

# **REVEALED IN PRAYER**

**Genesis 32:22-30**  
**Luke 11:9-13**

*Prayer empowers us, centers us, and leads us on the  
journey of discipleship.*

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Fort Smith, Arkansas  
November 10, 2019

Dr. Steve Harper, former professor at Asbury Theological Seminary and a renowned Wesley scholar, wrote a book about a major spiritual re-awakening in his life, and he began the book with these words: “Every significant movement of the Spirit has been preceded by prayer.”<sup>1</sup> We see the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus. He prayed after his baptism for 40 days in the wilderness; he prayed before choosing his disciples; he prayed before his arrest and crucifixion. The followers of Jesus prayed for 10 days before the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and the Church was born.

When God was leading Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to demand civil rights for black people, he grounded the movement in prayer. Did you know that the first march on Washington was not in 1963, but six years earlier, in May of 1957? It was called the Prayer Pilgrimage of Freedom. King and others gathered at the Lincoln Memorial and called on people to pray for freedom and justice for all people. There were only 30,000 in attendance, which is still a crowd, but it was much less than the goal of 50,000.

Six years later, 250,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial for a second March on Washington. Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, and the civil rights movement was galvanized. It was one of the most powerful political movements of our time, but it was grounded, at least from Dr. King’s perspective, in prayer.

Why is prayer so important?

Prayer is powerful and effective. Prayer motivates and inspires; prayer corrects and re-directs; prayer brings the hand of God into our daily lives. The Letter of James says, “*The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*”<sup>2</sup> Prayer makes a difference.

Dr. E. V. (Ed) Hill pastored Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, one of the largest African-American churches in America, for forty years. But he never would have started on the road to ministry without the powerful prayers of a woman he called “Mama.” Hill was born in Texas during the Great Depression, and his real mama had five children and couldn’t feed them all. So she sent Ed to live with a friend in a little town

called Sweet Home. Ed called her Mama, and Mama had a great faith and big plans for Ed. He graduated from high school in a class of one, but Mama insisted that he was going to get a college education.

She took Ed to the bus stop and put him on a bus to Prairie View College and gave him all the cash she had—\$5.00. She said, “Now you go on off to college, and Mama is going to be praying for you!” E. V. didn’t know much about prayer, but he knew Mama did. He arrived at Prairie View College with \$1.90 still in his pocket, and they told him he would need \$80 to register. Here’s how E. V. Hill described what happened next:

I got in line ..., and the devil said to get out of line ..., but I heard my Mama saying in my ear, “I’ll be praying for you.” I stood in line on Mama’s prayer. Soon there was [only one student ahead of me], and I began to get nervous, but I stayed in line .... Just about the time [the other student] got all of her stuff and turned away, Dr. Drew touched me on the shoulder, and he said, “Are you Ed Hill?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Are you Ed Hill from Sweet Home?”

“Yes.”

“Have you paid yet?”

“Not quite.”

“We’ve been looking for you all morning,” [he said].

I said, “Well, what do [you] want with me?”

“We have a four-year scholarship that will pay your room and board, your tuition, and give you thirty dollars a month to spend.”

And I heard Mama say, “I will be praying for you!”<sup>3</sup>

Prayer is powerful and effective because it centers us in God’s will. When we pray, and we do what God wants us to do, then we have spiritual power to do whatever it is God wants. Our devotional book this week gave the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear God’s Son. Her response was prayerful and humble, “*Let it be with me according to your word.*”<sup>4</sup> From that moment of dedication and commitment, Mary had the strength and courage to be the mother of the Lord. It was not an easy journey.

Centering our lives in God does not mean that the path will be level and light. Think of Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, wrestling all night with the angel of God. That is a metaphor for prayer. Jacob wrestled all night, but he held on, and he received a blessing. That's how prayer works sometimes.

At significant turning points in my life, I feel like I have wrestled with God in prayer. When I was being called into ministry, I spent many nights wide awake, staring at the ceiling, asking God, "What do you want me to do?" Then when I got the answer, I said, "Really, God? That?" But once I got my life centered in God's will, I never looked back. It hasn't always been pleasant or easy—hardly!—but through it all, God has blessed me on the journey. That's what prayer can do.

Prayer will lead us where we need to go, if we just pay attention. Nowadays when we want to get somewhere, and we don't know the way, we use a GPS on our phone or in our car. No more need for paper maps, right? The Global Positioning System tells us where we are and points the way to our destination. If we get off track, the voice lets us know: "Re-routing! Re-routing! Return to the route!" I hate it when it says that, because I feel so globally wrong. But I'm glad my GPS is keeping track, because it means I will never be lost.

Prayer is our spiritual GPS—God Positioning System—and when we pay attention to God in prayer, we will be led to the right destination.

In our devotional book this week, there was a story about a lady named Nancy. She had just retired as an elementary school teacher and was looking forward to some rest, relaxation, gardening, travel—all the retirement stuff. But her pastor asked her to start a ministry for children with special needs. She hadn't thought of spending her first year of retirement doing that, but she agreed to pray about it. Wrestling with God, she felt God leading her to do this ministry. So she developed a curriculum for special needs kids, and when they started the class, six new families started bringing their kids to class. Three months later, all six families joined the church, and the children were all baptized together. Nancy had not traveled or gardened or rested very much. But she had followed the leading of God, and her ministry had made a real difference.<sup>5</sup>

Prayer empowers us to be effective by centering us in the will of God and leading us where we need to go. How is that related to stewardship? We're supposed to be talking about stewardship, right? Stewardship is how we use what God has given us to work for God's Kingdom. How we give, how we serve, how we use our possessions and time and energy and talents for God—that's the stuff of stewardship. Prayer is the practice of spiritual discipline that helps us discern how God wants us to give and serve. The right path is revealed through prayer. It's the thread connecting all the parts of our life to God.

When I was growing up, I spent many days with my maternal grandmother. She would keep us after school and in the summer time while my mom worked. Grandma had lots of cool old stuff. One of my favorite old things was the quilt on her bed. It was a "crazy quilt," made from random pieces of fabric, not even the same shape or color. I used to lie on her bed and trace the pieces with my finger and make up stories about pirates and knights and armies and kingdoms, using the quilt like a map of a faraway land.

I don't know how my grandmother made the quilt. I don't know if you could do that kind of a quilt on a sewing machine. I think she hand-pieced the quilt, sewing each fragment of cloth together with a needle and thread. Then she probably used the machine to put the backing on and finish it. I do know that it took a lot of time and a lot of love to put that thing together; I could feel that when I lay on it or under it.

Our lives are like quilts sometimes, and they're usually more like crazy quilts than anything more orderly. But all the crazy pieces are connected, sewn together by a loving hand, and everything joins together to make a whole piece. Prayer is the thread that connects it all together—our relationship with God, the community of faith, our money, our time, our energy, our talents, our ministry, our mission—it's all connected. It's all a piece. It's the life of discipleship. It's the challenge of stewardship—to use all that God has given us to glorify the Giver and make a difference in the world. Prayer is what ties it all together.

And finally, prayer is important to our stewardship because it's the gateway to God's blessing. God wants the best for us. God wants to bless

us because God loves us. Our giving and our serving are not things we do to make ourselves miserable so God will be impressed with us. No, these are ways that God gives us so that we can experience the blessings God wants us to have. Prayer is the gateway to God's blessings. It's how we discern in concrete, practical terms what God is calling us to do.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, the disciples of Jesus ask him to teach them how to pray. He gives them what we normally call the Lord's Prayer, although it's really the Disciples' Prayer. Then he tells them a parable about being persistent. Then he gives them this wonderful and amazing teaching:

*"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*<sup>6</sup>

We love to bless those we love, don't we? This past summer we took our two oldest grandsons to a big arcade where they had all kinds of video games and ball games and dozens of fun things to do. We put money on little credit cards, and then we walked around with them, and whenever they wanted to play a game, we would poke the little card in the slot, and they would get after it. Papa and CeeCee weren't even playing the games, but we were having a big time just watching those boys have a big time. Why? Because we love the stuffing out of them!

If grandparents can get that excited about arcade games with their grandkids, how much more will God bless us when we ask for something that's actually important, like peace, strength, courage, healing, guidance, or direction. Jesus says ask, search, knock, and God will give you the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will make you powerful and effective. The Holy Spirit will center you in God's will. The Holy Spirit will lead you where you should go.

That's why we pray. That's why prayer is a fundamental aspect of stewardship, because every significant movement of the Holy Spirit is

preceded by prayer. As we think about the next step that God is asking us to take, we need to ask for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will empower us to take the step. The Holy Spirit will get us centered in God's will. The Holy Spirit will lead us in the way we should go. And that's how God blesses us—because God loves the stuffing out of us!

I hope you will be ready in a week to take whatever next step God is calling you to take. I hope you are praying, “Lord, where do you want me to be in my giving, in my serving, in my following you?” I hope you will answer as that young woman did so many years ago, and set our salvation in motion, “Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Harper, *For The Sake Of The Bride* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> James 5:16.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Simmons & Frank A. Thomas, editors, *Preaching with Sacred Fire* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 707-708.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>5</sup> R. Craig Miller, “Wrestling With God,” *A Generous Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 11:9-13.