

Classic Christian Writings:

Prayer is not limited to the humanly possible. Prayer is a work of faith. The purpose of prevailing prayer is to bring to pass things that are divinely possible and that are in God's will. Our prayer is an essential condition to most of God's sovereign workings in redemption. Conditioning His works of power upon our prevailing in prayer does not limit God's sovereignty. He has chosen to make us His co-laborers through our prayer and obedience.

In prevailing prayer you are asking God to do things you can accomplish in no other way. To prevail you need to desire and hunger deeply, to pray with fervor and passion. In addition, however, you need the dynamic of faith. "This is the victory," John assures us, to overcome the world—our faith (1 John 5:4). And equally, this is the victory in prevailing prayer—our triumphant faith.

Millions of prayers are prayed with almost no faith. James tells us that God is a generous giver, but we "must believe and not doubt" when we pray (James 1:6). He calls the doubter a double-minded person and states emphatically, "That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord" (v. 7).

Henry Martyn was a great missionary of the cross and poured out his life in devotion to God. He lived sacrificially and died an early death because of his tremendous commitment, whatever the cost. He was a man of prayer but perhaps not a man of faith. He said he "would as soon expect to see a man rise from the dead as to see a Brahmin converted to Christ."¹ He translated the New Testament into Hindustani, Arabic, and Persian, and his journals are classics in devotional literature, but he did not see one Brahmin converted. Lack of a dynamic faith limits what God can do through us.

Lack Of Faith Grieves God

How often we are double-minded in our praying. We believe that God can answer our prayer. Obviously, we have some hope that He will answer it, or we would not pray. But oh, how often we do not really expect God to answer. If Jesus asked us, as He did the two blind men who came to Him for healing, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matt. 9:28), we would instantly reply, "Yes, Lord." We know He is able to do all things. If we are totally honest, however, we would admit we do not feel sure that God will answer the need for which we pray.

Perhaps there is no thing about which Jesus expressed so frequent disappointment as the lack of faith in His disciples. Five times He exclaimed, "O you of little faith." In three places we read the words, "unbelieving generation." Three times Jesus conditions the mighty work God will do by saying, "If you have faith."

Hear His words: "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25); "Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40); "Because you have so little faith" (Matt. 17:20); "Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27); "He was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mark 6:6); "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matt. 13:58); "He rebuked them for their lack of faith" (Mark 16:14).

It is absolutely clear that our lack of faith limits God's freedom of working mightily. It stopped Jesus from using His miracle-working power (Mark 6:5). From the standpoint of omnipotence, God is almighty—His power is utterly unlimited. From the standpoint of His sovereignty, God can do what He will. But from the standpoint of His grace, He has chosen normally to limit His miracle answers to our believing. "According to your faith" (Matt. 9:29), said Jesus.

This limitation is just one of the many mysteries of God's will and grace. God desires to do many things for us, but His word is, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Revival seems to come only when someone has prepared the way in prayer. God is pleased to work through His children. Again and again He premises much of His divine working in salvation and in kingdom advance on our obedience, faith, and prayer. What an awesome responsibility this places upon us!

It is amazing that Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19); "your faith has saved you" (7:50); "your faith has healed you" (Mark 5:34; 10:52). Was it not Jesus' power? Jesus' act? Yes, but it would have been incomplete without their faith. The situation today is just the same: there is no substitute for faith. Hours and hours of praying do not eliminate the need for faith. They may help you to arrive at the position of faith, but without the dynamic of faith, prayer does not prevail.

Your need appeals to God's heart of love: Your prayer moves Him deeply. But without faith your prayer is incomplete. Talking to God without faith is not true intercession. Faith submits your need to the will of God and lays hold of the power of God. Faith honors God, and God delights to respond to faith.

Steps Of Faith

In the process of prevailing intercession, faith proceeds step by step:

1. Faith accepts God's revelation that you are created in the image of God, created to represent Him on earth and to rule on His behalf (Gen. 1:26-28).
2. Faith accepts Christ's redemption, making you a child of God with the spiritual right of access to God at any time for any need (Eph. 2:18).
3. Faith accepts your identity with Jesus, not only in His death, but also in His resurrection and exaltation, so that you now sit in the heavenlies with Christ at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 2:6). Faith accepts your role as a king and priest to God (Rev. 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5,9; Exod. 19:6; Isa. 61:6; Rev. 5:10; 20:6).
4. Faith recognizes the Spirit's aid as He indwells you and deepens your desires and guides your intercession (Rom. 8:26,27). In the words of Andrew Murray, "Faith sees the intercession of the saints to be part of the life of the Holy Trinity—the believer as God's child asking of the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit."2
5. Faith is overwhelmed by the amazing love of God to provide such a kingdom plan of your sharing in Christ's present rule through prayer. You bow in humble submission to the will of God, boldly daring to exercise the role to which God has called and exalted you. Faith gives determination to be all that God wants you to be through Christ.

Faith Conquers Doubt

Doubt blinds your soul to the role and power of prayer, making you forget God's redemptive purpose and His good will. Doubt weakens your soul's confidence in God's availability, faithfulness, and active role in your life. It darkens your horizon, distorts your spiritual vision, and numbs your spiritual vitality. It robs your prayer of its power and effectiveness. In short, it dishonors God.

Faith focuses your eyes on God and His promises, faithfulness, and availability. Faith sees God present, deeply concerned, and active. Faith looks at the problems and needs from God's perspective.

Doubt, anxiety, fear, and worry focus primarily on circumstances, but faith focuses primarily on God. Anxiety looks at things and makes you concerned about, even obsessed, with things that seem impossible. It tries to get you to worry, to brood about your problems and needs. It gets your eyes off God. Murray says, "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith."3

Faith is not blind to the needs. Faith faces reality but sees reality as measured by God, not as measured by man. Abraham exemplifies this God-focused faith. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed. . . . Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised" (Rom. 4:18-21).

Faith sees your empty hands but sees also the greater reality of the promise of God. On the basis of God's love and mercy, faith claims the promise of God. Faith is God-conscious, God-focused, and God-believing. Your love, prayer and faith must always have an object. You do not have faith in faith; you say with Paul, "I have faith in God" (Acts 27:25).

Faith is a triumphing and prevailing grace. It overcomes the world and whatever opposes you, for it focuses your spiritual eyes on greater things than the world. Faith is highly specific. It claims definite answers from God. Prevailing faith does not just believe in God. It believes for God's answer for the need before you. God's answer will be as specific as your faith. Prevailing faith is as specific as prevailing prayer.

Faith And Signs

The purest, most simple faith does not demand signs. Abraham came to the place of faith where he believed God for a son, without demanding a sign. His faith was perfected to the point where he believed God would raise Isaac from the dead, even though no one had ever been raised from the dead up to that time (Heb. 11:19).

Yet God often stoops to our humanness and gives us a sign to strengthen our faith. God did not reprove Gideon but repeatedly granted him a sign (Judges 6:16-23, 36-40). David prayed for a sign (Ps. 86:17). God told Ahaz to ask for a sign (Isa. 7:10-14). He gave Hezekiah a sign that he would be healed (38:7,8).

Be open to God's confirming your prayer or obedience by signs if He so chooses. In a way, every miracle is a sign proclaiming God's presence, goodness and power. A trembling faith can ask for a sign. Willful disdain and unbelief have no right to ask for a sign (Matt. 12:39; 16:4).

Our normal walk with God is to be a life of faith, not sight (2 Cor. 5:7). We fix our spiritual eyes on the unseen reality of God rather than on our visible surroundings (2 Cor. 4:18). We do not dictate to God or manipulate Him. Never demand signs from God, but welcome all He gives to strengthen your faith.

Faith And Assurance

God does not despise your humanness. When you need some visible strengthening to assist your faith, God is often willing to help in this way. The witness of the Spirit to your new birth is an unseen but deep assurance that God grants to you (Rom. 8:16). Perhaps you can think of it as an assuring sign.

How To Know God Hears Your Prayer

According to 1 John 5:15, "If we know that he hears us," then we have the confidence that "we have what we asked of him." But how can you have this knowledge, which is such a key condition of seeing prayer answered?

1. You have the assurance that God is a prayer-hearing God. David prayed with the assurance, "The Lord will hear when I call to him" (Ps. 4:3). Micah testified, "As for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (Mic. 7:7). This assurance upheld Moses, the prophets, and the heroes of faith of all ages. God always hears us! Such faith anchors your soul, fires prayer passion, and puts unwavering determination into your will.

2. You may know that you are asking in accord with God's will. Some prayers are always according to His will—the salvation of the sinner (2 Peter 3:9), the blessing and revival of the church, the glorifying of God's name. I call these "always prayers." But there are some prayers we are not sure of—the healing of a particular sick person at a particular time, God's prospering a particular activity at a particular time (James 4:15).

3. At times you know because of an inner assurance. This sense is based upon God's clear guidance, answered prayer providence in a related aspect of the situation, or a deep inner peace in regard to that for which you pray.

God grants a special inner assurance in your heart when you have been prevailing in prayer. Some people call this experience "praying through." Sometimes this assurance comes after long prayer or united prayer by several of God's children. Perhaps after hours or days of prayer, the Holy Spirit suddenly reveals that God has granted the request. It is as if God said in clear tones, "Your prayer is heard, and your request is granted." Such assurance is the experience of "most men to whom prayer is the basis of their life. . . . It occurs again and again." Goforth of China testified to the same clear assurances.⁴

Luther said of this assurance that though he did not understand it, "Sounding from above and ringing in my ears I hear what is beyond the thought of man."⁵

1 "An Unknown Christian, The Kneeling Christian (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, n.d.) 132.

2 Andrew Murray, Ministry of Intercession (New York; Raven, 1898), 166.

3 James H. McConkey. Prayer (Pittsburgh: Silver Publishing Society, 1939) 43.

4 Unknown Christian, Kneeling Christian, 43.

5 Donald G. Bloesch, The Struggle of Prayer (San Francisco; Harper, 1980), 63.

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