

A vertical photograph of a sunset over the ocean. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, casting a shimmering path of light across the water. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange near the horizon. Several seagulls are captured in flight, their dark silhouettes contrasting against the bright sky. One seagull is perched on the sandy beach in the foreground, looking towards the water. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE PRAYER

BJ RUDGE, PH.D.

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible. Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from the New King James Version, quotations marked NIV are from the New International Version, and ESV quotations are from the English Standard Version.

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Powerful and Effective Prayer

Do you desire to be a man or woman of great faith? Do you want God to mightily use your life to leave a lasting legacy? I recently read a book entitled *50 People Every Christian Should Know*. This book presents the biographies of 50 men and women who have left a lasting impression upon the Christian faith. As I read about their lives, I discovered several common traits which defined how they lived. One of these traits was that they were people of prayer. They all understood that their effectiveness in serving God was directly connected to the time they spent on their knees. Just like these individuals of the past, God wants to take ordinary people today, and raise up another generation of spiritual giants whose lives are marked by powerful and effective prayer.

The Prayer of a Righteous Man or Woman

After calling his readers to pray in times of trouble and sickness, and to confess their sins one to another, James asserts the following, “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (James 5:16). To illustrate effective and powerful prayer, James then refers to the prophet Elijah as an example of a person who had a powerful and effective prayer life. James tells us that Elijah’s prayers both began and ended a three-and-a-half year drought on the nation of Israel (see 1 Kings 17 and 18). James also reminds us that Elijah was a man with a nature just like us (James 5:17). In other words, “He [Elijah] had no superhuman powers; he was by nature a human being and nothing more. However, when he prayed ‘that it would not rain ... it did not rain’ (cf. 1 Ki 17:1-18:42-45)...so James assures his readers that such answers to prayer are within the reach of any believer.”¹

If it is true that we can have a powerful and effective prayer life like the prophet Elijah, then the obvious question is, “How?” Many books propose answers to this question by suggesting we do things such as recite a verse or a word repeatedly, sit in silence (an altered state of consciousness), or walk a prayer circle. Prayer, however, is not some magical incantation or manipulative tool we can use to control God. As Jesus Himself taught, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetitions as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7).² Instead, prayer is communicating with God through means by which He has revealed in His word. Recognizing that we are dependent upon the Bible to understand prayer, the following are seven biblical principles that can enable any believer to have a powerful and effective prayer life just like Elijah.

¹ Donald W. Burdick, “James” in *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, eds. Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1039.

² In his study notes on this verse, John MacArthur makes the following comment, “Prayers are not to be merely recited, nor are our words to be repeated thoughtlessly, or as if they were automatic formulas.”

Trust in the Sovereignty of God

I once heard a popular television evangelist assert the following about prayer, “Prayer is man giving God permission or license to interfere in earth’s affairs. God can do nothing on earth without a human giving him this access.” In other words, he is saying that God is dependent upon us. However, when I read the Bible I find the exact opposite, that we as humans are totally dependent upon God. For example, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego understood that their lives were under the control of a sovereign God. Consider the response they gave to the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, right before he had them thrown into the fiery furnace: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so our God Whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18).

Just as it was demonstrated in the lives of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, the following verses also highlight that God is sovereign and we are not:

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, the world and those who dwell in it. For He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers” (Psalm 24:1, 2).

“Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Psalm 135:6).

“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isaiah 46:9, 10).

“He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

A good place to begin to have a powerful and effective prayer life is in realizing that we are, in every way, completely dependent upon Him. Elijah understood this and when you read 1 Kings

17 and 18 you see God is the One guiding and directing the events related to the drought. While we know God does respond to the prayer of Elijah (James 5:17), He is the one who determines when it will rain again; “Now it happened after many days that the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, ‘Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth’” (1 Kings 18:1).

Once we acknowledge that God is sovereign we must then place our trust in Him. As it says in Proverbs, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5, 6). Just as in any relationship, the way trust is established is through communication – the exact essence of what prayer is all about.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

A friend of my family went through a very difficult divorce. From all appearances, it seemed everything was fine in his marriage. He and his wife were active in their church and home schooled their children. He was very vocal about his faith and was very intentional in sharing the Gospel at work. When I received news that he and his wife had divorced, I gave him a call to see how he was doing and if there was anything I could do to help. As we talked he said, “BJ, at some point in my marriage I became a stranger to my wife. I felt like a single parent raising my kids.” This man’s marriage was destroyed when he and his wife stopped communicating.

PRAYER JOURNAL

Just as in an earthly relationship, our relationship with God will never grow unless we spend time communicating with Him. It is during those moments on our knees when our trust in God develops. To help foster trust in God in my own life, I utilize a prayer journal. This journal has been a great resource in reminding me of God’s faithfulness. The following are some of the things I record in my journal.

First, I record prayer requests. This includes both current and past prayer needs. It is encouraging to reflect on past requests and see how God has responded to them. Sometimes God did not answer the request in the way I thought He would, nor in the time I wanted, but in each case I am reminded that I serve a God who listens and responds to the needs of His children (Psalm 34:17; Matthew 7:7; John 14:13-14; Hebrews 4:16; 1 John 5:14-15).

Second, I write down spiritual lessons God has taught me. Some of these lessons have come through times of trials and tribulation, others during times of prayer and fasting. Regardless of the situation, in each case it has been of great value to reflect upon what God has taught me through the years. I also include key verses that have given me strength, encouragement and direction through various times in my life. While this is not an exhaustive list of everything in my

journal, it gives some idea of what you can include in your journal. What a faithful God we serve! May the following verses remind you of this unchanging **truth!**

“Those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You” (Psalm 9:10).

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7, NIV).

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart exults, and with my song I shall thank Him” (Psalm 28:7).

“Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us” (Psalm 62:8).

“I will say to the Lord, ‘my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!’” (Psalm 91:2).

“Let me hear your lovingkindness in the morning; for I trust in You; teach me the way in which I should walk; for to You I lift up my soul” (Psalm 143:8).

The first principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is to trust in the sovereignty of God. Just as in the case of Elijah’s prayer, we are merely the vehicles which God uses to accomplish His sovereign will. Even in the uncertainties of life, we must realize, like Job, that we are dependent upon Him, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.’ I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:2-6).

Reverence for His Name

The second principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is to have a reverence for God's name. The Lord's Prayer opens up with this concept of reverence: "Our Father Who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matthew 6:9).

ADDRESS GOD AS OUR FATHER

Before looking at the idea of showing reverence, we first need to recognize that we are to address God as our Father. This demonstrates we have an intimate relationship with God as we approach Him. In other words, this presupposes that we are one of His children. How do we become one of His children? By placing our faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone: "But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12, 13). For those who have never placed their faith in Jesus Christ, they can never expect to approach God and have Him respond to their requests. This is essential to keep in mind because as sinners (Romans 3:23) no human being has the right to go before a holy and righteous God. It is only because of what Jesus Christ has done through His life, death, and resurrection that anyone can approach God's throne and call Him Father. "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that He might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God" (Galatians 4:4-7).

APPROACH GOD WITH REVERENCE AND RESPECT

Besides having the privilege to address God as our Father because of what Jesus Christ has done, we are also called to hallow God's name when we pray. This means we should approach God with reverence and respect. We need to keep in mind that in ancient times a name expressed the individual's essence (who they are). In other words, "To know the name of a person was to know that person's total character and nature."³ Thus, by approaching God with a reverence for

³ *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Ed. Trent C. Butler (Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1007.

His name, we are in reality expressing a respect for His very being. As David proclaims, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:9). Every time we look at creation we should respond like David with a sense of awe and marvel that we have the privilege to approach the One who created it.

Many people approach God without this sense of reverence. They pray to God like He is one of their buddies, and they dictate how and when they are going to pray to Him. They see God as being there to respond to them at their beck and call. In our house, my wife and I have made it a pattern to pray with our children every morning before school and every night. One evening as we were getting them ready to go to bed, I told them it was time to pray. At this time in my life, we had four children ages one to nine.

As I began to pray, they started talking and laughing. After a few minutes of this behavior, with warnings of various punishments, I figured out a better way to handle the situation. I asked the following question, “When you are sitting in your classroom and the principal walks in how do you act?” My two oldest responded by saying they are quiet and sit still and show respect to the principal. I then asked the following, “Why are you willing to show respect to the principal, but when we pray to the very One who created you and everything you see in this world, why do you not show the same respect?” Since God is our Father, we should have reverence and show respect for His name.

Let’s not wait until we are about ready to fall asleep and **then** decide to give God a few minutes. Instead, we need to make our prayer time with God the first and most important part of our day. In his discussion of effective prayer, Charles Spurgeon correctly notes the reverence and respect we must have as we go before the presence of God in prayer:

Our spiritual sacrifices should be offered with holy carefulness. God forbid that our prayer should be a mere leaping out of one's bed and kneeling down, and saying anything that comes first to hand; on the contrary, may we wait upon the Lord with holy fear and sacred awe.⁴

⁴Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Power in Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1996), 65.

Seek His Will and Not Our Own

The third principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is to seek God's will and not our own. This is taught by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In other words, "The one truly praying will pray concerning the establishment of God's kingdom and the realization of His will on earth."⁵

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

The question now is, "What is God's will?" Fortunately, God's Word provides us with direction in finding this out. The following are just a few verses that give us insight into the will of God. First, God's will is for our sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7). In other words, God desires us to live a life of holiness. Second, God's will is for us to live a life of sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). This means we are to live under His control and serve Him. Third, God's will is for us to be Spirit-filled (Ephesians 5:17-18). This is a call to live under the influence of the Holy Spirit.⁶ By recognizing these aspects of God's will, we can then approach our prayer life in such a way that we want to see our requests accomplish His will. Thus, when we go before God in prayer about a personal matter, we should desire to see His response to our requests draw us closer to Him and conform us into His image.

SUBMIT TO THE WILL OF GOD

Effective and powerful prayer always submits to the purposes and plans of God. Jesus is the best example of this as God in flesh (John 1:1; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9), submitting to the will of His Father. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays in the following manner, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The very

⁵J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 183.

⁶For a more in-depth study on the topic of God's will, please refer to my book, *Living Your Life in the Center of God's Will*.

essence of Jesus' entire life reflects His willingness to humble Himself and submit to the will of His Father (see Philippians 2:5-11).

The apostle John also acknowledges how we should pray according to God's will. "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). John could not have stated it more clearly, if we want God to hear our prayers, then we must seek God's will and not our own.

In my own life, I have learned the importance of submitting my will to God. When I was younger my desire was to be a professional soccer player. Certainly, there was nothing wrong with me aspiring to such a lofty goal. The problem was I allowed my desire to play soccer to be more important than my desire to serve and honor God. Soccer had become my identity and my value was based upon it. In essence, I was living a self-centered life, rather than a Christ-centered life and my prayers reflected it. The pursuit of my own dreams virtually destroyed me and it took three injuries, which required surgery on my left ankle and both of my knees, to bring me to a point in my life where I began to seek God's will and not my own. I remember after my third operation I wrote the following in my prayer journal, "God, I give my life and desires to you. Take this and build within me a desire to serve You; stronger than my desire to play soccer."⁷ As it says in Proverbs, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose [will] that prevails" (19:21, NIV).

We must remember that our prayer lives will be ineffective if we approach God on our own terms and in accordance to our own will. It will not be until we are willing to humble ourselves, and submit to His will for our lives, that we will begin to see our prayer lives being powerful and effective just like Elijah. In the words of the Puritan, John Bunyan:

"... prayer submits to the will of God, and says, Thy will be done, as Christ has taught (Matt. 6:10); therefore the people of the Lord in all humility are to lay themselves and their prayers, and all that they have, at the foot of their God, to be disposed of by Him as He in His heavenly wisdom sees best. Yet not doubting but God will answer the desire of His people that way that shall be most for their advantage and His glory."⁸

⁷ You can read my book, *Faith Through the Fire*, which details what God taught me through these injuries and how He eventually brought soccer back into my life.

⁸ John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth, 2005), 22.

Look to Jesus Christ as our Example

A fourth principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is to model our prayer life after Jesus Christ. Jesus' life was defined by prayer. At the start of his ministry, as He was baptized, He prayed (Luke 3:21). Before He chose His disciples He spent time in prayer (Luke 6:12-16). Before He was betrayed, arrested, and condemned to death, He was on His knees in prayer (Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32; Luke 22:41; John 17). The display of this consistent pattern of prayer obviously left an impression on Jesus' disciples as we find them asking Jesus, when He was finished praying, just how to pray. "It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples'" (Luke 11:1). While it was common at this time for rabbis to compose prayers for their disciples, the question by the disciples was more than just wanting to have a prayer to recite. They had already been taught by Jesus how prayer was not a showy presentation (Matthew 6:5) nor just the reciting of words (Matthew 6:7). Instead, I believe they wanted the same power and effectiveness Jesus demonstrated in His prayer life. As one of my former students asserts in an excellent book he wrote on the doctrine of prayer:

The disciples had been used to going to the synagogues and the temple and hearing the cold, impersonal, repetitious prayers of the Pharisees. But once they began following Jesus, they must have immediately noticed that His prayer life was different. It was passionate and powerful. It was much different than what they were used to. When Jesus prayed things happened. Jesus' prayer life commanded the disciples' attention enough for them to ask Him for instruction on how to pray.⁹

As we look to model our prayer lives after Jesus, just like the disciples, the following are two keys that Jesus both exemplified and taught His disciples about prayer.

⁹ Mike J. Sarkissian, *Before God: The Biblical Doctrine of Prayer* (USA: Xulon Press, 2009), 51.

SPEND PRIVATE TIME IN PRAYER

First, Jesus separated Himself from others to spend time in prayer with His Father. In other words, Jesus recognized the importance of spending *private* time in prayer. The following are a few examples where we see Jesus doing this:

“After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone” (Matthew 14:23).

“In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there” (Mark 1:35).

“Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray” (Luke 5:16).

One of the challenges we all face when it comes to spending time alone in prayer is being bombarded with distractions and busy schedules. I understand this, as I have six children, work full time in the ministry, coach high school soccer, and teach classes as a professor at an area university.

While preparing for a major speaking engagement, I decided to set aside some special time in prayer. The plan was, that once my wife and I had gotten all of our children to bed, there would be time in the evenings to do this. However, my daughter, Hannah, who at the time was 18 months, had different plans. Even though she had been going to bed over the past few weeks at her scheduled time, she now wanted to stay up and play with daddy! For the next several evenings my 18-month-old daughter lay beside me on the couch while I prayed.

It is inevitable that we are going to face distractions and times when we are busy. However, they should never be an excuse not to do the very thing Jesus did during His time here on earth. None of us is busier than He was, and if He could make time to separate Himself to pray, we can do the same. While we may not have a mountain or wilderness available for solitude, we can still find ways to spend time alone with God, making private prayer a daily habit. I have never met one person who, as they were coming to the end of his or her life, ever regretted having done this. In fact, as Matthew Henry, who wrote one of the best known commentaries on the Bible in the English language, said to his friend on his deathbed, “You have been asked to take notice of the sayings of dying men – this is mine: that a life spent in the service of God and communion with Him is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this world.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *50 People Every Christian Should Know* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 29.

BE PERSISTENT IN PRAYER

Second, Jesus also taught His disciples the importance of being *persistent* in prayer. Right after Jesus taught His disciples the Lord's Prayer, He tells them a parable that illustrates the importance of being persistent in prayer (Luke 11:5-13). In this parable, Jesus asks His disciples what they would do if a friend unexpectedly showed up at their house and they had no food to give them. In a culture that highly valued hospitality, this parable demonstrates how they would find the means to meet their obligation to feed and lodge their friend for the night. For instance, despite the fact it was night and their neighbor was sleeping, the host would go to the neighbor's house and ask for food. Note the response of the neighbor; he did not want to get up to give them food because he would wake up his children. This may not make sense to us today. However, at this time "the children would sleep on mats on the floor of the one-room dwelling; unbolting the heavy bar that was laid through rings attached to the door was a bother and would make noise that would awaken them."¹¹ So considering this, we can understand why the neighbor did not want to get up and get the food. Yet, Jesus goes on to explain that the person would eventually get up and do it, not because he was a friend, but because of his persistence. The Greek word for persistence carries with it the idea of urgency, boldness, shamelessness, and relentlessness. Thus, just as the friend was not afraid to go to his neighbor, despite the fact it was late at night; so too, we should approach God with that same boldness and persistence. Why should we do this? Because as this parable demonstrates,¹² "if a sleeping neighbor...will act in response to [a] persistent request, how much more God."¹³

The idea of persistence in prayer is also taught by the apostle Paul. For example, Paul tells the believers in Colosse to devote themselves or be persistent in prayer (Colossians 4:2). He also tells the believers in Thessalonica to pray without ceasing or to pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 219.

¹² See also the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) as another example of the importance of persistence.

¹³ J.D. G. Dunn, "Prayer," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and others (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), 624.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PATIENCE

One of the keys to being persistent in prayer is to be *patient*. Abraham had to wait around 25 years before God fulfilled His covenant-promise that he would have a son. For me, it took about 15 years of prayer before I saw one of my wife's family members put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Perhaps many of you who are reading this have also been in prayer about a situation for an extended period of time. Regardless of how long it has been, remember not to put a time limit on God. Continue to be patient and persistent! You never know when God will respond, and you do not know what God may be doing right now in that situation. Regarding the family member I was praying for, I never knew until we talked, all that God had been doing in his life during the time I was praying for him.

A quick word of caution! Persistence in prayer does not mean we always get the response we want. Paul understood this as he prayed three times for God to remove his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7, 8). Despite his pleading, God's response to Paul is a great reminder to all of us: His grace is sufficient for anything we may face. "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NKJV). Persistence in prayer is not about trying to get God to do what we want. Instead, it is patiently waiting upon God to respond according to His will.

Jesus truly gives us a great example of how we should pray. As we look to model our prayer life after Him, we need to ask ourselves these questions: "Would anyone want to ask me to teach them how to pray?"; "Is my prayer life a model for others?"

A Heart of Thankfulness

A fifth principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is that we must have a heart of thankfulness. The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” The result of this is “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and you minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

We should always be mindful that we are to approach God with a heart of thankfulness. Jesus is a great example of what it means to have a heart of thankfulness. Even though He was God in flesh, He still took time to thank the Father: “Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted” (John 6:11); “So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, ‘Father, I thank You that You have heard Me’” (John 11:41).

AN EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION

I was reminded of the importance of having a heart of thankfulness when my father and I had a conversation about the birth of my son Lucas. When my wife was pregnant with him she was diagnosed with group B strep. We were told it was not serious, but it would require her to receive an antibiotic a few hours before Lucas would be born. My wife was somewhat concerned because with her previous pregnancy she had our daughter within a few hours. So in light of this, she was worried about making sure she would get the antibiotic prior to delivering our son. To ease her anxiety the doctor told my wife she would induce her so there would be no concern about getting the antibiotic. The day for her to be induced was about a week before her actual due date. Other than the need of the antibiotic, my wife was progressing along with the pregnancy, so the doctor had no problem inducing a week early. Everything went well that day.

My wife took the antibiotic, and labor, at least from my standpoint, moved along smoothly. As my son was being born the doctor noticed the cord wrapped around his neck, and she quickly removed it. In the excitement of having another child, I didn’t think too much, at the time, about the implications of the cord around his neck. It was not until after, discussing this with my wife and my dad, that we all realized how we could have lost Lucas. I truly believe that if my wife had not been induced a week early, my son might not be here today. I finally did what I should have done at the moment he was born – I got down on my knees and thanked the Lord!

When my son was born, it was a rainy and overcast day. However, at the moment he was born, the doctor commented how the sun suddenly came out and shone through the window. What a reminder to us of God’s faithfulness, as He blessed our lives with our son Lucas (which,

by the way, means “light bearer”). His birth date also was a blessing to my father. It was the same date, July 5, that his little brother, at seven years of age, was killed by a car so many years ago.

Unfortunately, many times we become so preoccupied with our list of wants and needs that we forget to step back and thank God for all He has done for us. We have the tendency to approach God with a sense of entitlement. Thus, we attempt to make God into some type of cosmic genie where all we have to do is rub the lamp to get what we want – what we feel we deserve! This attitude has created a false understanding of how to approach God and the erroneous idea that God is merely a means to gain wealth and health. One televangelist was selling green prayer cloths, which he said could bring miracles of healing and financial prosperity.

In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3). In other words, the focus of our prayers should not be on financial wealth, but on our daily needs as we approach God with an expression of gratitude.¹⁴ As Paul told the Colossians, “devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving [a thankful heart]” (Colossians 4:2).

AN ATTITUDE OF CONTENTMENT

When I was in Haiti as a youth, I witnessed an amazing expression of gratitude and an attitude of contentment. The mission compound where we stayed took food and water to a remote village once a week. This village was extremely poor and the people had to walk miles to get water. As we approached this tiny village I was struck by two images. One was the extreme poverty and dire conditions in which the people lived. Their village was situated along a dirt path with minimal vegetation. The huts were made of dirt, straw, and what appeared to be old tin metal sheets. The children were running around naked and the adults in tattered clothes.

Besides this image of extreme poverty, I was struck by the faces of the people as we entered the village. They began to smile and wave as they ran towards their huts, then came out wearing their *best* clothes (old and worn-out) as they headed to the one-room church that had been built by the mission compound. As we walked into the church they were singing a song. I asked our interpreter what they were singing, and he said they were thanking God for all He had given them. I looked around and thought to myself, “What things?” These people had no houses or cars, barely any food or clothes, and lived in an extremely dusty environment. How can they be thankful?

Then I realized that a thankful heart does not focus on what it lacks but is content with, and grateful for, what it has. As the apostle Paul reminded the believers in Philippi, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of

¹⁴I am not asserting that it is a sin to have wealth. The Bible is clear that it is the LOVE of money that is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:11-13).

An attitude of contentment takes the focus off of our circumstances and on to our Source of Strength. It reminds us that we serve a God Who is greater than anything we face, and as the Psalmist reminds us, His greatness is the reason we can have a heart of thankfulness. “Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods” (Psalm 95:2, 3).

A thankful heart is not just another principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life, but it is also the will of God, “Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

Avoiding the Schemes of Satan

The sixth principle in having a powerful and effective prayer life is we must avoid the schemes of Satan.

WE ARE IN A SPIRITUAL BATTLE

As Christians, we need to recognize that we are engaged in a spiritual battle. As the apostle Paul told the Ephesians, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12, NKJV). This battle goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Since that time, Satan has been given delegated authority by God over this world (1 John 5:19), which is why Jesus refers to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and the apostle Paul refers to him as the god of this age/world (2 Corinthians 4:4).

As the ruler of this world, Satan desires to bring all humans under his authority as he opposes every believer in Jesus Christ. This murderer and father of lies (John 8:44) is the adversary of all Christians, and like a roaring lion, he seeks to devour and destroy every follower of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:8). It is no wonder that Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:13, NKJV). Since we recognize that we are in a spiritual battle, the obvious question now is how do we prepare for this battle?”

We must put on the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17), and renew our minds daily by studying, reflecting, and applying God’s Word (Romans 12:2) to prepare for the spiritual battles we will face in this life. Prayer is also essential in our preparation. One person in my life who was a great example of spiritual preparation was my grandmother Flo. My grandmother was a 4 foot 10 inch redhead, who wore high heels and had bobby pins in her hair. While she certainly was not a physically intimidating person, she certainly was someone I would want beside me in a spiritual battle. She spent her life both studying and memorizing God’s Word, and praying for her family and friends. I have never met anyone as devoted to prayer as she was, and through her persistence and faithfulness, God responded to her requests in powerful ways. She truly is a great example of how one should prepare to engage in spiritual warfare, and equip him or herself to avoid the schemes of Satan.

SCHEME 1: SIN

In my experience, I have seen Satan use three schemes in an attempt to adversely affect our prayer lives. The first of these is sin. As the Psalmist declares, “Come and hear, all who fear God, and I will tell of what He has done for my soul. I cried to Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue. If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Psalm 66:16-18). Isaiah also recognized how sin acts as a hindrance to our prayer life. Consider what he said to the children of Israel, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear (Isaiah 59:1, 2). Consider, also, how the consistent pattern of sin and disobedience in the life of Saul (1 Samuel 13:1-15; 15:10-34) impacted his communication with God, “When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him” (1 Samuel 28:5, 6).

If we want to have powerful and effective prayer lives, we must not allow sin to gain a foothold in our lives. While we all sin in this life (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:10), if we are truly God’s children we will seek to restore our fellowship with God by confessing our sins – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).¹⁵ This is the very thing that Jesus taught His disciples in the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our debts [sins]” (Matthew 6:12).¹⁶ Confession of sin is an essential part of having an unhindered line of communication with God. David understood this reality, and after He was caught in an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, he wrote the following prayer of repentance¹⁷:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight – that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be

¹⁵ Another mark that we are truly one of God’s children is we will not habitually walk in sin (1 John 1:6, 7).

¹⁶ The rest of this verse calls us to forgive our debtors. We need to remember that a lack of extending forgiveness to others is another hindrance to our prayer life (Mark 11:25).

¹⁷ Repentance involves both turning from our sinful way of living and turning toward Jesus Christ.

converted to You. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise (Psalm 51:1-17, NKJV).

David's act of sin caused him to experience separation in his relationship with God. However, even though David experienced lifetime consequences from His act of disobedience, God in His grace and mercy forgave him and restored David's relationship. Just like David, anytime we find ourselves caught in sin, we need to go humbly before God's throne of grace and repent of our sins so that we too can enjoy the benefits of having fellowship with our Creator. Take this opportunity right now. Examine your life, and make sure you are not allowing any sin(s) to hinder your relationship with God. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV).

SCHEME 2: DOUBT

A second scheme Satan uses to adversely affect our prayer life is doubt. This subterfuge of Satan goes back to the Garden of Eden. It is here we see Satan trying to persuade Eve to question the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God. In other words, Satan tried to get her to doubt what God had said to her, "Did God actually say..." (Genesis 3:1, ESV). Through this scheme of doubt, Satan was able to get Adam and Eve to disobey God's command, which in turn ruined the perfect fellowship they had with Him. Where they once had direct access to God as He walked with them in the garden in the cool of the day, they now found themselves hiding from Him (Genesis 3:8), also losing access to the perfect environment God had created for them (Genesis 3:23, 24).

In his discussion of dealing with trials, James highlights the point of approaching God without doubt: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:5-8). Like sin, doubt will act as a hindrance to our prayer life. Therefore, as noted in the very first principle, we must TRUST in the sovereignty of God. As John MacArthur notes, "God requires the right kind of asking when we come to Him in prayer. We

must ask without doubting, which means our prayers have to be accompanied by authentic trust in God's character, purposes and promises."¹⁸

This is where the prayer journal, mentioned earlier in the chapter, can be of great value. As you face challenges and trials it is easy to have thoughts of doubt and to question whether God is even listening to your prayers. When these moments come, you can go back into your journal and reflect upon God's past faithfulness. Like Job, we may not have a full understanding of the *why*, but we can still have the faith to know *Who* is with us. We need to remember that "without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

SCHEME 3: WORLDLY INFLUENCES

A third scheme Satan uses to adversely hinder our prayer life is through worldly influences. Satan will use the things of this world to divert our focus and time away from God and onto our own personal pleasures and pursuits. Thus, we find the most common reason why people do not pray is due to a lack of time (even though studies show that the average person spends about five hours a day in leisure activity). This demonstrates that we find the time to do the things we want to do, and that are important to us. While I do not advocate that we should disregard all leisure activity and personal hobbies, I am recommending that we should not seek these at the expense of our own time with God. Our time with Him should not only be the priority of the day, but it should be something we incorporate into everything we do! We need to realize that we live in a fallen world, which is under the delegated authority of Satan. The philosophy that drives this world is not designed to draw us closer to Jesus Christ, but is meant to pull us away from Him. This is why the apostle John states the following: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:15, 16).

The question we all need to ask ourselves is, "How are we spending our time?" The depth of our walk with the Lord will ultimately be connected to the amount of time we spend on our knees. Therefore, there is no way we can ever expect to be powerful and effective for Him, nor avoid the schemes of Satan, if our time is primarily invested in the things of this world. We need to remove those unnecessary distractions that pull us away from spending time with Him, making prayer more than just another item to check off our "to do" list; we must make it a passion. We need to pursue God with all our heart, and desire to constantly be in His presence.

¹⁸John MacArthur, *Lord, Teach Me to Pray: An Invitation to Intimate Prayer* (Nashville: Countryman, 2003), 114.

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

“O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

“I love the Lord, because He hears my voice and my supplications. Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live” (Psalm 116:1, 2).

Ultimate Goal is His Glory

The final principle for powerful and effective prayer is the goal of prayer: God's glory. David was a person who constantly desired to be in the presence of God and see Him glorified. This can be found throughout the various Psalms attributed to him. However, we sometimes forget that he wrote many of the Psalms during times of trial and tribulation. One example is Psalm 57 where we find David hiding from Saul. Before David actually sat on the throne as king over Israel, he faced constant threats from Saul and calamitous circumstances. Although God, through Samuel, had removed his hand of blessing from Saul, rejected him as the king over Israel (1 Samuel 13:13, 14; 15:22-26), and anointed David king instead (1 Samuel 16:1-13), David still had to face many challenges before he took his rightful place.

Threatened by enemies like Saul, we find that David's request is not deliverance from his personal problems, but for God to be glorified in the midst of them: "I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to You among the nations. For Your lovingkindness is great to the heavens and Your truth to the clouds. Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let Your glory be above all the earth" (57:9-11).

The apostle Paul also expressed his desire to see God glorified. As a prisoner in Rome, awaiting his trial for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he uttered the following words to the believers in Philippi, "For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Philippians 1:19, 20, NIV). In the midst of imprisonment, Paul's greatest desire was that God be glorified (exalted/honored), even if that meant physical death.

PERSONAL TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Through many trials and tribulations in my life, I have had to deal with the doubts and fears of not fully understanding why I had to go through them. Whether it was the time I almost lost my house; to watching my mom courageously battle cancer; to almost losing my daughter Samantha at only one week old; to dealing with injuries and health issues, there have been many times in my life that have brought me to my knees. I have learned in these moments that the ultimate goal/desire for my prayer life is to see God glorified in my circumstances. I must admit that it is hard to come to the point where you see the ultimate goal of prayer to be God's glory, because to do so means you are willing to surrender your entire life (goals/dreams/etc.) to God; even those moments when you experience the greatest pain and hurt.

One of those moments in my life was when my wife had a miscarriage. I not only had to deal with my own pain of losing our child, but I had to watch my wife suffer even more. This was so difficult, because as her husband, all I wanted was to be able to take away her pain. While on my knees in prayer I came across the verse mentioned above (Philippians 1:19, 20). After reading this, my prayer throughout the situation was that God would be glorified. While there were many nights of tears, I gained strength from knowing that God would be glorified through our pain and that one day we would stand before Him and hold the child we had lost.

THE EXPRESSION OF OUR EMOTIONS

As we seek to see God glorified in the circumstances of our lives, we can still express our emotions to God in prayer. This can be a means by which we lay our fear, hurt, pain, and doubt at the throne of God. By way of example, I have lived with an autoimmune disorder for the past ten years. During this time, I have spent many hours on my knees in prayer over this issue, and I have expressed a variety of emotions to God. I have found myself strengthened and encouraged to know that God hears my cries and personally understands what I am going through (Hebrews 4:14-16). While I believe God can heal me of this illness, I have committed this to Him. I desire to see Him glorified regardless of whether He heals me or not.

The Psalms are a great example of how human emotion is expressed to God in prayer. Consider the following examples, and remember that as David expressed his emotions he never forgot the One to Whom he was going with his request. Whether expressing fear, anguish, or hopelessness, David always came back to the reality that He served a God who was faithful, trustworthy, and merciful.

Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled; but You, O Lord – how long? Return, O Lord, deliver me! Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake! (Psalm 6:2-4, NKJV).

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me...But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me (Psalm 13:1, 5, 6, NKJV).

Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye wastes away with grief, yes, my soul and my body! For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away... Oh, how great is Your goodness, which You have laid up for

those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You in the presence of the sons of men! (Psalm 31:9, 10, 19, NKJV).

My heart is severely pained within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me... Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved (Psalm 55:4, 5, 22, NKJV).

Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for my God... Hear me, O Lord, for Your lovingkindness is good; turn to me according to the multitude of Your tender mercies (Psalm 69:1-3, 16, NKJV).

Not Why but Whom

Prayer is a great reminder that no matter what we face, we can go before the Creator of this world and not only find comfort, guidance, and strength, but also hope. A good friend of mine went through a very difficult time. He lost his mother to cancer, his wife had a miscarriage, and his father was diagnosed with cancer. Although he is a person of faith, he wrestled with the question of why a loving God would allow this to happen. While I could not give him a definitive reason WHY all these tragic events occurred in his life, I was able to remind him WHOM he could look to for HOPE in the midst of the challenges he faced.

One of the unique features of the Christian faith is that God is not some distant Being unconcerned with us, nor is He some impersonal force. Instead, God is a personal Being who loves us so much that He came down to earth, experienced all that we experience, and willingly suffered and died for our sins. The God of the Bible sympathizes with us in our pain and suffering (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15); moreover, through His death and resurrection, He has provided the solution to evil, pain, and suffering.

As the apostle Paul promised, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). No matter what we as believers face in this life, may we always remember that we serve a faithful God. We may not understand the WHY of our situation, but we can know WHO gives us HOPE.

When one considers everything God is preparing for His children for all eternity, the undeniable conclusion is that He loves us greatly! So, in the difficult times in our lives, let us go to the Lord in prayer as He is our source of strength and hope.

THE STORY OF SAMANTHA: GOD HEARS OUR PRAYERS

We all know that in this life we will experience both good times and bad times. As it says in the Bible, “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, NKJV). In these difficult times, it is on our knees where we find the strength we need to keep moving forward. One of those times was when my wife and I nearly lost one of our children. As you read the following story about our daughter Samantha, may it be a reminder that no matter what we go through, God does hear our prayers.

The birth of our fifth daughter, Samantha, was an exceptional blessing from the Lord. About a year before she was born, my wife and I went through the painful process of a miscarriage. So holding Samantha in our arms helped to relieve some of the residual pain from the loss of our

previous child. When Samantha came home she was the focus of our attention and was instantaneously smothered by her sisters and brother. At her first doctor's appointment (six days old) my wife shared with the doctor that Samantha made lots of noise, almost as if she were snoring, and that she seemed to eat very fast. He told us Samantha had an underdeveloped epiglottis which caused these noises. He recommended we buy bottles that would help her to drink more slowly and, if needed, also add cereal to her formula.

The day following the appointment, on Samantha's one-week birthday, we decided to buy different bottles. Our three-year-old daughter Hannah came with us, as she was having some difficulty adjusting to the new baby. We thought it would be good for her to have some time alone with mommy and daddy. My mother-in-law stayed home with Samantha and our other three children – the first time Tara had left Samantha. Along with the adjustment of a new baby, we had been dealing with three sick kids, so it was enjoyable to get out of the house, even if we were only going to the store.

On our way home I was on the phone talking to a friend. During the conversation my phone beeped, alerting me of another call. When I looked at the number it was from our house. Since my wife had just talked to her mother, and we were only two minutes away from our house I did not click over. Assuming it was just one of the kids calling with a question, I kept talking to my friend. I did mention to Tara that we had a call from the house. Then my wife did what I should have done and called back to make sure everything was OK. My mother-in-law informed us that something was wrong with the baby. Less than a minute away, we rushed toward our house. At this point I still did not think there was a major crisis. As we pulled into the driveway my wife jumped out of the car and ran into the house as I unbuckled Hannah. As Hannah and I walked toward the house, I realized we were facing something serious. My wife was carrying Samantha, telling me we needed to get her to the emergency room immediately.

When she was only a few feet away from our car, my wife, who is a nurse, turned around and looked right at me. From her facial expression, I knew something was terribly wrong. Tara exclaimed, with terror in her voice, "I do not know what is wrong with her!" I looked at my daughter. Her head was slumped over, and I truly thought, at that moment, we had lost her. I felt so helpless.

Looking at my daughter and hearing the terror in my wife's voice, I remember telling my mother-in-law to call 911, feeling we would not make it to the hospital in time. I then ran to over to our neighbor who was a nurse in the maternity ward at our local hospital. Not knowing if she was even home, I pounded on her door at 9:30 p.m. and, as it opened, all I could say was, "Rachel, there is something wrong with the baby!" Both of us ran back to my house and, as soon as my wife saw Rachel, she told me later, her nursing instincts kicked back in.

When Rachel saw Samantha she observed a significant amount of what seemed to be saliva coming out of her mouth. Samantha's eyes were closed and covered with matter. At this point, my wife yelled to one of our daughters to get the syringe we brought home from the hospital to suction Samantha's mouth. As we waited for the ambulance to arrive, I remember Tara and Rachel taking turns suctioning the saliva from Samantha's mouth as my other children stood in

the background watching all of this unfold. My mother-in-law told me later that my son Lucas was on the steps crying when we left in the ambulance. Along with his sisters, he had no idea if they would ever see their baby sister alive again.

It had seemed like an eternity for the ambulance to arrive. When it did come, my wife carried Samantha in her arms to the back of the ambulance and continued to suction her all the way to the hospital while I followed in our car. While driving, I called my parents to tell them what was happening. They dropped their groceries and immediately headed to the hospital – praying all the way. After speaking with my father, I wept the rest of the way to the hospital. I kept crying out, “Lord, please do not let my daughter die!” I had no idea as I drove behind the ambulance if I would ever see her alive again. It was the loneliest and most helpless I have ever felt in my life. As a father it is my job to protect my children, and I could do nothing but cry out to God.

Until we arrived at the hospital, it was as if time was standing still. Tara told me later, that as she was walking towards our car, Samantha had gone limp in her arms as her head fell backwards. She thought Samantha had had a seizure; she had seen some of her adult patients have seizures, but never before an infant.

Pulling up to the emergency room, I saw my parents waiting for us. I ran over to the ambulance as my wife carried Samantha into the ER. The hospital staff knew we were coming and they were ready for us. As I entered the ER doors, fear and panic overwhelmed me. I had no idea what to expect. In the midst of all the ER staff, machines and devices, all Tara and I remember seeing was one particular nurse. Because she attended our church, we both knew her. Neither of us had realized she worked at the hospital, but seeing the familiar face of another believer was such an encouragement and source of strength for us. I remember my wife telling this woman a few weeks later that her presence in the ER brought us such peace.

A variety of tests were run on Samantha. It was heartbreaking to see our one-week-old daughter with needles stuck in her, hooked up to various monitors. The good news, however, was that, in spite of her crying, she was stable. Yet, it was still unknown what had happened, and there was a concern that she may have had a seizure. So, at the recommendation of the ER doctor, we decided to transport Samantha by ambulance to Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital – over an hour’s drive from our house.

At Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital, Samantha underwent numerous tests requiring blood work, a urine sample, spinal tap, and a check of her brain activity. In each of these tests, my wife and I committed every decision we had to make to prayer. Physical exhaustion accompanied emotional exhaustion, as we spent the entire night awake in the ER of the children’s hospital. The purpose for these tests was to eliminate the worst case scenario. The doctor’s main concern was whether Samantha had had a seizure. While relief came with the news that each test was normal, there was still the underlying question of what had happened.

Following our night in the ER, it was decided to move Samantha to her own room for additional tests. The image I still carry in my mind is of my baby daughter laying there, helpless, throughout all of these tests.

Over the next two days, the majority of information we got back from the various tests told us what was **not** wrong. One of these tests was an EEG where probes attached to Samantha's head evaluated her brain activity. As in the other tests, this one came back fine, eliminating any possibility of seizure activity – one of our main concerns. Throughout this process of elimination my wife and I reminded the doctors of what we already knew; that her epiglottis was not fully developed. Based on this, it was recommended that Samantha undergo a barium swallow where dye would be put in her bottle and x-rays taken while she ate.

This test confirmed concerns over her eating, as she was swallowing very fast, and there was a high risk of food trickling back into her trachea. As a result, the therapist from the feeding center at the hospital recommended we switch her to a slower flowing nipple and add cereal to thicken her formula. This, in turn, would help ensure that she would eat more slowly. Since we knew she already had reflux issues, using a slower flow would help to keep her food down. For the next several hours, they monitored her eating to assess the correct amount of cereal to add and to check her vitals while she ate. Once they were satisfied with her adjustment to the new eating protocol, the doctors told us that they would be comfortable allowing us to take her home.

There was definite relief and excitement that this crisis appeared to be ending, but still lingered the question, "What, exactly, had happened?" The first day we were at Pittsburgh Children's Hospital, one of the pediatricians referenced something called Sandifer's Syndrome. We were told this was a rare condition related to acid reflux where symptoms mimic seizures. This diagnosis was again brought up as the most likely explanation for what had occurred with Samantha. While it is something that children outgrow, and is typically not life threatening, there was still the possibility she could have recurring episodes.

As when we first brought Samantha home following her birth, there was renewed joy and excitement in having her home again. The first day back all we wanted to do as a family was to just huddle around Samantha and hold her. We all knew we were truly blessed by God to have her back home. While we had to adapt our lifestyles to accommodate Samantha's condition, not one day goes by that we do not look at her and realize how thankful we are to God for taking care of her. With adjustments to how she eats and sleeps, we have seen great progress in her development, and although there have been a few scary moments, as each day passes we see fewer symptoms related to her condition.

Throughout the ordeal with Samantha, God has shown me what it means to trust Him, and not allow fear to control me. While my trust in God was already present, I gained new insight into how it is lived out. One thing we must all remember is that tragedy and trials can come at any moment. Therefore, it is vital that we spend each day in prayer and reading God's Word, because when these moments come and our faith is tested, our trust in God will already be established because of the time we have spent with Him.

At the baby dedication ceremony for Samantha, I shared that her name (the female version of Samuel) means "God has heard." I said this name was so appropriate with all that she has gone through, and that my prayer for her was that God would use her life to remind everyone she

meets that God does hear our prayers. As David himself proclaimed, “I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears” (Psalm 34:4, NKJV).

Leaving a Legacy

One afternoon while walking through the woods, spending time with the Lord in prayer, I reflected upon my life. Not only contemplating my past, I began to examine where I was in the present. I specifically thought of how I was spending my time and how this might impact my future. I thought of my children and what type of legacy I was leaving for them, and asked myself, “If I were to pass away, how would my children describe me? Would they talk about a father who not only loved them, but also desired to continually be in the presence of the Lord? Would they see me as a man who invested his life in prayer and in fulfilling God’s calling on his life? Would they want to follow in my footsteps and emulate my spiritual walk with the Lord?”

The reality is that all of us will leave a legacy. Regardless of whether we are married and have children or not, God places people in our lives who are part of our circle of influence. A friend of mine has never been married and has no children, but he recognizes that he has been called by God to be a spiritual role model for his nieces and nephews. Another friend told me that he and his wife were not able to have children. However, he realizes that God has still called him to be a godly example to others. So he invests his time working with the children at his church, and serving as a chaplain at a local hospital to patients who are dying.

Considering this, ask yourself the following question: “What spiritual legacy am I leaving with the people God has put in my life?” The answer to this question will depend upon how much time you spend in prayer. For it is in the time we spend in prayer that God prepares and equips us for His calling on our lives. As Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones asserts in his studies on the Sermon on the Mount:

“Prayer is beyond any question the highest activity of the human soul.
Man is at his greatest and highest when, upon his knees, he comes face to face with God.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Bill Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

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