and has been found in their own experience to be absolutely true. And that is what we are to discover from a study of God’s own Word.

In the twelfth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles we have the record of a most remarkable prayer, remarkable because of what was asked for and remarkable because of the results of the asking. King Herod had killed James, the brother of John. This greatly “pleased the Jews,” so he proceeded further to arrest the leader of the whole apostolic company, the Apostle Peter, with the intention of killing him also. But the arrest was during Passover Week, the Holy Week of the Jews; and, while the Jews were perfectly willing to have Peter assassinated, eager to have him assassinated, they were not willing to have their Holy Week desecrated by his violent death. So Peter was cast into prison to be kept until the Passover week was over, and then to be executed. The Passover week was nearly over, it was the last night of the Passover week, and early the next morning Peter was to be taken out and beheaded.

There seemed to be little hope for Peter, indeed, no hope at all. He was in a secure dungeon, in an impregnable fortress, guarded by sixteen soldiers, and chained by each wrist to a soldier who slept on either side of him. There appeared to be no hope whatever for Peter. But the Christians in Jerusalem undertook to get Peter out of his perilous position, to completely deliver him. How did they go at it? Did they organize a mob and storm the castle? No, there was no hope whatever of success that way. The castle was impregnable against any mob, and, furthermore, it was garrisoned by trained Roman soldiers who would be more than a match for any mob. Did the Christians circulate a petition and get the names of the leading Christians in Jerusalem signed to it to present to Herod, asking that he would release Peter? No. That might have had weight, for the Christians in Jerusalem at that time were numbered by the thousands and among them were not a few influential persons, and a petition signed by so many people, and by some people of such weight, would have had influence with a wily politician such as Herod was. But the Christians did not attempt that method of deliverance. Did they take up a collection and gather a large amount of money from the believers in Jerusalem to bribe Herod to release Peter? Quite likely that might have proved successful, for Herod was open to that method of approachment. But they did not do that.

What did they do? They held a prayer meeting to pray Peter out of prison. Was anything apparently more futile and ridiculous ever undertaken by a company of fanatics? Praying a man so securely incarcerated, and so near his execution, out of prison? If the enemies of Peter and the church had known of that attempt they doubtless would have been greatly amused, and have laughed at the thought of these fanatical Christians praying Peter out of prison, and doubtless would have said to one another, “We’ll see what will become of the prayers of these fool Christians.”

But the attempt to pray Peter out of prison was entirely successful. Apparently Peter himself had no fears, but was calmly resting in God; for he was fast asleep on the very eve of his proposed execution. While Peter was sound asleep, guarded by the six teen soldiers, chained to a soldier sleeping on either side of him, suddenly there shone in the prison a light, a light from heaven; and “an angel of the Lord” could have been seen standing by Peter. The angel struck Peter on the side as he slept, and woke him, and said, “Quick, get up!” Instantly Peter’s chains fell from his hands and he arose to his feet. The angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and your sandals.” Peter did so, and then the angel said, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” Peter, dazed and wondering, thought he was dreaming; but he was wise enough to obey God even in his sleep and he went out and followed the angel, though he “thought he was seeing a vision.” The soldiers

were all asleep, and, unhindered, the angel and Peter passed the first guard and the second guard and came to the strong iron gate that led into the city. Moved by the finger of God, the gate "opened for them by itself." They went out and silently passed through one street.

Now Peter was safe, and the angel left him. Standing there in the cold night air, Peter came to himself, and realized that he was not dreaming, and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." Stopping a few moments to reflect, he may have said to himself, "There is a prayer meeting going on. It must be at Mark's mother's house; I will go there." And soon those who are praying are startled by a heavy pounding at the outside gate of Mark's mother's home. A little servant girl named Rhoda must have been kneeling among those praying. Instantly she sprang to her feet and rushed to the gate, "When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!'" "Oh, Rhoda, you are crazy," cried the unbelieving company. "No," Rhoda said, "I am not crazy. It is Peter. God has answered our prayers. I know his voice. I knew he would come and he is here." Then they all cried, "It is not Peter, it is his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and they opened the door, and there stood Peter, the living evidence that God has answered their prayer.

Now, if we can find out how these people prayed, then we shall know just how we, too, can pray so as to get what we ask. In the fifth verse we are told exactly how they prayed. Let me read it to you. "The church was earnestly praying to God for him." The whole secret of prevailing prayer, the prayer that gets what it asks, is found in four phrases in this brief description of their prayer. The first phrase is, "earnestly." The second, "the Church." The third, "to God." The fourth, "for him."

I. To God

Let us take up these four phrases and study them. We take up first the third phrase, for it is really the most important one, "to God." The prayer that gets what it asks is the prayer that is to God. But someone will say, "Is not all prayer to God?" No. Comparatively few of the prayers that go up from this earth today are really to God. I sometimes think that not one prayer in a hundred is really "to God." You ask, "What do you mean?" I mean exactly what I say, that not one prayer in a hundred is really to God. "Oh," you say, "I know what you mean. You are talking about the prayers of the heathen to their idols and their false gods." No, I mean the prayers of people who call themselves Christians. I do not think that one in a hundred of them is really unto God. "Oh," you say, "I know what you mean. You are talking of the prayers of the Roman Catholics to the Virgin Mary and to the saints." No, I mean the prayers of people who call themselves Protestants. I do not believe that one in a hundred of the prayers of Protestant believers is really to God. "What do you mean?" you ask. I mean exactly what I say.

Stop a moment and think. Is it not often the case, when men stand up to pray in public, or kneel down to pray in private, that they are thinking far more of what they are asking for than they are of the great God who made heaven and earth, and who has all power? Is it not often the case that in our prayers we are not thinking much of either what we are asking for or of Him from whom we are asking it, but, instead, our thoughts are wandering off everywhere? We take the name of God on our lips, but there is no real conscious approach to God in our hearts.

We are really taking the name of God in vain when we fancy we are praying to Him. If there is to be any power in our prayer, if our prayer is to get anything, the first thing to be sure of when we pray is that we really have come into the presence of God, and are really speaking to Him. We should never utter one syllable of prayer, either in public or in private, until we are definitely conscious that we have come into the presence of God and are actually praying to Him. Oh, let those two words, "to God," "to God," "to God," sink deep into your heart; and from this time on never pray, never utter one syllable of prayer, until you are sure that you have come into the presence of God and are really talking to Him.

Some years ago in our church in Chicago, before we began the great Saturday night prayer meetings to pray for a world-wide revival, a little group of us used to meet every Saturday night for prayer, to pray for God's blessing on tomorrow's work. Never more than a handful of people came, but we had wonderful times of blessing. One night, after we had gathered together, I rose to open the meeting and said to those gathered there, "Now we are going to kneel in prayer and every one of you feel at perfect liberty to ask for what God puts into your heart to ask for; but be sure that you do not utter a word of prayer until you have really come into the presence of God, and know that you are talking to Him." Then we knelt in prayer. A friend of mine, a business man, had come in just before I said that. One day the following week I met him and he said to me,

“Mr. Torrey, I ought to be ashamed to confess it, but do you know that that thought you threw out last Saturday night just before we knelt in prayer, that not one of us should utter a syllable of prayer until we had really come into the presence of God and knew that we were talking to Him, was an entirely new thought to me and it has transformed my prayer life?” I could easily understand that, for I can remember when that thought transformed my prayer life. I was brought up to pray. I was taught to pray so early in life that I have not the slightest recollection of who taught me to pray. I have no doubt it was my mother, but I have no recollection of it. In my earliest days the habit of prayer was so thoroughly ingrained into me that there has never been a single night of my life as far back as my memory goes, that I have not prayed; with the exception of one night when I was carried home unconscious and did not regain consciousness until the next morning.

Even when I had wandered far from God, and had definitely decided that I would not accept Jesus Christ, I still prayed every night. Even when I had come to a place where I doubted that the Bible was the Word of God, and that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and even doubted that there was a personal God, nevertheless, I prayed every night. I am glad that I was brought up that way, and that the habit of prayer was so instilled into me that it became permanent, for it was through that habit that I came back out of the darkness of agnosticism into the clear light of an intelligent faith in God and His Word. Nevertheless, prayer was largely a mere matter of form. There was little real thought of God, and no real approach to God. And even after I was converted, yes, even after I had entered the ministry, prayer was largely a matter of form. But the day came when I realized what real prayer meant, realized that prayer was having an audience with God, actually coming into the presence of God and asking and getting things from Him. And the realization of that fact transformed my prayer life. Before that, prayer had been a mere duty, and sometimes a very irksome duty, but from that time on prayer has been not merely a duty but a privilege, one of the most highly esteemed privileges of life. Before that, the thought I had was, “How much time must I spend in prayer?” The thought that now possesses me is, “How much time may I spend in prayer without neglecting the other privileges and duties of life?”

Suppose some Englishman were summoned to Buckingham Palace to meet King George. He answers the summons and is waiting in the outer room to be ushered into the presence of the King. What do you think that man would say to himself while he waited to be brought into the presence of the King? Do you think he would say, “I wonder how much time I have to spend with the King?” No, indeed; he would think, “I wonder how much time the King will give me.” But prayer is having an audience with the King of kings, that eternal, omnipotent King, in comparison with, all earthly kings are as nothing; and would any intelligent person who realizes that fact ever ask himself, “How much time must I spend in prayer?” No, our thought will be, “How much time may I spend in prayer, how much time will the King give me?” So let these two words, “to God,” sink deep into your heart and govern your prayer life from this day on. Whenever you kneel in prayer, or stand in prayer, whether it be in public or in private, be absolutely sure before you utter a syllable of prayer that you have actually come into the presence of God and are really speaking to Him. Oh, it is a wondrous secret.

But at this point a question arises. How can we come into the presence of God, and how can we be sure that we have come into the presence of God, and that we are really talking to Him? Some years ago I was speaking on this verse of Scripture in Chicago, and at the close of the address a very intelligent Christian woman, one of the most intelligent and deeply spiritual women I ever knew, came to me and said, “Mr. Torrey, I like that thought of ‘to God,’ but how can we come into the presence of God and how can we be absolutely sure that we have come into the presence of God, and that we are really talking to Him?” It was a wise question and a question of great importance; and it is clearly answered in the Word of God. There are two parts to the answer.

1. You will find the first part of the answer in the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter ten, verse nineteen, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.” That is the first part of the answer. We come into the presence of God “by the blood of Jesus”; and we can come into the presence of God in no other way. Just what does that mean? It means this: You and I are sinners, the best of us are great sinners, and God is infinitely holy, so holy that even the seraphim, those wonderful “burning ones” (for that is what seraphim means, burning ones), burning in their own intense holiness, must veil their faces and their feet in His presence (Isaiah 6:2). But our sins have been laid on another; they were laid on the Lord Jesus when He died on the cross of Calvary and made a perfect atonement for our sins. When He died there He took our place, the place of rejection by God, the place of the “curse,” and the moment we accept Him and believe God’s testimony concerning His blood, that by His shed blood He made perfect atonement for our sin, and trust God to forgive and justify us because the Lord Jesus died in our place, that moment our sins are forgiven and we are reckoned righteous and enter into a place above the seraphim, the place of God’s only and perfect Son, Jesus Christ. And we do not need to veil our faces or our feet when we come into His presence, for we are made perfectly “in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:6).

To “enter into the holiest,” then, to come into the very presence of God, “by the blood of Jesus,” means

that when we draw near to God we should give up any and every thought that we have any acceptability before God in ourselves, realize that we are miserable sinners, and also believe that every sin of ours has been atoned for by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and therefore come "with boldness" into the very presence of God, "into the holiest, by the blood of Jesus." The best man or woman on earth cannot come into the presence of God on the ground of any merit of his own, not for one moment; nor get anything from God on the ground of his own goodness, not even the smallest blessing. But on the ground of the shed blood of Jesus Christ the vilest sinner who ever walked this earth, who has turned from his sin and accepted Jesus Christ and trusts in the shed blood as the ground of his acceptance before God, can come into the presence of God any day of the year, and any hour of the day or night, and with perfect boldness speak out every longing of his heart and get what he asks from God. Isn't that wonderful? Yes, and, thank God, it is true.

Christian Scientists cannot really pray. What they call prayer is simply meditation or concentration of thought. It is not asking a personal God for a definite blessing; indeed, Mrs. Eddy denies the existence of a personal God, and she denies the atoning efficacy of the blood. She said that when the blood of Jesus Christ was shed on the cross of Calvary it did no more good than when it was running in His veins. So a Christian Scientist cannot really pray; he is not on praying ground.

Neither can a Unitarian really pray. Oh, he can take the name of God on his lips and call Him Father, and say beautiful words, but there is no real approach to God. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Some years ago in Chicago I was on a committee of three persons, one of whom was one of the leading Unitarian ministers of the city. He was a charming man in many ways. One day, at the close of our committee meeting, this Unitarian minister turned to me and said, "Brother Torrey, I often come over to your church to hear you." I replied, "I am very glad to hear it." Then he continued, "I especially love to go to your prayer meetings. Often on Friday nights I drop into your prayer meeting and sit down by the door, and I greatly enjoy it." I replied, "I am glad that you do. But tell me something. Why don't you have a prayer meeting in your own church?" "Well," he said, "you have asked me an honest question and I will give you an honest answer. Because I can't. I have tried it and it has failed every time." Of course it failed, they had no ground of approach to God--they denied the atoning blood.

But there is many a supposedly orthodox Christian, and often in these days even supposedly orthodox ministers, who deny the atoning blood. They do not believe that the forgiveness of our sins is solely and entirely on the ground of the shedding of Jesus' blood as an atonement for sin on our behalf on the cross of Calvary, and, therefore, they cannot really pray. There are not a few who call the theology that insists on the truth so very clearly taught in the Word of God, the doctrine of the substitutionary character of Christ's death and that we are saved by the shedding of His blood, a "theology of the shambles" (that is, of the butcher shop).

Mr. Alexander and I were holding meetings in the Royal Albert Hall in London. I received through the mail one day one of our hymnbooks that some man had taken from the meeting. He had gone through it and cut out every reference to the blood of Christ. With the hymnbook was an accompanying letter, in which the man said, "I have gone through your hymnbook and cut out every reference to the blood in every place where it is found, and I am sending this hymnbook back to you. Now sing your hymns this way, with the blood left out, and there will be some sense in them." I took the hymnbook to the meeting with me that afternoon and displayed it; it was a sadly mutilated book. I read the man's letter, and then I said, "No, I will not cut the blood out of my hymnology, and I will not cut the blood out of my theology, for when I cut the blood out of my hymnology and my theology I will have to cut all access to God out of my experience." No, men and women, you cannot approach God on any other ground than the shed blood, and until you believe in the blood of Jesus Christ as a perfect atonement for your sins, and as the only ground on which you can find forgiveness and Justification, real prayer is an impossibility.

2. You will find the second part of the answer to the question, How can we come into the presence of God and how can we be sure that we have come into His presence? In Ephesians 2:18, "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." Here we have the same thought that we have already had, that we have just been presenting, that it is "through him," that is, through Jesus Christ, that we have our access to the Father. But we have an additional thought, the thought that when we come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ, we come "in" the One Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit. Just what does that mean? It means this: It is the work of the Holy Spirit, when you and I pray, to take us by the hand as it were and lead us into the very presence of God and introduce us to Him, and to make God real to us as we pray. The Greek word translated "access" is the exact equivalent in its etymology of the word "introduction," which is really a Latin word transliterated into English. As I say, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to introduce us to God, that is, to lead us

into God's presence, and to make God real to us as we pray (or return thanks, or worship). And in order that we may really come into the presence of God and be sure that we have come into His presence when we pray, we must look to the Holy Spirit to make God real to us while we are praying.

Have you ever had this experience, that when you knelt to pray it seemed as if there were no one there, as if you were just talking into the air, or into empty space? What shall we do at such a time as that? Shall we stop praying and wait until some time when we feel like praying? No, when we least feel like praying, and when God is least real to us, that is the time we most need to pray. What shall we do, then? Simply be quiet and look up to God and ask Him to fulfill His promise and send His Holy Spirit to lead us into His presence and to make Him real to us, and then wait and expect. And the Holy Spirit will come, and He will take us into God's presence, and He will make God real to us. I can testify today that some of the most wonderful seasons of prayer I have ever had, have been times when as I first knelt to pray I had no real sense of God. It seemed that no one was there, it seemed as if I were talking into empty space; and then I have just looked up to God and asked Him and trusted Him to send His Holy Spirit to teach me to pray, to lead me into His presence, and to make Him real to me, and the Spirit has come, and He has made God so real to me that it almost seemed that if I opened my eyes I could see Him; in fact, I did see Him with the eyes of my soul.

One night at the close of a sermon in one of the churches on the South Side in Chicago, I went down the aisle to speak to some of the people. I stepped up to a middle-aged man and said to him, "Are you a Christian?" "No," he replied, "I am an infidel. Did you ever see God?" I quickly replied, "Yes, I have seen God." The man was startled and silenced. Did I mean that I had seen God with these eyes of my body? No. But, thank God, I have two pair of eyes; not only does my body have eyes, but my soul also has eyes. I pity the person who has only one pair of eyes, no matter how good those eyes are. I thank God I have two pairs of eyes, these bodily eyes with which I see you, and the eyes of my soul, with which I see God. God has given me wonderful eyes for my body, that at sixty-seven years of age I have never had to wear glasses and do not know what it means to have my eyes weary or painful under any circumstances. But I will gladly give up these eyes rather than those other eyes that God has given me, the eyes with which I see God.

This, then, is the way to come into the presence of God and to be sure that we have come into His presence: first, to come by the blood; second, to come in the Holy Spirit, looking to the Holy Spirit to lead us into the presence of God, and to make God real to us.

In passing, let me call your attention to the great practical importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Many think that the doctrine of the Trinity is a purely abstract, metaphysical, and utterly impractical doctrine. Not at all. It involves our whole spiritual life, and it is of the highest importance in the very practical matter of praying. We need God the Father to pray to; we need Jesus Christ the Son to pray through; and we need the Holy Spirit to pray in. It is the prayer that is to God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son, under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that God the Father answers.

II. With Intense Earnestness

Now let us consider another of the four words/phrases used in Acts 12:5 that contain the whole secret of prevailing prayer, the word "earnestly"--"The church was earnestly praying to God for him." The word "earnestly" comes far nearer giving the force of the original language but even "earnestly" does not give the full force of the Greek word used. The Greek word is "ektenos," which means, literally, "stretched-out-edly." The King James translators came to translate it "without ceasing": they thought of the prayer as stretched out a long time--unceasing prayer. But that is not the thought at all. The Greek word is never used in that sense anywhere in the New Testament, and I do not know of a place in Greek literature outside of the Bible where it is so used. The word is a pictorial word, as so many words are. It represents the soul stretched out in the intensity of its earnestness toward God.

Did you ever see a foot race? The racers are all toeing the mark waiting for the starter to say "Go," or to fire the revolver as a signal to start. As the critical moment approaches, the runners become more and more tense, until when the word "Go" comes, or the revolver cracks, they go racing down the track with every nerve and muscle stretched toward their goal, and sometimes the veins stand out on the forehead like whipcords--every runner would be the winner! That is the picture, the soul stretched out in intense earnestness toward God in intense earnestness of desire.

It is the same word that is used in the comparative mood in Luke 22:44, which reads, "Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." The thought is, as I have

said, of the soul being stretched out toward God in intense earnestness of desire. Probably the most accurate translation that could be given in a single word would be "intensely": "The church was intensely praying to God for him." In fact, the word "intensely" is from the same root, but has a different prefix. In the 1911 Bible the passage is translated, "Instant and earnest prayer was made of the church unto God for him," which is not a bad paraphrase, though it is not a translation. And "Intensely earnest prayer was made of the church unto God for him" would be an even better rendering.

It is the intensely earnest prayer to which God pays attention, and which He answers. This thought comes out again and again in the Bible. We find it even in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." We here discover the reason why so many of our prayers are unheard of God. There is so little heart in them, so little intensity of desire for the thing asked, that there is no reason why God should pay any attention to them. Suppose I should ask all of you if you prayed this morning. Doubtless almost every one of you would reply, "Yes, I did." Then suppose I should ask you again, "For what did you pray this morning?" I fear that some of you would hesitate and ponder and then have to say, "Really, I forget for what I did pray this morning." Well, then, God will forget to answer. But if I should ask some of you if you prayed this morning you would say, "Yes." Then if I asked you for what you prayed you could tell me at once, for you always pray for the same thing. You have just a little rote of prayer that you go through each morning or each night. You fall on your knees, go through your little prayer automatically, scarcely thinking of what you are saying, in fact, oftentimes you do not think of what you are saying but think of a dozen other things while you are repeating your prayer. Such prayer is profanity, taking the name of God in vain.

When Mrs. Torrey and I were in India, she went up to Darjeeling, in the Himalayas, on the borders of Tibet. I was unable to go because of being so busy with meetings in Calcutta. When she came back she brought with her a Tibetan praying wheel. Did you ever see one? A little round brass cup on the top of a stick; the cup revolves when the stick is whirled. The Tibetan writes out his prayers, drops them into the cup, and then whirls the stick and the wheel goes round and the prayers are said. That is just the way a great many Americans pray, except that the wheel is in their head instead of being on the top of a stick. They kneel down and rattle through a rote of prayer, day after day the same thing, with scarcely any thought of what they are praying for. That kind of prayer is profanity, "taking the name of God in vain," and it has no power whatever with God. It is a pure waste of time, or worse than a waste of time.

But if I should ask some of you what you prayed for this morning you could tell me, for as you were in prayer the Spirit of God came on you, and with a great heartache of intensity of desire you cried to God for that thing you must have. Well, God will hear your prayer and give you what you asked. If we are to pray with power we must pray with intense earnestness, throw our whole soul into the prayer. This thought comes out again and again in the Bible. For example, we find it in Romans 15:30, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me." The word translated "struggle" in this verse is "sunagonizo" (Greek). "Agonizo" (Greek) means to "contend" or "strive" or "wrestle" or "fight."

We hear a great deal these days about "the rest of faith," by which men usually mean that we should take things very calmly in our Christian life, and when we pray we simply come into God's presence like a little child and quietly and trustfully ask Him for the thing desired and count it ours, and go away very calmly, and consider the thing ours. Now, there is a truth in that, a great truth; but it is only one side of the truth, and a truth usually has two sides. And the other side of the truth is this, that there is not only the "rest of faith" but there is also the "fight of faith," and my Bible has more to say about "the fight of faith" than it has about "the rest of faith." The thought of wrestling or fighting in prayer is not the thought that we have to wrestle with God to make God willing to grant our prayers. No, "our wrestling is . . . against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12), against the devil and all his mighty forces, and there is no place where the devil so resists us as when we pray. Sometimes when we pray it seems as if all the forces of hell sweep in between us and God. What shall we do? Give up? No! A thousand times, no! Fight the thing through on your knees, wrestle in your prayer to God, and win.

Some years ago I was attending a Bible conference in Dr. James H. Brooks' old church in St. Louis. On the program was one of the most distinguished and most gifted Bible teachers that America ever produced, and he was speaking this day on "The Rest of Faith." He said, "I challenge anybody to show me a single passage in the Bible where we are told to wrestle in prayer." Now one speaker does not like to contradict another, but here was a challenge, and I was sitting on the platform, and I was obliged to take it up. So I said in a low tone of voice, "Romans 15:30, brother." He was a good enough Greek scholar to know that I had him, and what is

more rare, he was honest enough to own it up on the spot. Yes, the Bible bids us “wrestle in prayer,” and it is the prayer in which we actually wrestle in the power of the Holy Spirit that wins with God. The root of the word translated “struggle” is “agone” (Greek), from which our word “agony” comes. Oh that we might have more agonizing prayer.

Turn now to Colossians 4:12, 13, and you will find the same thought again, put in other words, “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you.” The words translated “working hard” is a very strong word; it means intense toil, or, painful labor. Do you know what it means to toil in prayer, to labor with painful toil in prayer? Oh, how easily most of us take our praying, how little heart we put into it, and how little it takes out of us, and how little it counts with God.

The mighty men of God who throughout the centuries have wrought great things by prayer are the men who have had much painful toil in prayer. Take, for example, David Brainerd, that physically feeble but spiritual mighty man of God. Trembling for years on the verge of consumption (TB), from which he ultimately died at an early age, David Brainerd felt led of God to labor among the North American Indians in the early days, in the primeval forests of northern Pennsylvania, and sometimes on a winter night he would go out into the forest and kneel in the cold snow when it was a foot deep and so labor with God in prayer that he would be wringing wet with perspiration even out in the cold winter-night hours. And God heard David Brainerd and sent such a mighty revival among the North American Indians as had never been heard of before, as, indeed, had never been dreamed of.

And not only did God send an answer to David Brainerd’s prayers this mighty revival among the North American Indians, but also in answer to David Brainerd’s prayers he transformed David Brainerd’s father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards, that mighty prince of metaphysicians, probably the mightiest thinker that America has ever produced (the only American metaphysician whose name is in the American Hall of Fame), into Jonathan Edwards the flaming evangelist, who so preached on the subject of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in the church at Enfield, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that the strong men in the audience felt as if the very floor of the church were falling out and they were sinking into hell, and they sprang to their feet and threw their arms around the pillars of the church and cried to God for mercy. Oh that we had more men who could pray like David Brainerd, then we would have more men that could preach like Jonathan Edwards.

I once used this illustration of David Brainerd at a conference in New York State. Dr. Park, the grandson and biographer of Jonathan Edwards, who was in my audience, came to me at the close and said, “I have always felt that there was something abnormal about David Brainerd.” I replied, “Doctor Park, it would be a good thing for you and a good thing for me if we had a little more of that kind of abnormality.” Indeed it would, and it would be a good thing if many of us who are here this morning had that kind of so-called “abnormality” that bows a man down with intensity of longing for the power of God, that would make us pray in the way that David Brainerd prayed.

But a very practical question arises at this point. How can we get this intense earnestness in prayer? The Bible answers the question very plainly and simply. There are two ways of having earnestness in prayer, a right way and a wrong way. The wrong way is to work it up in the energy of the flesh. Have you never seen it done? A man kneels down by a chair to pray; he begins very calmly and then he begins to work himself up and begins to shout and scream and pound the chair, and sometimes he spits foam, and he screams until your head is almost splitting with the loud uproar. That is the wrong way, that is false fire; that is the energy of the flesh, which is an abomination to God. If possible, that is even worse than the careless, thoughtless prayers of which I have spoken.

But there is a right way to obtain real, heart-stirring, heart-wringing, and God-moving earnestness in prayer. What the right way is the Bible tells us. It tells us in Romans 8:26-27, “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.” That is the right way—look to the Spirit to create the earnestness. The earnestness that counts with God is not the earnestness that you or I work up; it is the earnestness that the Holy Spirit creates in our hearts. Have you never gone to God in prayer and there was no earnestness in your prayer at all, it was just words, words, words, a mere matter of form, when it seemed there was no real prayer in your heart? What shall we do at such a time as that? Stop praying and wait until we feel more like praying? No. If there is ever a time when one needs to pray it is when he does not feel like praying. What shall we do? Be silent and look up to God to send His Holy Spirit, according to His promise, to move your heart to prayer and to awaken and create real earnestness in your heart in prayer: and God will send Him and you will pray with

intense earnestness, very likely “with groanings which cannot be uttered.”

I wish to testify right here that some of the times of deepest earnestness that I have ever known in prayer came when at the outset I seemed to have no prayer in my heart at all, and all attempt to pray was mere words, words, empty form. And then I looked up to God to send His Spirit according to His promise to teach me to pray, and I waited and the Spirit of God came on me in mighty power and I cried to God, sometimes with groanings which could not be uttered.

I shall never forget a night in Chicago. After the general prayer meetings for a world-wide revival had been going on for some time, the man who was most closely associated with me in the conduct of the meetings came over to my house one night after the meeting was over and said, “Brother Torrey, what do you say to our having a time alone with God every Saturday night after the other meetings are over? I do not mean,” he continued, “that we will actually promise to come together every Saturday night; but let us have it tonight, anyway.” Oh, such a night of prayer as we had that night. I shall never forget that, but it was not that night that I am especially thinking of now. After we had been meeting some weeks, he suggested that we invite in a few others, which we did; and every Saturday night after the general prayer meeting was closed at ten o’clock we few would gather in some secluded place where we would not disturb others to pray together. There were never more than a dozen persons present; usually there were six or seven. One night, before kneeling in prayer, we told one another the things we desired especially to ask of God that night, and then we knelt to pray and a long silence followed. No one prayed. And one of the little company looked up and said, “I cannot pray, there seems to be something resisting me.” Then another raised his head and said, “Neither can I pray, something seems to be resisting me.” We went around the whole circle, and each one had the same story.

What did we do? Break up the prayer meeting? No. If ever we felt the need of prayer it was then, and quietly we all bowed before God and looked to Him to send His Holy Spirit to enable us to pray to victory. And soon the Spirit of God came on one and another, and I have seldom heard such praying as I heard that night. And then the Spirit of God came on me and led me out in such a prayer as I had never dreamed of praying. I was led to ask God that He would send me around the world preaching the Gospel, and give me to see thousands saved in China, in Japan, in Australia, in New Zealand, in Tasmania, in India, in England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France, and Switzerland; and when I finished praying that night I knew I was going, and I knew what I would see as well as I knew afterward when the actual report came of the mighty things that God had wrought. That prayer meeting sent me around the world preaching the Gospel. Oh, that is how we must pray if we would get what we ask in prayer--pray with the intense earnestness that the Holy Spirit alone can inspire.

III. The Church

Now let us look briefly at another one of the four phrases, the phrase “the church.” The prayer that God particularly delights to answer is united prayer. There is power in the prayer of a single individual, and the prayer of individuals has wrought great things, but there is far greater power in united prayer. Our Lord Jesus taught this same great truth in Matthew 18:19, 20, “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” God delights in the unity of His people, and He does everything in His power to promote that unity, and so He especially honors unity in prayer. There is power in the prayer of one true believer: there is far more power in the united prayer of two, and greater power in the united prayer of still more.

But it must be real unity. This comes out in the exact words our Lord uses. He says, “If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” It is one of the most frequently misquoted and most constantly abused promises in the whole Bible. It is often quoted as if it read this way, “If two of you on earth agree to ask anything, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” But it actually reads, “If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” Someone may say, “I do not see any essential difference.” Let me explain it to you. Someone else has a burden on his heart, he comes to you and asks you to unite with him in praying for deliverance and you consent, and you both pray for it. Now you are “agreed” in praying, but you are not agreed at all “about anything” you ask. He asks for it because he intensely desires it; you ask for it simply because he asks you to ask for it. You are not at all agreed “about anything” you ask. But when God, by His Holy Spirit, puts the same burden on two hearts, and they thus in the unity of the Spirit pray for the same thing, there is not power enough on earth or in hell to keep them from getting it. Our Heavenly Father will do for them the thing that they ask.

IV. For Him

How to Pray So As to Get What You Ask

Now let us look at the fourth phrase, “for him.” The prayer was definite prayer for a definite person; and that is the kind of prayer God answers, definite prayer. Oh how general and vague many of our prayers are. They are very pretty, they sound nice, they are charmingly phrased, but they ask no definite, specific thing, and they get no definite, specific answer. When you pray to God, have a very definite, clear-cut idea of just exactly what it is you want of God, and ask Him for that definite and specific thing; and, if you meet the other conditions of prevailing prayer, you will get that definite, specific thing which you asked. God’s answer will be just as definite as your prayer.

In closing, let me call your attention to our dependence on the Holy Spirit in all our praying if we are to accomplish anything by our prayers. It is the Holy Spirit, as we saw in our study of the first phrase, who enables us really to pray “to God,” who leads us into the presence of God and makes God real to us. It is the Holy Spirit, again, who gives us the intense earnestness in prayer that prevails with God. Still again, it is the Holy Spirit who brings us into unity so that we know the power of really united prayer. And it is the Holy Spirit who shows us the definite things for which we should definitely pray.

To sum it all up, the prayer that God answers is the prayer that is to God the Father, that is on the ground of the atoning blood of God the Son, and that is under the direction and in the power of God the Holy Spirit.