

Prayer Focus

by Jim Cymbala

Jim Cymbala emphasizes the necessity of focused and earnest prayer to experience God's miraculous interventions in our lives.

Duration: 20:26

Scripture: Psalm 67:1, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 7:7, Philippians 4:6

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Peter's miraculous escape from prison as described in the Bible. Peter was in a seemingly hopeless situation, chained to two guards in a dungeon with two more guards at the door. However, through prayer, God opened the doors for Peter and his chains fell off. The preacher emphasizes that God can open not only physical doors but also spiritual doors and can free people from various chains, such as addiction and sin. The sermon encourages believers to have faith in God's ability to intervene in difficult situations and to pray for the awakening of those who are spiritually asleep.

Transcript

It's good to sing praise to the Lord. Anybody in trouble, let them pray. Anybody happy, let them sing songs of praise.

And that's the balance that we have in the New Testament for church life and our individual lives. Praising, worshiping, and then sometimes just flat out bringing your petition to the Lord, Philippians 4.6. Don't be anxious or worried about anything. In fact, the newer translations bring out the double negative in the Greek.

No, not even a single thing. Don't worry about a single thing because worry is a kind of sin. I know I wouldn't get an amen from that, but I wanna say it again.

Worry is a kind of sin, it is, because it's a lack of faith that God's not gonna take care of us. And we've all fallen prey to it, am I correct? The antidote to it is to bring our petitions to the Lord with thanksgiving, and then the promise is the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and minds. I wanna tell you something about prayer tonight because we wanna excel in praying, and there's a word in the Greek language which describes prayer.

It's a general word because when you're walking down the street and you just remember God's goodness to you and you go hallelujah, that's prayer in a way. There's a general word for prayer. You might call it praise, but there's a word in the Greek which is all communion between ourselves and God.

But then there's thanksgiving, and then there's praise to God, then there's worship, then there's petition, then there's what we were doing before, intercession, where you touch, let's say, with your heart, your faith, the situation on the card or some loved one, and you try to then reach out and touch God, and you're the intermediary between God and that person as you pray. Paul would say to the churches, pray for me, pray for me. Just don't pray for yourselves, pray for me.

So there's all kinds of prayer. But we have one story, and then many backup verses, about the kind of prayer that gets answered, one of the secrets of prayer, and why many prayers are not answered, because we tend to fall into general prayer, and we list a lot of things without focusing. The name of this little talk is Prayer Focus.

All the great prayers in the Bible that are answered miraculously by God, almost in every case you will find one simple characteristic about the person praying. And we see this in the story in Acts chapter 12, another example of it, which is when Peter was thrown in a slammer and is in prison, and it's a bad time for the church because King Herod, this is the grandson of King Herod the Great, and he is not a practicing Jew, but he wants to curry favor with the Jewish population. So what he does is he arrests Christians because they were odious, they were hated by the Jewish people there, because what Christians were saying was Messiah has come, we believe in him, we accepted him, and you rejected him, helped crucify him, so you have missed the one who was promised.

Well, they didn't wanna hear that, as it is still today. To curry favor with them, he took James, the brother of John, who we know very little about, and he had him beheaded. This was very ugly to Jewish people in that culture.

He followed the Roman custom there and had him beheaded. When he saw that the people were going, yay, Herod, give me an H, give me an E, Herod is really doing what we want, what he did then was he arrested Peter. So imagine the church, imagine how the church was feeling.

James is gone, the brother of John, and now Peter's arrested, and it was the time of the Passover, and Herod was waiting till the Passover feast ended, that was Passover, then he had the seven-day feast, eight days in all, so then what you have is, when it's over, I'll kill him. I don't wanna kill him during a Jewish holiday, that's not nice, we'll just kill him afterward, as if it mattered, right? So he has him in jail, but it seems as if maybe what happened to Jesus in the tomb, even though there was a stone and there were Roman soldiers, and he still got out of their clutches when he rose from the dead, there must have been planted in their minds, these Christians are not so easily kept down, so they put four soldiers on a rotational basis to be with Peter in the dungeon. Two were chained to him, two more were sentries at the door.

So you got a guy with no weapons, no money, no bail, no nothing, he's gonna get killed, and he is in the prison with two guys chained to him, and he's sleeping, and then the Bible says there's two more at the door. Do you have a hopeless situation facing you tonight? You got a problem that looks so stubborn, so difficult, like even God can't help me with this one. Maybe it's a wayward child, maybe it's a situation in your own personal life of besetting sin.

Maybe it's a lost job and now a financial mountain facing you, a heartbreak that you feel you never can get healed from. Impossible, you know, there are some things we have like a common faith, like I think God can do that. Then there are others that almost dare us to believe.

They laugh at us, certain needs. And many times when that happens, we stop praying because it's like God might do this, and God might do that, but that other thing, God cannot do that, even God can. I'm not even praying for it.

So this was one of those situations. They had no power, the early church, and no money, and no public buildings. They had nada, nothing.

And here, one of their leaders is not just in prison, he's gonna get killed, and there's no appeals court, and there's no grand jury that has to be gathered, sequestered, there's nothing like that. It's just Herod says you're gonna die. So now comes this very powerful verse.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, which would have been the end, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance, as I described. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, from heaven, obviously, and a light shone in the cell.

Isn't it something when you pray, something comes from heaven? When there's darkness, a light comes, not just in a cell, but someone you're praying for. They're walking in darkness, suddenly, light comes, because someone's praying. This is very instructive for us.

He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. How many are happy when you pray God can wake people up who are sleeping? And I don't mean sleeping, like Peter. How many know someone that you love spiritually, they're sleeping, lift your hand up, you know them.

They're sleeping, now who's gonna wake them up? Well, I talked to them about the Lord, they once served the Lord, now they're nowhere. Well, God can wake people up. God can wake, can we put our hands together, God can wake people up.

Quick, get up, he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrist. How many happy that when we pray, chains can come off of people, and not physical chains only, but crack, and weed, and a lot of other things, and pornography, and all kinds of other things. Those chains can come off.

Then the angel said to him, put on your clothes and sandals, and Peter did so, wrap your cloak around you and follow me, the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening, he thought he was seeing a vision. You know, Peter was in like a state, when you wake up and you're all like, when you sleep real heavy, you get up, you don't even know where you are, right? You don't know your name, you don't know anything, like, ugh.

Well, Peter seemed to be like that, wasn't sure he had seen a vision. They passed the first and second guards, came to the iron gate leading to the city, it opened for them by itself. How many are happy that when we pray, God can open doors that are closed, let's say amen, not just physical doors, spiritual doors, mission doors, God can open doors that are shut.

Notice, Peter and the angel didn't have to get a crowbar or a ramming device to knock it open, I gotta get this door open. As they approached it, the door opened by itself. How many need some doors opened by

themselves for us? Like what to do, where to minister, where to go, he opens doors.

It opened for them by itself, praise God, and they went through it, and when they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me. Everybody say rescued me.

Rescued me. When people pray, God rescues people. God sends something from heaven, an angel, a light, a dream, something from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.

What a great story, and it brings to us this simple truth which I wanna leave with you right now. All the prayers in the Bible that are hugely like impossible situations and then God comes through, they are invariably, I would say almost 100%, some scholars think, they were praying for just one thing and they felt it to their bones. If you got a real stubborn problem, you got a mountain you can't overcome, you can't pray for 11 different things, the way we are made is you can't feel strongly about 11 things at once.

You can't even feel strongly about five things at once. Sure, there's a time we had 12 o'clock prayer here, I sat right over there and prayed and I went over my family, my extended family, I was praying for missionaries and people and pastors I know and all kinds of situations. But when you got a real emergency impossible situation, you gotta really focus in prayer.

When they were praying, now look, it seems as if they shut everything down. Churches don't do that today, but we should do that. This is unknown to a lot of Christians and pastors, unfortunately.

When they saw Peter in prison, they went time out, shut everything down. They have the soldiers, they got the prison, but we got a God who answers prayer. So we are gonna now focus on Peter.

When they were praying, they weren't praying for Lord and bless the missionaries, they were Peter. God, Peter. It could have gone on for days.

Morning, noon, and night, taking breaks for sleep and food. Or maybe some were fasting. But they had only one thing on their mind, God, we lost James, we cannot lose Peter.

Peter, Peter. And the Bible says they earnestly prayed, that a stream of prayer went up, but it was earnest. Some translations have it was fervent prayer.

Some have deeply felt prayer. And the Greek word that's used there is only used in two of the places, basically in the New Testament in that form. One is love each other, but make sure, Paul says, you love each other fervently.

Don't have a half-baked love among yourselves. When you love one another, love each other fervently. All out, all out.

Because half-baked love is not the kind of love God has for us. The other time it's used, and more germane to this, is when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. And he says he fell on his face, and he prayed earnestly.

And earnest prayer went up from the church. Now, you can't make up earnest prayer. By screaming when you don't feel it, it doesn't mean that we impress God like, wow, they're really screaming when they pray.

Because sometimes the most earnest prayer, you don't say a word. Your tears speak. The groan of your soul.

The Holy Spirit comes and gives you utterance so you're praying in a language you don't even know. It can be loud, it can be quiet. But two things we learn here is that great answers come from God when people pray with single focus so they really feel it, and they focus at the throne of grace on that need.

And number two, when they pray earnestly. They're not going all over the map. There is a time to pray.

Paul says, I mention you in all of my requests. He was praying for so many things. He couldn't have been feeling soul travail for every single need that he knew about.

But there are some situations that you might, some of you might be even in tonight with a child or something, or a decision you gotta make, and it's time sensitive. And you wanna just focus on that tonight. And say, God, this is what you have to do, is say, God, this is a real problem, but God, Holy Spirit, come and help me so that I can pray with, call me corazon.

I don't wanna just pray with my head and my lips. I wanna pray with my heart. How many are with me? Say amen.

I wanna pour out my soul to you. Like Hannah, there's another example. She wanted a child.

She wasn't interested in praying about anything else. She just stood there. Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

And she was praying for a baby, and God granted her request. But it was for one thing. I want a child.

They're mocking me. I can't have a baby. She prayed for that.

And here they were praying for Peter, and they prayed earnestly. And the Holy Spirit can come and help galvanize us and focus us and stir our hearts so that we can really pray, really pray. You know, I had written books and preached sermons about prayer, but when my oldest girl got away from us, which you've heard me reference many times, God took me to a new school of prayer.

I learned things about prayer I didn't know. First of all, I learned what praying without ceasing meant, because I was always a millisecond away from praying. You could be talking to me, but the moment you paused, my spirit would go and start praying for Chrissy, because she was getting worse.

Harder, harder, harder. Then we learned she had a baby. Made me pray harder.

What am I gonna do? And one time in the previous building, I was preaching at the pulpit here, and I turned like this. I can see myself. And I was making a point to be a blessing to the congregation, hopefully.

And while I was making the point, my spirit just went to the throne of grace, and I started to intercede for Chrissy. And I started praying, God, save her, bring her back, God. But my spirit was praying, but I was still talking.

The sermon. Good grief, I almost had a heart attack. I'm praying and I'm preaching at the same time.

Not a good thing to do. You gotta do one or the other. And I said to God, God, help me.

Please help me now, because I'm gonna fall to pieces in front of the people. Please help me take care of Chrissy, but help me now to preach. The people need to hear a word.

They didn't hear about Chrissy. That's my problem right now. They need encouragement.

When a burden comes on you to pray, you can't stop praying. How many have ever had a burden to pray? I mean, you just pray. Middle of the night, you wake up, you're praying.

You're praying when you're eating a sandwich. You're riding in the subway. Your spirit just keeps going to the throne of grace and say, God, you know I need it, God.

But you focus on that one big thing. Not that there aren't a lot of things that we need to pray for, but great answers come from great prayers, and those prayers are helped by the Holy Spirit, and they're focused. So tonight, we're gonna take time and pray.

It's a prayer meeting. It would be a good idea to pray. We're not gonna go around the map.

I'm gonna ask first, close your eyes with me, those of you who have a mountain, mountain. I've had them financial, family that I just told you. I've had them of every kind.

Trouble, difficulty, just impossible. No, listen, the guy's in prison, and he's not only in prison, there's two guards chained to him, not watching him, chained to him. Two more at the door, no way.

Now, that's impossible. But when people pray, nothing is impossible to God. Listen to me, everyone.

Nothing is impossible with God. God brought my daughter back. She's the pastor's wife.

She's speaking and traveling and being a blessing to people and what God did for Chrissy. He can do for your Chrissy, for your situation, but you gotta focus tonight and say, God, I'm not gonna let go of you. Maybe one of you youth leaders have one person in your group, it is just like a burden.

Like, God, you gotta break this in that person. The Holy Spirit has to do it. He has to bring that and make that need known to you.

Anybody got a mountain and wanna pray for a little season here with me in the front? Get out of your seat and just come. Come on, get out of your seat and just come. But if you walk up here, I don't want you praying for 10 things.

I don't want you praying for one thing, for that thing, that daughter, and nobody else. Don't pray for me. Don't pray for the missionaries.

Peter was kept in prison, but the church prayed earnestly for him. God did a miracle. One of your servants wrote, who is a God like unto you, who answers prayer? All flesh will come to you.

We run to you all the time because we can't make it without your grace and your help at the throne of grace. So we are believing tonight that mountains are coming down, that Peters are gonna be released from prison. Light is gonna come from heaven.

Chains are gonna fall off. Doors are gonna open by themselves because you are not a God to mock us, disappoint us. But when you say, ask and you shall receive, you mean that.

Lord, thank you for the body of Christ. Thank you that we can sing together, laugh together, cry together, pray together. Right now, put your blessing on every one of us.

Let your face shine upon us and grant us the shalom of God, your peace that passes all understanding. Get us all home safely. Help the workers for the youth to rest up so they're ready to go on Friday.

Give them a good next couple days. Bring us together this Lord's Day to make more songs to you, more melody, more singing, more worship, more praise, and to learn more about you as you visit us. We pray all these blessings in Jesus' name.

And everyone said. Amen. Let's give God one more, one more.

We bless your name. Turn around and give someone a hug, everyone.

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