

PRAYER FOR HEALING



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Introduction: My Story of How Prayer Can Heal

Prayer changes things. I have known this all my life. So did my parents.

In 1944, my father Raymond was serving his country in the US Marine Corps. Ordered to run across an air field under enemy fire, he prayed with all his might. Somehow he dodged every bullet fired at him, and was one of three men to capture a Japanese radio used to direct planes to the base. He only spoke of it to me once, in very calm tones, pulling out the maps he had drawn of the airfield and the radio nest 50 years before. The gravity of the event didn't sink in with me until I saw it dramatized in the documentary *The Pacific* several years after my dad died.

In 1948, Emma, who had gone from service as a nurse in the US Army in World War II to service as a missionary nurse in Nigeria without a break returned home to Augusta, Georgia for the first time in years. As soon as she arrived, she learned that the family was gathering for the eminent death of her 18-year-old niece from typhus. The family wasn't a family that prayed. She prayed for a miracle. The miracle came in the form of all the neighbors having gathered enough money for a shot with the then-very expensive miracle drug, tetracycline. Her niece got an injection of the drug, and came to consciousness in the middle of a discussion of her non-believing sisters over who would inherit her party dress.

In the 1950's, Rosa and Raymond wanted to have babies, but every time Rosa got pregnant, she miscarried. Finally, she agreed to be treated with estrogen and thyroid hormone and DES and even thalidomide. This time she didn't miscarry, but in her fourth month another doctor advised her that the baby would never be normal (which may have turned out to be right, writing 60 years after the fact) and she needed to have an abortion. Her child would be horribly deformed. She prayed, and Raymond prayed, and they felt led to try to keep the child.

Five months later on a Saturday afternoon little Robert was delivered in a breech birth. He was a beautiful baby, but he was blue. He wasn't breathing. The doctor in the small-town hospital made out a death certificate and went home to get drunk. Raymond and Rosemary prayed that somehow, some way, the doctor was wrong. About an hour later, as he was going to be taken to the funeral home, Robert started screaming at the top of his lungs.

That actually wasn't the only time Robert, who, as you may have guessed by now, is the Robert who wrote this book, woke up just as he was about to be sent to the morgue. In 2012, I had heart surgery that went very wrong. The odd thing was, I had known for several days ahead of time I was probably going to die.

Five days before the event, my then-deceased dad Raymond just appeared by my bedside. He told me "It's going to be alright, son." I said, "Dad, are you really there?" He answered, "I certainly think so, son," with a chuckle, and vanished.

The next night my also-deceased mother Rosemary appeared by my bedside and also said, "It's going to be alright," and vanished.

I still don't know, of course, whether this was all in my imagination or it was some dispensation from God or what it was. I don't think it really makes a lot of difference.

The next day, which was a Saturday, my doctors discharged me, but because of a series of mixups, I didn't have my wallet, my cellphone, and every last one of my friends was out of town. Hospital security told me in no uncertain terms I had to go out into the cold. I had \$1.35, I think it was, so I took the bus downtown about five in the morning to go to my church. I barely had energy to walk from the bus stop two blocks to my church, and I plopped down on a bench to wait for the door to open.

I went to Sunday School, I went to church, not having eaten in 48 hours, and I collapsed at the end of the service. The ambulance took me back to the same hospital.

It was obvious I needed an urgent heart operation. The nurse brought out the consent form, and then crossed out what I wrote in response to the question about what the operation was about. (Just a word of advice, if this ever happens, do not let yourself be taken to surgery.) She wrote in something that absolved the doctor of even more consequences. I was so tired and sick that I signed it. I had the operation and I was brought back to my room to recover.

The room seemed to fill up with spirits. I immediately thought of the verse about the "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 12:1. My mother came over and told me "It will be about 10 minutes." Sure enough, about 10 minutes later, I flatlined at the very moment an education nurse, the head nurse, and a student nurse all came in at the same time. At the same moment, another

heart surgeon (in whom I had far more confidence) happened walk by the door. There was an open operating room.

I died for twelve minutes. I remember a wonderful reunion. I remember being in a joyous place. I remember my mother coming over and saying, "You won't be here long, son."

The next thing I know I am on a gurney and I am taking the most difficult breath of my life. I had been shot up with epinephrine and atropine and given CPR for five minutes. I was on my way to an OR. I started talking with the doctor in Italian. (He was Italian.) Then it occurred to me, "I don't speak Italian." I flatlined again.

I woke up in the OR as the doctor was saying "360, no detectible pulse, I'm going to call it." I opened my eyes and said something to the effect of "Don't send me to the morgue just yet." He then apologized that there was no time to give me a painkiller and opened me up without anesthetic to pull a balloon in my heart. I was very sure I was still alive.

There are lots of questions that arise in a story like mine. I frankly don't know what's imagination, what's an insight into life after death, or not, and what's factual in what ways. I don't really care. I simply know that God sent me comfort in my darkest hour and death itself was not my end. Everything else is secondary. I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which He has committed. That's the important point. It wasn't that I was a great pray warrior. I found out later that hundreds of people (who were very much alive) had been praying for me that very afternoon, but I didn't know it at the time. And I wasn't awake and aware enough to do my own eloquent prayers.

Most Christians have difficulty with prayer for healing. It's a good thing it's not all up to them.

They know their Bible. They pray every day. They may serve as deacons or elders or Sunday School teachers. Inevitably, they reach a period in their lives when everything seems to go wrong.

Sickness, disappointments in marriage and family and personal relationships, and financial reversals leave Christians feeling less than fully successful (or downright failures) in both their Christian lives and their place in the world. Nearly all Christians can remember some powerful peak experiences, where they felt peace, fulfillment, and connection to God, but then they run into a patch in which blessing is just nowhere to be found.

It seems like prayer doesn't work. But it really does, just not always in the ways that we expect.

The Lord's Prayer Method

Nearly all Christians can recite the Lord's Prayer by heart. Not as many Christians remember the context. Just before Jesus gave us the Lord's prayer, He said:

"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." (Matthew 6: 7-8, New American Standard Bible)

The Berean Study Bible translates Matthew 6:7 as:

"And when you pray, do not babble on like pagans, for they think that by their many words they will be heard."

As an author, I attend many meetings with many people of every imaginable religious persuasion. In 2007 I was in a crowded elevator with the principal author of the bestselling book and movie, *The Secret*. This very famous person was standing about two inches away from my eardrum. When the door opened, we were too jam-packed to get out quickly, but she saw a famous producer. Wanting desperately to get the powerful man's attention, this *The Secret* author screamed at the ear shattering volume, in vain, because we didn't all get out before the elevator before the door closed.

I would have thought she would have just "manifested" him.

We Christians can fall into the same trap. We can pray for the same thing in the same words louder and louder, we can shatter the eardrums of innocent people around us, but fail to go through the door that leads to what we seek. "Knock and the door shall be opened to you," Jesus taught us. But how do we recognize the right door?

There isn't necessarily a door. Or a window. There may not be a single defining moment where you can stand up and shout "I've been healed!" God often delivers blessings through more than one channel so you can do your part.

Prayer is only part of the healing process. God gives us multiple responsibilities for ourselves, for our families, for our churches, and for our neighbors. God gives us our part to do, so we won't make our own prayerfulness a source of unholy pride. Believe in God. But still do your part.

Ask, Believe, Receive?

We are often told that we only need to pray for what we want, believe that we already have it, and wait to receive it. It's like God was a Heavenly Short Order Cook. We read the menu of holy choices, we put in our order, and we wait for God to bring it to us while we sit our table. That isn't exactly how Bible tells us it's done. You probably know the verse:

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." Isaiah 40:31 (King James Version)

God doesn't wait on us. We wait on the Lord. We serve the Lord, and in the process of all the complex events of our lives as we seek to serve Him, we find the healing we need.

Rise, Learn, Surrender, Follow

We don't need to ask, believe, and receive. We need to rise, learn, surrender, and follow.

What does it mean to rise?

Some people seem to be amazing prayer warriors. If they ask God for something it happens.

Other people pray and pray and pray and don't ever get what they ask for at all. Does that mean that God plays favorites? Or that some people just pray better than others?

I don't think so. I think that the difference is that some people have learned how to do what Paul told the Thessalonians, "Pray without ceasing." They live and breathe and seek the Lord in everything they do. What difference could that make?

If you are busy seeking the Lord's will, you don't have a lot of time to be negative. You don't have a lot of time and money to indulge bad habits. If you pray with what you do, not just with what you say, you will be more open to all the different ways the Lord can bless you and make you the child of God you were meant to be. When your whole life becomes consistent with your prayers, when you seek to serve the Lord continuously, then you will find the blessings you need at just the time you need them.

What are the characteristics of someone who prays without ceasing?

- **Humility:** The word "humility" shares its Latin root with the word "humus," the dark, rich, organic matter found in the soil. Humus is what is left when the manure is abandoned. When we become teachable, open to God's work in our lives, and coachable, open to help from other Christians (and sometimes the Lord will use people who aren't Christians), then we can grow. We may be just beginners on the path to health and wholeness, but we let go of the detritus and dead matter that holds us back and let God transform it into the humus that makes us healthy. We still hold to what's right, but we remember that God is the author of righteousness and we follow the Book of Life. Oddly enough, it's by becoming humble that we rise.

- **Learning:** A lot of life is a “learning experience.” When we aren’t so busy making our demands on God and our lives all the time, when we take time to wait on the Lord, we naturally learn.
- **Surrender:** Sometimes God’s plan for us isn’t all about us. Sometimes God is using us to do His will. God will give us the strength to do His will as long as we are doing it. We release old fears, old ideas, old resentments, old habits, and the need to be right. This opens us to God’s amazing healing power and God’s renewal of our minds.
- **Following:** Following is about being right, it’s about being in close relationship with God. When I was young, unhappy, and rebellious, an old preacher told me “Rister, God works in mysterious ways, and you are one of His greater mysteries.” For me, the lesson I needed to learn was that being right is not the same as being a loving follower of Christ. As Christians, we need to stay on the side of right, but we can’t be so focused on our own rectitude that we commit sins of omission.

Not All Prayers Are Equal

If you are praying to lose weight, God might give you a flat tire while you're driving to Dunkin' Donuts. If you praying to overcome emphysema, maybe you shouldn't schedule your prayer time at a smoking break.

It isn't true that God helps those who help themselves. God helps people who are so totally messed up that they haven't got the first clue about how to help themselves, people on the wrong track, people on the right track, and even people who think they have arrived (although these may be God's more difficult cases).

Just about all of us have had occasion to say "It seemed like a good idea at the time." When this happens, it isn't because God gave what we thought we wanted. It's because God allowed us to pursue what we thought we wanted. How do you align your prayer life with the perfect will of God? I don't have all the answers, but I do have some suggestions:

- Turn off the TV and social media (Facebook, etc.) at least part of every day. We are influenced by what we see.
- Give your children, especially if they are under seven, things to do that don't involve exposure to advertising. Many of our hardest issues as adults (mine was an addiction to Coca Cola, for instance) arise from the advertising we saw on children's shows when we were little.
- Realize that you are bombarded with "wants" all the time. Don't suppose you don't need God's help to overcome wanting things that are not appropriate for you.
- Don't get hung up on prayer, either. Yes, we are to pray without ceasing. However, prayer listening is as important as talking to God—who already knows everything we need and is giving it to us in perfect time if we let Him.

The more you wait on the Lord, the more you serve the Lord and others, the more you will see your problems solved and your needs met. This is true of your health, and it is true of every area of your life. Be open to God to give you a vision for your life that makes the most of your health.

Healing Often Comes When We Least Expect It

One wrong way to pray for healing is to tell God "Heal me, oh, please heal me, you haven't healed me yet, so please heal me" every day. If you are like that, and I have been, it can be because you are in real pain and real despair. It's human. It's natural. But Christians are called on to seek the supernatural.

We are called on to stop clinging to our desires and to open ourselves to the possibilities God provides us each day. We are called on to serve the Lord and to love our families and our neighbors and even our enemies. When we do this, then the healing we need often sneaks up on us as our whole lives are changed. God wants us to have perfect health, but He also wants for us to abide in His will. It's like a Christian songwriter told us:

Asleep in the Light (by Keith Gordon Green, who died in a plane crash at the age of 28)

*Do you see?
Do you see?
All the people sinking down?
Don't you care?
Don't you care?
Are you gonna let them drown?*

*How can you be so numb?!
Not to care if they come
You close your eyes,
And pretend the job is done*

*"Oh, bless me, lord!
Bless me, lord!"
You know, it's all I ever hear!
No one aches,
No one hurts,
No one even sheds one tear
But, He cries,
He weeps,
He bleeds,
And He cares for your needs
And you just lay back,
And keep soaking it in*

Oh, can't you see such sin?!

*'cause He brings people to your door,
And you turn them away
As you smile and say,
"God bless you!
Be at peace!"
And all heaven just weep,
'cause Jesus came to your door,
You left him out on the streets*

*Open up! open up!
And give yourself away
You see the need,
You hear the cries,
So how can you delay?!
God is calling,
And you are the one
But like Jonah, you run
He told you to speak,
But you keep holding it in*

*Oh, can't you see such sin?!
The world is sleeping in the dark,
That the church just can't fight,
'cause it's asleep in the light!
How can you be so dead?!
When you've been so well fed
Jesus rose from the grave,
And you!
You can't even get out of bed!
Oh, Jesus rose from the dead!
Come on, get out of your bed!*

Our Sins Aren't Always What We Think They Are

I have always been a fan of the Book of Job. I even took a course taught by a Columbia University professor who quoted whole passages from the Book of Job in Aramaic (of which I did not understand a single word). It wasn't until I was writing this book, however, that I noticed something new in the Book of Job. God wasn't just testing Job. God was blessing Job in a way Job totally did not expect.

It's hard story to follow, especially if you consider what scholars have to say about the book, namely that the happy ending was added only centuries later. I'm not going to snip anything out of the Bible, but I notice that there is a point I never noticed even if you stop in the middle of the last chapter.

Job's Character and Wealth (Job 1:1-5)

1 There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. 2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. 4 His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed[a] God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

In the original text, the word for God is "a god," suggesting that Job didn't really know which god he was worshipping so he wanted to make sure all his bases were covered. As the story unfolds, he learns about that there is only one God, and God is more than a provider of good things.

Satan Allowed to Test Job (Job 1:6-12)

6 Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. 7 The Lord said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." 8 And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" 9 Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." 12 And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Satan Takes Job's Property and Children (Job 1:13-22)

13 Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 14 and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 16 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 17 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." 18 While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 19 and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people,

and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

(The passage above is from the New English Version of the Bible.)

Job was a man whom God had blessed with everything a man of his time could have. He had wealth. He had a family. He had "groupies." His life was a celebration every day, but he was careful to stay in God's will.

Satan was convinced that Job's faith was superficial. Take away the wealth, take away the family, take away the servants and the entourage, and he would curse God. But as we know from having read the story, Job never did. Job may have sat on top of a pile of manure scratching himself with a broken pot, as the Book of Job tells us, but he never, ever lost his faith in God.

We also know that the Book of Job has a happy ending. Satan was wrong, God was right, and God restored Job's wealth and family and happiness. There's an odd thing about the oldest known copy of the Book of Job, however. That's not the ending in the oldest manuscript (which is written in Aramaic, not Hebrew). In the oldest copy of the Book of Job, God quizzes Job about sea monsters in Chapter 41:

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook

or tie down its tongue with a rope?

2 Can you put a cord through its nose

or pierce its jaw with a hook?

3 Will it keep begging you for mercy?

Will it speak to you with gentle words?

4 Will it make an agreement with you

*for you to take it as your slave for life?
5 Can you make a pet of it like a bird
or put it on a leash for the young women in your
house?*

God's lecture to Job goes on for a couple dozen more verses, and Job replies in the next chapter:

Then Job replied to the Lord:

*2 "I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
3 You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without
knowledge?'
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.
4 "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'
5 My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
6 Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."*

(Job 42:1-6, New International Version)

Job had not seen God in health and wealth and love, but he saw God in his suffering, and that was enough. End of story, the older version, the scholars tell us. Not the end of the story, our Bible tells us. But when Job did have health and wealth and family once again, he had them along with the knowledge of the awesomeness of God.

So, Is There a Secret to Prayers for Healing?

God doesn't keep secrets. God gave us His Word. But if you need a guideline for praying for healing or for anything else in your life, consider these three steps.

1. Be very clear about what you are seeking, and submit it to God. Be aware that you may see your goal differently as you pray day by day.
2. Prioritize. Be sensible about the things you do day by day in all of your life, but seek the will of God first.
3. Move. When the Spirit moves you, obey. Don't wait to do something because you don't feel well, or you are worried about a bill, or you are upset with your children. When the Spirit moves you, don't just hear. Listen and obey.

Remember Isaiah 40:29-31:

*He gives power to the weak
and strength to the powerless.
Even youths will become weak and tired,
and young men will fall in exhaustion.
But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint.*

And remember Romans 8:37-39:

*No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is
ours through Christ, who loved us.
And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us
from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels
nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries
about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can
separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above*

or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.