

Your Most Important Work

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I believe that you and I can change the world. But it will take something that is an act of faith, perseverance, and hard work-prayer. It will have to be consistent, serious prayer—whether you **feel** like praying or not. But the reward for you will be a life released to the Holy Spirit's work. This is the emphasis of the teaching of the Word of God that I will be giving over the near future.

One hundred and ninety years ago a shoe repairman in England began to be concerned about the world's heathen peoples. As he would pound away on his shoes, looking at a map he had placed above his workbench and on which he had written the few facts he could garner from *Captain Cook's Travels* and other books, he would pray for the salvation of people in distant lands.

William Carey—who described himself as a self-educated, ungifted plodder—went on to become the father of modern missions. Through his influence, Britain's first missionary society was formed—but only after Carey overcame great reluctance among his Baptist brethren. Soon afterward he went as a missionary himself to India—but only after being put off his British ship and having to take a Danish boat instead. His wife at first refused to go with him and refused to allow their children to go. She was persuaded differently only after Carey had already boarded ship.



Once in India, where he spent forty-two years, Carey and his co-workers translated the entire Bible into twenty-five Indian languages, and the New Testament or parts of it into fifteen more.

Many books have been written about William Carey, but to my knowledge not one has been written about his little known sister, a bedridden cripple. She and Carey were very close, and from India he wrote to her about all the details and problems of his work. Hour after hour, week after week, she would lift these concerns to the Lord in prayer. **So I wonder: Who was responsible for the success of William Carey's ministry?**

How does God apportion the credit? A good verse on this is [1 Samuel 30:24](#)—"The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike." I wonder if God isn't saying to us that we can have a worldwide impact without ever leaving our hometown or our home country.

Prayer can change the world. Prayer can change the secular, sinful world, and it can also change those who are believers. Many times in our ministry around the world,

something will happen that couldn't have turned out any better, and I think, ***I hardly prayed at all for this situation. I wonder who gets the credit for this one?*** I am sure the credit often goes to those back in the United States and elsewhere who are praying for what God is doing through our ministry.

Prayer is an act of faith. First of all, it is offered to the God whom none of us has ever seen. **Second**, it is based on statements in the Scriptures which we believe are true—that our words addressed toward heaven are going to do some good. After all, that's what faith is—believing the statements of God. It is not a feeling, not a hope, not based on circumstances. It is based on God.

Prayer is an act of dependence and sometimes an act of desperation. But it is supremely an act of faith. And God says that we walk by faith, not by sight.

Prayer is a way of releasing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. In the Scriptures we learn that prayer activates God's grace and His Spirit in us. God's grace and His Spirit operate without us, but they also work through us and because of us. This is part of the mystery of prayer.

Paul wrote, **"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them" (1 Cor. 15:10).** These are the keys to the Christian life: God's grace and hard work. But even in working hard Paul goes on to say, **"yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."** Even the hard work is dependent on God's grace. **"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty" (Zech. 4:6).**

Something that has been liberating for me in prayer is learning not to depend on feelings, but on God's word. We're trapped by our feelings more often than we want to admit. We feel like praying, so we pray. We don't feel like praying, so we don't. But **C. H. Spurgeon** had some good counsel on this: **"We should pray when we're in a praying mood because it would be sinful to neglect so fair an opportunity. We should pray when we're not in a praying mood because it would be dangerous to remain in so unhealthy a condition."**

How we feel also has nothing to do with the *effectiveness* of our prayers. When we feel free and bold in prayer, we think our prayers are dropping right onto God's do-list, ready for immediate action. But when we're tired or have a headache and don't feel spiritual, we dribble some weak prayers in thinking maybe next week or next month God will get around to those. So in practice we think our feelings really do have something to do with whether God answers.

Feelings aren't wrong. Sometimes praying in the Spirit means that we are simply conscious of the Holy Spirit leading us on, whether in intercession or praise. We feel free. But many, many times I *don't* feel free.

I believe that praying in the Spirit, as we are commanded in [Ephes. 6:18](#), does not mean praying in a certain feeling, but in dependence on the Holy Spirit and according to his will. The Christian life is not to be lived on the basis of feelings—it is not an existential life. **Feelings should not take precedence over the Scriptures.** If we are conscious in prayer of the Holy Spirit's unusual liberation and joy, that's great. But if we're not—pray on.

We should make good use of the Scriptures in our prayer—not only the promises there, but also the biblical patterns of prayer as we see in Paul's prayers in [Ephes. 1-3](#); [Phil. 1](#); and [Col. 1](#). By following these patterns we can be sure we're praying in the Lord's will.

What are the conditions for having our prayers answered? There are only a few. One is to pray in Christ's name ([John 14:13](#))—in his merits and not our own. It encourages me that no failure in my life in any way hinders my coming to God in prayer. And nothing I am in any way helps me. I come in Christ's merits, relying totally on him.

Another condition is to pray according to God's will ([1 John 5:14](#)). Another is to ask in faith, with confidence in the statements of God. Jesus said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer" ([Matthew 21:22](#)).

George Mueller emphasized the importance of believing in God's ability and willingness to answer our prayers. Mueller said, **"I have found invariably in the fifty-four years and nine months which I've been a Christian that if I only believe, I was sure to get in God's time the thing that I asked for. I would especially lay this on your heart, that you exercise faith in the power and willingness of God to answer your requests."**

"We must believe that God is able and willing. To see that He is able we have only to look at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ—for having raised Him from the dead, he must have almighty power. As to the love of God you have only to look to the cross of Christ to see that His love, in not sparing His Son and not withholding His only begotten Son from death, guarantees us His love. With these proofs of the power and love of God, assuredly if we believe we shall receive." These are simple statements. George Mueller was a rather simple man—but with faith in the Almighty God.

Another condition for answered prayer is that we must continue waiting patiently on God until we receive his answer. I've often had people ask me, "If I have faith and I pray for it once, do I have to say the prayer again?" There are occasions when the Holy Spirit gives such confidence and assurance that we merely thank the Lord and praise Him for what He is going to do. But the clear teaching of Jesus is persistence in prayer—importunity, going at it day after day, week after week, year after year, decade after decade.

In [Luke 11](#), after Jesus taught his disciples the Model Prayer, He told them a parable of a man who goes to another man's house at midnight and says, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him." But the man inside has already locked his door and he and his family are in bed. They were probably all living in one room, and he would have to climb over several people to find the loaves and get to the door. So he answers from inside, "Don't bother me."

But his caller is persistent. He isn't obnoxious or kicking the door or shouting insults, but just standing there patiently knocking. Inside, the wife soon begins to wake up and asks what is happening. The children begin to cry. The neighbors, whose houses are only a few feet away, begin rustling. So the man inside climbs over his family, unbolts the door, and says, "Here, take all these loaves, and the Lord bless you!" The caller's persistence was rewarded.

And Jesus said, *This is the way to pray*. Ask and keep on asking, and you shall receive. Seek and keep on seeking, and you shall find. Knock and keep on knocking, and the door shall be opened.

"The great point," Mueller said, "is to never give up until the answer comes . . . The great fault of the children of God is: They do not continue in prayer; they do not go on praying; they do not persevere. If they desire anything for God's glory, they should pray until they get it."

God wants us to demonstrate our confidence in Him, and to take our place as creatures before the Creator. Moreover, we are to never lose sight of the fact that there may be particular reasons why a prayer is not answered at once. We may need to exercise our faith more, for faith is strengthened by exercise and trial. Faith is demonstrated and strengthened as day after day we repeat the same request to God until He answers. We can glorify God by our patience. One woman I met in Romania prays three times a day for her children.

God may also have us wait because our heart is not prepared for the answer to our prayer. God is working something in us, and until He can accomplish it He won't answer our prayer. Our stubbornness, our insensitivity, our unwillingness to change may be the reason for the lack of an answer.

One last condition for answered prayer is found in [Psalm 66:18](#)—"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." We don't have to be sinless, but we do need to get rid of known sin by confessing it and receiving God's forgiveness and cleansing, as he promises in [1 John 1:9](#). Holding on to known sin and being unwilling to give it up will short-circuit our prayer.

It is hard in prayer to depend on God's Word rather than our feelings. But it is even harder to make time for prayer. Some people think of me as being hard-grinding and diligent. But I can be lazy with no trouble at all. That makes praying hard.

It takes discipline to pray, and that means making time for it. Especially for an extended time alone with the Lord such as a half day of prayer, the only way to make the time is to put it in your schedule and refuse to change your plans. This is an act of faith as well as discipline: It is believing that prayer is more important than any other activity. Prayer is priority.

One African ministry team I work with sets aside six weekends a year for prayer. From Friday night to Sunday they will together spend between fifteen and twenty hours in prayer. They make these weekends an inviolate part of their yearly schedule.

When we go to God in prayer, the devil knows that we are opposing him. Therefore he tries to hinder our prayer all he can. He'll fight us in our making time for prayer as much as in anything else.

Prayer is hard work. **J. Oswald Sanders** has written, "**Prayer is not dreamy reverie. All vital praying makes a drain on a man's vitality.**" It costs us to pray. Sanders goes on to say that prayer requires intense mental discipline. That's one of the reasons you and I don't pray more. None of us is eager for intense mental discipline.

Prayer takes faith and hard work. If you depend on your feelings, you'll give up quickly. But if you're praying according to God's will, keep right on. You'll be encouraged to see how God *does* answer.