

# PRAYING TOGETHER

KINDLING PASSION FOR PRAYER

UPDATED AND REVISED EDITION

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*Praying Together:  
Kindling Passion for Prayer*

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# 1

## Me? Pray with Others? *Accepting the Invitation*

*Prayer moves that arm which moves all things else.*

C. H. Spurgeon

Me? Pray out loud? I get nervous when I try to pray in front of other people.”

Jim was trying to find a nice way to say no to my invitation to the prayer meeting that night, and I knew exactly how he felt.

I love to pray with others, but it wasn't always that way. There was a time when just the mention of prayer meetings brought up not-so-spiritual memories of “praying without ceasing,” trying helplessly not to look at my watch as seconds ticked slowly by.

Let's be honest. Prayer meetings aren't at the top of most people's lists of favorite things to do, and there's a reason. Praying together is a lost art for many Christians. Not only are we not used to doing it, we feel awkward when we try. Sometimes we let a few less-than-inspiring experiences discourage us. We can even feel that it's only something reserved for a select group of Christians, those who are “good” at praying or who have the “spiritual gift” of prayer.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Search God's Word, and you'll never find prayer mentioned once as a spiritual gift set aside for a select few (check out 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 and Romans 12:6–8 for lists of the gifts of the Spirit). God wants every believer to pray. He loves it when we do and wants our prayers together to be a constant source of life-transforming encouragement and hope. God has great plans for our prayers, and our "skill" at prayer has nothing to do with it. His strength "is made perfect in weakness," and He waits to show us what He will do when our eyes are on Him alone (2 Corinthians 12:9). True prayer has much more to do with God's faithfulness in response to waiting hearts than with our ability to string words together.

God's Spirit is sparking new interest in praying together today, and that's exciting. Four hundred years ago, Puritan pastor Matthew Henry wrote, "When God intends great mercy for a people, the first thing He does is set them a-praying."<sup>1</sup> Amazing things happen when God's people pray! When we pray together, our heavenly Father invites us into the wonder of watching Him work and offers us a front-row seat. God waits for us to claim His special promises for people who pray.

### Music to Our Father's Ears

Jesus promised in Matthew 18:19, "If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." He makes it clear that *when we pray with others*, we capture God's attention in a special way.

The word *agree* that Jesus uses is from the Greek *sumphoneo*, the root of our English word *symphony*. That word points to the truth that our prayers together are beautiful music to God.

Imagine a concert where God is in the audience, just waiting for His children to begin. Our heavenly Father looks forward to our prayers together and hears them with a deep sense of satisfac-

tion because of His love for us. It doesn't matter how our praying may sound to our own ears. Think of parents at an elementary school concert just waiting to hear their children's first awkward notes. Our praying together is as imperfect as we are, but God smiles with approval. We may not even feel like anything is happening, but our united prayers are deeply moving to God. So moving that I could pray a lifetime on my own and never come close to what may happen when I pray with others. The Bible tells us that "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). But imagine what the prayers of *many* can accomplish, offered with faith in Jesus's promise that God hears and answers in a special way when we pray together.

It may be no coincidence that the culture we live in has become increasingly indifferent and even hostile to Christianity at the same time that united prayer has gone out of the church. As recently as fifty years ago, prayer meetings were a vital part of many churches. As American culture became increasingly entertainment oriented, the midweek prayer meeting began to be replaced by other Wednesday night activities. Over time, the prayer meeting moved out of the sanctuary and into a corner of the church library (if it happened at all). At the same time, the church's impact upon the culture around us began to gradually decline.

But you can make some great discoveries in church libraries. Dust off a few old books, and you'll discover that a church without prayer is a church without power. Prayer infuses the church with power and makes the smallest church a David to the world's Goliath. As the British poet William Cowper wrote over two hundred years ago:

Restraining prayer, we cease to fight;  
Prayer makes the Christian's armor bright;  
And Satan trembles when he sees  
The weakest saint upon his knees.<sup>2</sup>

There is no greater need in the church today than for Christians to rediscover the importance of praying together. Go back to earlier days, and you'll find God's people hungering for the chance to pray. They gave prayer a huge priority in their lives, and because they did, God enabled them to accomplish more than they ever could have achieved in their own strength.

Praying together changes history. The First Great Awakening, which started in America and Britain in the 1730s, began to stir a few years earlier with Moravians on their knees in Germany, praying for the spread of the gospel around the world. The Second Great Awakening, which swept through the United States with revivals and camp meetings beginning in 1800, followed an organized effort by Jonathan Edwards to unite God's people in prayer on both sides of the Atlantic. The Third Great Awakening was sometimes called "The Prayer Meeting Revival" because it started with a series of meetings in New York City in 1857, which spread throughout the country and profoundly influenced lives wherever they went (including that of evangelist D. L. Moody).

Praying together takes patience and practice. But whenever God breathes new life into His people and His church, somewhere, someone is praying. C. H. Spurgeon captured this principle well over 150 years ago when he wrote, "All through the church of God the true progress is in proportion to the prayer."<sup>3</sup>

### **What Are We Missing?**

When we skip praying together, we miss out on the chance to see the difference between what we can accomplish and what only God can do. Bill Hybels wrote, "When I work, I work. But when I pray, God works."<sup>4</sup> When we pray we draw close to God's heart and tap into His infinite power and love. God has chosen to use our prayers—especially our prayers together—as one of the main ways



He accomplishes His work in our world. That may be why the first request of the Lord's Prayer is for His kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:12). God has chosen our prayers as one of the main means by which His work moves forward.

In May of 1934 in Charlotte, North Carolina, a small group of friends met together on a dairy farm to pray. It was the middle of the Great Depression, and the farmer had lost all of his savings in the banking collapse the previous year. But he gave up much-needed time at work that day to pray with his friends.

Together they asked God to raise up a person from the Charlotte area who would share the good news of Jesus all over the world. A few months later, the farmer's teenage son (who was mocking his father's friends at the time of the prayer meeting by referring to them as "fanatics") committed his life to Jesus during an evangelistic campaign. His name was Billy Graham.<sup>5</sup>

You have to wonder what would have happened if there hadn't been a small prayer meeting on the Graham farm that day. What would we have missed? How many millions of people would never have heard the message of Jesus's love through the sermons of Billy Graham if this small group of faithful believers had not asked God to intervene?

The strategy of the devil is to divide and conquer. Ours is a distracted age where people go through increasingly isolated lives separated from God and each other in a never-ending quest for self-fulfillment. Depression, substance abuse, narcissism, and random acts of violence decry the desperation of our times, and it's easy to feel as if our adversary has the upper hand.

God's Word reminds us that the devil is a defeated foe. Christ, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). The One who is in us "is greater than the one who is in the world"

(1 John 4:4). He calls us to “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). When God’s children seek Him together on their knees, His power and love flow through us in ways that go far beyond our ability to ask or understand.

God deeply desires for us to pray together. The night before Jesus was crucified our unity was so important to Him that He prayed for it more than anything else (John 17:11). It was in those moments He also asked, “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour? . . . Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matthew 26:40–41).

Henry Blackaby writes, “I think God is crying out to us and shouting, ‘Don’t just do something. Stand there! Enter into a love relationship with Me. Get to know Me. Adjust your life to Me.’”<sup>6</sup> Our heavenly Father invites us to join Him on the greatest adventure of our lives. If we take Him up on it, He promises that He will not only show us things we never thought were possible, He will also give blessings we never even considered asking for.

The New Testament tells us that God is “able to do immeasurably *more* than *all we* ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within *us*” (Ephesians 3:20, emphasis added). Those words *ask* and *imagine* are plural: The idea here is that we will be asking and imagining *together*, which was the earliest practice of the church, where “they all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). And because His power is at work within *us*, our loving and faithful Father is waiting for us to seek Him together so that He can work through us and move in ways that reach far beyond anything we could conceive of on our own.

### Asking Our Father to Help Us

Imagine you’re watching two children doing their best to move a rock in their backyard.

“*Push!*” They yell encouragement to each other, but the rock won’t budge.

Their father is also watching, a few yards away.

“One . . . two . . . *three!*” They try again. But no matter how much they push, they get nowhere.

“Have you tried everything you could?” Dad asks.

“*Everything!*” they yell back exhausted. “We can’t do it! We’ve tried and tried, and it’s just too big!”

“There is one thing you haven’t tried,” Dad says gently, with a smile in his voice.

“What’s that?”

“*You haven’t asked me to help you.*”

I’ve *lived* that story. As a pastor and church planter serving active churches, I found myself continually on the lookout for the next “big idea.” There was no shortage of glossy mailers filled with programs, enough to keep me and the churches I served occupied with activities for years to come (or at least until we stumbled upon “the next big thing”). There was just one problem.

We hadn’t asked our Father to help us. Not really. Sure, we had prayed. Every board meeting started with prayer. But then we got on with “the business” of the church, relying more on our own strength than God’s.

George Barna surveyed several hundred senior pastors to determine their top three ministry priorities. Discipleship and spiritual development ranked highest (47 percent listed it as a priority). Evangelism and outreach were also right up there (46 percent). Preaching rounded out third place (35 percent). Prayer wasn’t even in the running. Only 3 percent of pastors listed it among their primary priorities for ministry.<sup>7</sup>

Something is desperately wrong with those numbers. In many respects, the church is better equipped today than we ever have been

in history. We have technology, talent, multimillion dollar facilities, and a plethora of plans and programs. Yet even a quick look around reveals that for all of these advantages, our influence on lives and hearts in the culture around us has waned significantly.

But God is faithful. Interest in prayer and praying together is on the rise, and that's a good thing. There is a growing hunger to see what God alone can do above and beyond our ability to plan or program. A fresh wind of the Spirit is blowing, removing the dust that has long covered the lost art of praying together. That's exciting.

This isn't a book about the past. It's about the good things God *will* do when His people pray. What could be more exciting than seeing heaven touch earth in response to our prayers, a front-row seat to a fresh move of God? Imagine the changes we could see in our lives and the lives of those we love if we responded to God's invitation to meet Him in prayer!

### **An Opportunity Not to Be Missed**

John Holecek attended the first church I served right out of seminary. John is a bold believer whose life was radically turned around by God. A prodigal son come home, he went from drug abuse and a long "walk on the wild side" in the 1960s to smuggling Bibles behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War.

One Sunday morning John and I were talking after worship when someone approached us and began to share a problem. I was responding with a rather pious sounding, "I'll pray for you" (meaning later, on my own, if I remembered), when John jumped on the moment: "Yes! Let's pray right now! That way we won't forget to do it later!" He quietly bowed his head and prayed aloud, caring for the person and her need in a thoughtful and practical way. God marked that moment in my mind, teaching me a lesson I will remember as long as I live. *Prayer with others is an opportunity that is not to be missed.*

I hope you won't miss it as long as I did. Learning to pray with others has been a slow work of grace in my life. It didn't come naturally for me, and I still have a lot to learn. But God is faithful. He continues to surprise me with His kindness, presence, and power. The truth is that some of the sweetest moments of my life have been spent praying with others.

If you hunger to see what only God can do in response to prayer, this book is for you. If you feel inadequate when it comes to praying, you'll also find help here. We'll take a fresh look at what the Bible says about praying together in both the Old and New Testaments. We'll rediscover what Jesus taught about praying with others, including a life-changing promise He made to those who pray that is often overlooked. We'll look at the priority the early church placed on united prayer and unearth inspiring examples of God's people praying together throughout history. And we'll discover some simple, time-tested ideas for praying with others that can help us personally experience God's presence and power *today* beyond all "we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20)

When we pray together, God invites us on an adventure into His goodness and love where we and those around us may be deeply blessed.

The adventure awaits! There are breathtaking discoveries to be made along the path of praying together. Our prayers together are even a preview of heaven itself, where "a great multitude that no one could count" will bow before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9–10).

God's promises for people who pray together are beyond counting. His Word through the prophet Jeremiah speaks to the moment:

Stand at the crossroads and look;  
ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16)

Untold blessings await those who walk with God on the path of prayer. The journey opens before you, and God is holding out His hand.

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### **Prayer Confidence Builder #1**

Our confidence in praying with others grows as we take time with God in prayer on our own. As a way of preparing to spend time with others in prayer, schedule a specific time to pray on your own. During that time, ask God to help you learn how to pray and to show you places in your life where you can begin to pray with others.

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### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What comes to mind when you think of prayer meetings? Have you ever attended a prayer meeting? What was it like?
2. What did Jesus say about the importance of praying together in Matthew 18:19? Do you ever draw a correlation between praying together and God answering prayer?
3. Do you agree that Christian influence on society has decreased since churches have stepped away from prolonged prayer together? Why or why not?
4. What role does heartfelt, united prayer play in your personal life? In the life of your church?
5. Do you see praying together as an opportunity or a burden? Why do you see it that way?