

# The Power of Prayer

by Reuben Archer Torrey—1856-1928

*Ye have not, because ye ask not (James 4:2).*

I BRING YOU A MESSAGE FROM GOD contained in seven short words. Six of the seven words are monosyllables, and the remaining word has but two syllables and is one of the most familiar and most easily understood words in the English language. Yet there is so much in these seven short, simple words that they have transformed many a life and brought many an inefficient worker into a place of great power.

I spoke on these seven words some years ago at a Bible conference in central New York. Some months after the conference, I received a letter from the man who had presided at the conference, one of the best-known ministers of the gospel in America. He wrote me, "I have been unable to get away from the seven words on which you spoke at Lake Keuka, they have been with me day and night. They have transformed my ideas, transformed my methods, transformed my ministry." The man who wrote those words has since been the pastor of what is probably the most widely known of any evangelical church in the world. I trust that the words may sink into some of your hearts today as they did into his on that occasion and that some of you will be able to say in future months and years, "I have been unable to get away from those seven words, they have been with me day and night. They have transformed my ideas, transformed my methods, transformed my life, and transformed my service for God."

You will find these seven words in James 4:2, the seven closing words of the verse, "*Ye have not, because ye ask not.*"

## **The Secret of Christians Powerlessness**

These seven words contain the secret of the poverty and powerlessness of the average Christian, of the average minister, and of the average church. "Why is it," many a Christian is asking, "that I make such poor progress in my Christian life? Why do I have so little victory over sin? Why do I win so few souls to Christ? Why do I grow so slowly into the likeness of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?" And God answers in the words of the text: "Neglect of prayer. You have not, because you ask not."

"Why is it," many a minister is asking, "that I see so little fruit from my ministry? Why are there so few conversions? Why does my church grow so slowly? Why are the members of my church so little helped by my ministry, and built up so little in Christian knowledge and life?" And again God replies: "Neglect of prayer. You have not, because you ask not."

"Why is it," both ministers and churches are asking, "that the church of Jesus Christ is making such slow progress in the world today? Why does it make so little headway against sin, against unbelief, against error in all its forms? Why does it have so little victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil? Why is the average church member living on such a low plane of Christian living? Why does the Lord Jesus Christ get so little honor from the state of the church today?" And, again, God replies: "Neglect of prayer. You have not, because you ask not."

### **The Early Church's Victory**

When we read the only inspired church history that was ever written, the history of the church in the days of the apostles as it is recorded by Luke (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) in the Acts of the Apostles, what do we find? We find a story of constant victory, a story of perpetual progress. We read, for example, such statements as Acts 2:47: "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" and Acts 4:4: "Many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand," and Acts 5:14: "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." In addition Luke in Acts 6:7 states: "And the word of God increased: and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

And so we go on, chapter after chapter, through the twenty-eight chapters of Acts, and in every one of the twenty-seven chapters after the first, we find the same note of victory. I once went through the Acts of the Apostles marking the note of victory in every chapter, and without one single exception the triumphant shout of victory rang out in every chapter. How different the history of the church as here recorded is from the history of the church of Jesus Christ today. Take, for example, that first statement, "The Lord added to the church daily [that is, every day] such as should be saved." Why, nowadays, if we have a revival once a year with an accession of fifty or sixty members and spend all the rest of the year slipping back to where we were before, we think we are doing pretty well. But in those days there was a revival all the time and accessions every day of those who not only "hit the trail" but "were [really] being saved."

Why this difference between the early church and the church of Jesus Christ

today? Someone will answer, "Because there is so much opposition today." Ah, but there was opposition in those days, most bitter, most determined, most relentless opposition in comparison with which that which you and I meet today is but child's play. But the early church went right on beating down all opposition, surmounting every obstacle, conquering every foe, always victorious, right on without a setback from Jerusalem to Rome, in the face of the most firmly entrenched and most mighty heathenism and unbelief. I repeat the question, "Why was it?" If you will turn to the chapters from which I have already quoted, you will get your answer.

### **Steadfast Prayer**

Turn, for example, to Acts 2:42: "*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread and in prayers.*" That is a picture very brief but very suggestive of the early church. It was a **praying church**. It was a church in which they prayed, not merely occasionally, but where they all "continued steadfastly . . . in prayers." They all prayed, not a select few, but the whole membership of the church; and all prayed continuously with steadfast determination. "They gave themselves to prayer," as the same Greek word is translated in Acts 6:4.

Now turn to Acts 6:4 and you will get the rest of your answer. "*We will give ourselves continually to prayer.*" That is a picture of the apostolic ministry: it was a praying ministry, and a ministry that "gave themselves continually to prayer," or, to translate that Greek word as it is translated in former passage (Acts 2:42), "*They continued steadfastly in prayer.*" A **praying church and a praying ministry!** Ah, such a church and such a ministry can achieve anything that ought to be achieved. It will go steadily on, beating down all opposition, surmounting every obstacle, conquering every foe, just as much today as it did in the days of the apostles.

### **Present-day Departure From Prayer**

There is nothing else in which the church and the ministry of today or, to be more explicit, you and I have departed more notably and more lamentably from apostolic precedent than in this matter of prayer. We do not live in a praying age. A very considerable proportion of the membership of our evangelical churches today do not believe even theoretically in prayer. Many of them now believe in prayer as having a beneficial "reflex influence," that is, as benefitting the person who prays, a sort of lifting yourself up by your spiritual bootstraps.

But as for prayer bringing anything to pass that would not have come to pass if we had not prayed, they do not believe in it, and many of them frankly say so, and even some of our "modern ministers" say so. I believe it is still the vast majority in our evangelical churches-even they do not make the use of this mighty instrument that God has put into our hands that one would naturally expect. As I said, we do not live in a praying age. We live in an age of hustle and bustle, of man's efforts and man's determination, of man's confidence in himself and in his own power to achieve things, an age of human organization and human machinery, human push and human scheming, and human achievement, which in the things of God means no real achievement at all.

I think it would be perfectly safe to say that the church of Christ was never in all its history so fully, so skillfully and so thoroughly and so perfectly organized as it is today. Our machinery is wonderful; it is just perfect, but, alas, it is machinery without power; and when things do not go right, instead of going to the real source of our failure, our neglect to depend on God and look to God for power, we look around to see if there is not some new organization we can get up, some new wheel that we can add to our machinery. We have altogether too many wheels already. What we need is not so much some new organization, some new wheel, but "the Spirit of the living creature in the wheels" we already possess.

I believe that the devil stands and looks at the church today and laughs in his sleeve as he sees how its members depend on their own scheming and powers of organization and skillfully devised machinery. "Ha, ha," he laughs, "you may have your Boy Scouts, your costly church edifices, your multi-thousand-dollar church organs, your brilliant university-bred preachers, your high-priced choirs, your gifted sopranos and altos and tenors and bases, your wonderful quartets, your immense men's Bible classes, yes, and your Bible conferences, and your Bible institutes, and your special evangelistic services, all you please of them; it does not in the least trouble me, if you will only leave out of them the power of the Lord God Almighty sought and obtained by the earnest, persistent, believing prayer that will not take no for an answer." But when the devil sees a man or woman who really believes in prayer, who knows how to pray, and who really does pray, and, above all, when he sees a whole church on its face before God in prayer, "he trembles" as much as he ever did, for he knows that his day in that church or community is at an end.

Prayer has as much power today, when men and women are themselves on praying ground and meeting the conditions of prevailing prayer, as it ever has had. God has not changed, and His ear is just as quick to hear the voice of real prayer and His hand is just as long and strong to save as they ever were. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save: neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But our iniquities may "have separated between us

and our God, and "our sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1,2). Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power. All that God is, and all that God has, are at the disposal of prayer. But we must use the key. Prayer can do anything that God can do, and as God can do anything, prayer is omnipotent. No one can stand against the one who knows how to pray and who meets all the conditions of prevailing prayer and who really prays. "The Lord God Omnipotent" works from him and works through him.

### **Prayer Will Promote Our Personal Holiness as Nothing Else, Except the Study of the Word of God**

But what, specifically, will prayer do? We have been dealing in generalities; let us come down to the definite and specific. The Word of God very plainly answers the question.

In the first place, prayer will promote our personal piety, our individual holiness, our individual growth into the likeness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as almost nothing else, as nothing else but the study of the Word of God. These two things, prayer and study of the Word of God, always go hand-in-hand, for there is no true prayer without study of the Word of God, and there is no true study of the Word of God without prayer.

Other things being equal, your growth and mine into the likeness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be in exact proportion to the time and to the heart we put into prayer. Please note exactly what I say: "Your growth and mine into the likeness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be in exact proportion to the time and to the heart we put into prayer." I put it in that way because there are many who put a great deal of time but so little heart into their praying that they do very little praying in the long time they spend at it.

On the other hand, there are others who, perhaps, may not put so much time into praying but put so much heart into praying that they accomplish vastly more by their praying in a short time than the others accomplish by praying in a long time. God Himself has told us in Jeremiah 29: 13: "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

We are told in Ephesians 1:3, that God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in -Christ." That is to say, Jesus Christ by His atoning death and by His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father has obtained for every believer in Jesus Christ every possible spiritual blessing. There is no spiritual blessing that any believer enjoys that may not be

yours. It belongs to you now; Christ purchased it by His atoning death and God has provided it in Him. It is there for you; but it is your part to claim it, to put out your hand and take it. God's appointed way for claiming blessings by putting out your hand and appropriating to yourself the blessings that are procured for you by the atoning death of Jesus Christ is by prayer. Prayer is the hand that takes to ourselves the blessings that God has already provided in His Son.

Go through your Bible and you will find it definitely stated that every conceivable spiritual blessing is obtained by prayer. For example, it is in answer to prayer, as we learn from Psalm 139:23, 24, that God searches us and knows our hearts, tries us and knows our thoughts, brings to light the sin that there is in us and delivers us from it. It is in answer to prayer, as we learn from Psalm 19:12,13, that we are cleansed from secret faults and that God keeps us back from presumptuous sins. It is in answer to prayer, as we learn from the 14th verse of the same Psalm, that the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart are made acceptable in God's sight. It is in answer to prayer, as we learn from Psalm 25:4,5, that God shows us His ways, teaches us His path, and guides us in His truth. It is in answer to prayer, as we learn from the prayer our Lord Himself taught us, that we are kept from temptation and delivered from the power of the wicked one (Matthew 6:13). It is in answer to prayer, as we learn from Luke 11:13, that God gives us His Holy Spirit. And so we might go on through the whole catalog of spiritual blessings and find that every one is obtained by asking for it. Indeed, our Lord Himself has said in Matthew 7:11: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him."

One of the most instructive and suggestive passages in the entire Bible as showing the mighty power of prayer to transform us into the likeness of our Lord Jesus Himself, is found in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass [The English Revision reads better, "reflecting as a mirror"] the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." The thought is that the Lord is the sun, you and I are mirrors, and just as a mischievous boy on a bright sunny day will catch the rays of the sun in a piece of broken looking-glass and reflect them into your eyes and mine with almost blinding power, so we, as mirrors, when we commune with God, catch the rays of His moral glory and reflect them out on the world "from glory to glory." That is, each time we commune with Him we catch something new of His glory and reflect it out on the world.

I'm sure you remember the story of Moses, how he went up into the mount and tarried about forty days with God, gazing on that ineffable glory, and caught so much of the glory in his own face that when he came down from the mount, though he himself did not know it, his face so shone that he had to draw a veil

over it to hide the blinding glory of it from his fellow Israelites.

Even so we, going up into the mount of prayer, away from the world, alone with God, catch the rays of His glory, so that when we come down to other people, it is not so much our faces that shine (though I do believe that sometimes even our faces shine), but our characters, with the glory that we have been beholding. We then reflect out on the world the moral glory of God from "glory to glory," each new time of communion with Him catching something new of His glory to reflect out on the world. Oh, here is the secret of becoming much like God by remaining long alone with God. If you won't stay long with Him, you won't be much like Him.

One of the most remarkable men in Scotland's history was John Welch, son-in-law of John Knox, the great Scotch reformer; he is as well-known as his famous father-in-law, but in some respects a far more remarkable man than John Knox himself. Most people have the idea that it was John Knox who prayed, "Give me Scotland or I die." It was not, it was John Welch, his son-in-law. John Welch put it on record before he died that he counted that day ill-spent that he did not put seven or eight hours into secret prayer. When John Welch came to die, an old Scotchman who had known him from his boyhood said of him, "John Welch was a type of Christ." Of course, that was an inaccurate use of language, but what the old Scotchman meant was, that Jesus Christ had stamped the impress of His character on John Welch. When had Jesus Christ done it? In those seven or eight hours of daily communion with Himself. I do not suppose that God has called many of us, if any of us, to put seven or eight hours a day into prayer, but I am confident God has called most of us, if not every one of us, to put more time into prayer than we now do. That is one of the great secrets of holiness, indeed, the only way in which we can become really holy and continue holy.

Some years ago we often sang a hymn, "Take Time to Be Holy." I wish we sang it more in these days. It takes time to be holy, one cannot be holy in a hurry, and much of the time that it takes to be holy must go into secret prayer. Some people express surprise that professing Christians today are so little like their Lord, but when I stop to think how little time the average Christian today puts into secret prayer the thing that astonished me is, not that we are so little like the Lord, but that we are as much like the Lord as we are, when we take so little time for secret prayer.

### **Prayer Will Bring the Power of God Into Our Work**

But not only will prayer promote as almost nothing else our personal holiness, but prayer will also bring the power of God into our work. We read in Isaiah

40:31: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk [plod right along day after day, which is far harder than running or flying], and not faint."

It is the privilege of every child of God to have the power of God in his service. And the verse just quoted tells us how to obtain it, and that is by "waiting upon the Lord." Sometimes you will hear people stand up in a meeting, not so frequently perhaps in these days as in former days, and say: "I am trying to serve God in my poor, weak way." Well, if you are trying to serve God in your poor, weak way, quit it; your duty is to serve God in His strong, triumphant way. But you say, "I have no natural ability." Then get supernatural ability.

The religion of Jesus Christ is a supernatural religion from start to finish, and we should live our lives in supernatural power, the power of God through Jesus Christ, and we should perform our service with supernatural power, the power of God ministered by the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. You say, "I have no natural gifts." Then get supernatural gifts. The Holy Spirit is promised to every believer in order that he may obtain the supernatural gifts which qualify him for the particular service to which God calls him. "He [The Holy Spirit] divideth to each one [that is, to each and every believer] severally even as he will" ([Corinthians 12:11]). It is ours to have the power of God if we will only seek it by prayer in any and every line of service to which God calls us.

Are you a mother or a father? Do you wish power from God to bring your own children up in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord"? God commands you to do it and especially commands the father to do it. God says in Ephesians 6:4: "*Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*"

Now, God never commands the impossible, and as He commands us fathers, and the mothers also, to bring our children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, it is possible for us to do it. If any one of your children is not saved, the first blame lies at your own door. Paul said to the jailer in Philippi: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*" (Acts 16:31).

Yes, it is the solemn duty of every father and mother to have every one of their children saved. But we can never accomplish it unless we are much in prayer to God for power to do it. In my first pastorate I had as a member of my church a most excellent Christian woman, but she had a little boy of six who was one of the most incorrigible youngsters I ever knew in my life. He was the terror of the community. One Sunday, at the close of the morning service, his mother came to me and said: "You know-?" (calling her boy by his first name).



"Yes," I replied, "I know him." Everybody in town knew him. "Yes," I replied, "I know he is not a very good boy." Indeed, that was a decidedly euphemistic way of putting it; in point of fact he was the terror of the neighborhood.

Then this heavy-hearted mother said, "What shall I do?"

I replied, "Have you ever tried prayer?"

"Why," she said, "of course I pray."

"Oh," I said, "that is not what I mean. Have you ever asked God definitely to regenerate your boy and expected Him to do it?"

"I do not think I have ever been as definite as that."

"Well," I said, "you go right home and be just as definite as that."

She went home and was just as definite as that, and I think it was from that very day, certainly from that week, that the boy was a transformed boy and grew up into fine young manhood.

Oh, mothers and fathers, it is your privilege to have every one of your children saved. But it costs something to have them saved. It costs your spending much time alone with God, to be much in prayer, and it costs also your making those sacrifices and straightening out those things in your life that are wrong; it costs the fulfilling the conditions of prevailing prayer. And if any of you have unsaved children, when you go home today get alone with God and ask God to show you what it is in your own life that is responsible for the present condition of your children. Straighten it out at once and then get down alone before God and hold to Him in earnest prayer for the definite conversion of each one of your children. Do not rest until, by prayer and by your putting forth every effort, you know beyond question that every one of your children is definitely and positively converted and born again.

Are you a Sunday school teacher? Do you wish to see every one of your Sunday school scholars converted? That is primarily what you are a Sunday school teacher for, not merely to teach Bible geography and Bible history, or even Bible doctrine, but to get the people in your class one and all saved. Do you want power from on high to enable you to save them? Ask God for it.

### **Examples of God's Power Evident in Prayer**

When Mr. Alexander and I were holding meetings in Sydney, Australia, the meetings were held in the Town Hall, which seated about five thousand people. But the crowds were so great that some days we had to divide the crowds and have women only in the afternoon and men only at night. One Sunday afternoon the Sydney Town Hall was packed with women. When I gave the invitation for all who would accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, surrender to Him as their Lord and Master, begin to confess Him as such before the world, and strive to live from this time on to please Him in every way from day to day, over on my left a whole row of eighteen young women of, I should say, about twenty years of age, arose to their feet. As I saw them stand side by side, I said to myself, "That is someone's Bible class." Afterwards they came forward with the other women who came to make a public confession of their acceptance of Jesus Christ. When the meeting was over, a young lady came to me, her face wreathed in smiles, and she said, "That is my Bible class. I have been praying for their conversion, and every one of them has accepted Jesus Christ today.

When we were holding meetings in Bristol, England, a prominent manufacturer in Exeter had a Bible class of twenty-two men. He invited all of them to go to Bristol with him and hear me preach. Twenty-one of them consented to go. At that meeting twenty of them accepted Christ. That man was praying for the conversion of the members of his class and was willing to make the sacrifices necessary to get his prayers answered. Revival would quickly come here in this city if every Sunday school teacher would go to praying the way they ought for the conversion of every scholar in his or her class!

Are you in more public work, a preacher perhaps, or speaking from the public platform? Do you long for power in that work? Ask for it.

Oh, men and women, if we would spend more nights before God on our faces in prayer there would be more days of power when we faced our congregations!

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