

Hindered Prayers

By
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“That your prayers be not hindered,” I Peter 3:7 and Judges 16:28-30

[Editor’s note: This sermon was preached to the student body at Holmes Theological Seminary in 1952.]

Prayer is the one superlative opportunity of the human race, the grandest privilege God ever gave to man. Someone has called it “the Christian’s vital breath.”

It is the Jacob’s ladder by which men may climb from the brink of despair and sin to the heights of eternal glory and purity.

It is a heaven-born instinct that finds its roots in the deepest recesses of the human heart.

It is the one common heritage that brings all men together on common grounds.

My little girl learned the value of prayer early in life. She disobeyed her mother and Agnes was about to give her a spanking. And as she always does before spanking, they bowed their heads and prayed. As soon as Agnes said “amen”, our little girl said, “Let’s pray again, mama.” She figured as long as they were praying, there wouldn’t be any spanking. Not exactly the right motive, but a truth nonetheless. The more we pray, the less opportunity we have to get into trouble.

The greatest prayers are the prayers of the Bible. Strange though it is, the greatest prayers are the short prayers. Long prayers have little place in the Bible. Mighty armies have been defeated, victories won, kingdoms subdued – all because of short, passionate prayers. The whole course of history has been changed by prayer. The heavens have been shaken and the earth has moved because of prayer.

Moses had come down from the mount to find the people engaged in the worship of a golden calf. Judgment was meted out by the Levites as they went through the camp slaying with the sword those guilty of worshiping the calf. Over three thousand souls were slain when Moses, moved by compassion, flung himself before God and cried out: “O God, forgive this people if you can. But if you cannot forgive them, then blot my name out of the book which thou hast written.” Just a few words, a short prayer, but God heard him and the people were spared.

During the conquests of Joshua after Ai had fallen, the five kings of the Amorites marched on Gibeon to destroy it. In desperation they called on Joshua for help. With all the army of fighting men, Joshua fought them. God was with them and sent mighty hailstones upon the enemy and slew thousands. The day was about over, the sun was sinking in the west, but the battle was not finished. Standing in sight of all the people, Joshua looked at the sun and prayed: “Sun, stand thou still over Gibeon and thou moon in the valley of Ajilon.” And the record has it that the sun stood still and the moon stayed in its place for the space of about a whole day.

King Ahab led a backslidden nation. They gathered on the top of Mt. Carmel where Elijah had challenged the false prophets of Baal in the sight of all Israel. For three and a half years no rain or dew had fallen on the earth. The fate of the nation was hanging in the balance. The outcome of this crisis would decide the destiny of Israel. Elijah had set the terms of the challenge – the God who answers by fire, let him be God. The prophets of Baal tried nearly all day but got no answer. The sun was hanging low in the evening sky. The shadows of the trees were lengthening. The dust from thousands of restless feet filled the air. The milling multitude with parched lips and thirsty tongues was

impatient. Everyone's nerves were on edge – waiting, hoping, expecting. It was Elijah's turn to pray. The altar was prepared – wood, sacrifice, and water. Then, every eye upon him, every pulse quickening, Elijah prayed a prayer of sixty-three words. It took less than a minute. God heard and answered by fire, and a nation repented.

The philistines were having a great feast to honor Dagon, their chief god. All their lords and ladies were present, sitting in the gallery of that magnificent temple. Coming out of the temple, a little lad was leading a man whose tangled hair fell about his massive shoulders. His sightless eyes were gruesome reminders of his sins in other years. His calloused hands and scarred body were obvious signs of sins power to bind and enslave. The hoarse voices of thousands of spectators made the earth tremble as they made sport of the mighty Sampson. What a strategic moment in the life of Sampson. He spoke to the little boy, "Take me to the main support pillars." Once there Sampson leaned against them. The people saw his lips move, but they didn't know what he was saying or that he was praying. He doesn't ask for his sight. He doesn't ask for his freedom. But in just one sentence he prays, "Oh, Lord God, remember me and strengthen me only this once." And with a might heave, the pillars toppled and the temple lay in ruins with more of God's enemies slain at this one time than in all the years of Sampson's life combined.

The publican standing in the temple, steeped in sin, condemned by the law, would not even so much as lift up his eyes to heaven. Smiting his breast, he prayed, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." God heard him and extended mercy.

The dying thief hanging in the shadows between two worlds, sinking into the gross hopelessness of outer darkness, breathed one prayer: "Remember me." And that day Jesus took him to paradise.

How many souls across the years, out of the throes of despair and gloom, have cried out just like Sampson and just like the thief, “Remember me.” Blind Bartimaeus, the Syrophoenician woman, the dying leper all prayed, “Remember me.” How many thousands from hospital beds, from dark and hopeless situations, have cried, “Lord, remember me” and the light broke in.

When Satan has oppressed, when hell has crowded in, when blackness and discouragement have destroyed the spirit, when hope was lost, when sin was the blackest, when pain was hardest to bear, the cry went out, “Lord, remember me” and help came. When criticism was sharpest, when friends were untrue, when the very foundations were shaken, when companions sold out, when in the grinding mill of affliction, the cry remains, “Remember me” and heaven opened up and the light pointed the way.

More of our prayers are hindered than answered. In most cases we attribute it to Satan. Daniel is certainly a clear example of prayers hindered by Satan. Sometimes our prayers are hindered because we ask amiss. But perhaps there is another, more frequent reason our prayers are hindered, a breaking of divine rules that regulate answers to our prayers. I believe the Bible teaches that the way we live with and get along with one another determines the answers to many of our prayers. “If thou takest thy gift to the altar and remember that thy brother has ought against thee, go first and be reconciled.”

Prayers must be unified in a worship service if we are to bring down revival. The prayer of the church that brought an angel to Simon Peter and unlocked the prison for him followed a pattern of agreement among the brethren. Prayer was made of the church unto God for him. The power of Pentecost came upon a company that had their purpose and petition unified. The power of unified thought is a great factor in answered prayer. If

we think together, worship together, and pray together, we can move a mighty revival across the land.

Sampson prayed, “Remember me only this once.” How many times have you failed and in a moment of remorse and regret, you too have cried out, “Only this once, remember me.” In a moment of thoughtless foolishness you said something that wounded another and later in the still watches of the night, you felt the remorse of your own condemnation, and you cried, “Oh, Lord, remember me only this once.”

Sampson was the Bible’s strong man, a Nazarite from birth, called to deliver Israel, sent as their savior. But the purpose of the mission was marred because he carelessly played with sin. But the story powerfully tells us about three things: the ruthlessness of sin, the mercy of God, and the power of God to lift a man from the very pits of despair. No doubt many of Sampson’s prayers were hindered because of his disobedience and sin. But in the end, a penitent, grateful man prayed a sincere prayer of just a few words and God brought the victory.

It is said that St. Augustine’s mother prayed daily for thirty years for her son before God saved him. Perhaps some of your mothers are praying for you tonight. But you will have to have more than your mother’s prayers to be successful in taking the Gospel to the lost. You will have to be a man of prayer. Satan may hinder some of your prayers. That’s for certain. But be careful not to hinder your own prayers by allowing sin into your life, whether it’s the gross excesses of a man like Sampson or the subtle sin resulting from a break in a relationship with a brother in Christ. Instead, confess, repent, and unite with your brothers, united in prayer, shoulder to shoulder, going forth as to war.