

# WE CAN SHAKE THE KINGDOM

by Jim Cymbala



It was just before dawn on a chilly day in Palestine about two thousand years ago. Jesus' disciples were sound asleep, exhausted after the previous day's activities – handling the huge crowds that had thronged them, encouraging listeners to believe the Master's words, even trying their hand at praying for a few of the sick and broken hearted. But while they enjoyed their needed rest, someone else was stirring. Although the sun had not yet risen, Jesus got up and walked out of the village where they were all staying. He was headed to a deserted place nearby to pray.

What an awesome scene! It was repeated many times during the three years the disciples stayed with Jesus. The Son of the living God couldn't face the day without prayer.

Jesus habitually offered up prayers, sometimes with "fervent cries and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). His prayers enabled him to make decisions and face the challenges and demonic attacks that confronted him daily.

This isn't a new believer in Christ we're talking about; it is Jesus Christ the Holy One himself! If he felt the need to talk with his Father, how much more necessary it must be for us – if we only realize it.

As Samuel Chadwick, a great Methodist preacher of late-nineteenth-to-early-twentieth-century England wrote: "God and prayer are inseparable...The teaching of the Old Testament is full of the subject of prayer. Everywhere there are commands and inducements to pray, and the great stories of deliverance and victory, experience and vision, are all examples of prevailing prayer...There are many problems about prayer, but they lie outside the fact and experience of prayer, and *apart from praying* there is no solution to them.

To the person who truly prays, there is no problem reconciling God's sovereignty with a heartfelt petition. Again, remember that Scripture declares: "You do not have because you do not ask God" (James 4:2). It wasn't that God didn't desire to give an answer or that some divine decree stood against us. If we missed out, it was because we didn't have the faith, time, and spiritual temperament to talk with our Father.

### **Our Pestering Prayers Can Save Others**

Remember the story of Abraham and his nephew Lot? They had separated in Canaan because their large herds couldn't all be fed and nourished in the same area. Abraham let the younger man choose first the land he wanted. Lot quickly decided to move east toward the rich plains near Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot should have prayed for God's will in the matter, but his eyes betrayed him. He would soon discover that good appearances can be deceiving.

Sometime later Abraham encountered the Angel of the Lord and learned that news of Sodom's gross wickedness had reached heaven. Judgment seemed inevitable, and Abraham's heart turned quickly to the predicament of his nephew Lot. Then, in one of the most incredible portions of the Bible (Genesis 18:16-33), Abraham, this great man of faith, commenced to negotiate with the Lord (the Angel of the Lord is identified with deity in Old Testament Scripture) that Sodom be spared from destruction. Of course, Lot was really on his mind, but Abraham never mentioned his name.

"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" Abraham asked. "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? (verses 23-24). The Lord heard Abraham's plea, for he agreed to spare the city if fifty godly people existed.

But Abraham wasn't done. "How about if there are forty-five?" Then he pleaded for Sodom to be spared if forty righteous people could be found. Why didn't the Lord just tell him that he had already predestined the future of Sodom and Lot with it? Instead, the Angel of the Lord went along with the man's persistent pleading. Finally, Abraham whittled the number to ten righteous people. This kind of pestering prayer seems a bit over the line, don't you think? But the Lord seemed pleased rather than being put off with Abraham's argument.

It was too late for Sodom though. Two angels were sent there and discovered just how ugly and out of hand things had gotten (Genesis 19:1-13). The angels emphatically warned Lot and his family to get out of town immediately. There was no time to waste; judgment was imminent. But then Lot began to waver and hesitate. It was difficult for him to leave all the good stuff he'd accumulated. The angelic beings were forced to grasp the hands of Lot, his wife, and two daughters, and firmly guide them away from ground zero. Lot's family would find safety in the nearby town of Zoar, but they must "flee there quickly" because the angels cannot do anything until you reach it" (Genesis 19:22).

The end of the story is sad, but here's the silver lining: "Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like the smoke from a furnace. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, *he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe* that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived" (Genesis 19:27-29, emphasis added).

Why did the angels forcibly remove Lot's family from doomed Sodom? Why couldn't the command for destruction be given until Lot reached safety? It sure wasn't because Lot and his family were spiritually sensitive and prayerful; the man almost fought off two angels trying to rescue him! No, the lesson of the whole strange story is this: God remembered and honored Abraham's prayers for his nephew, and because of them, he saved Lot from a catastrophe. Lot's family was spared for one reason alone: an old man prayed for him and prevailed with God Almighty.

### **Prayer Links Us to Power**

This story seems very foreign to what most of us think about prayer. We have unfortunately formed our ideas not from Scripture, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, but rather from what we have seen and experienced in our churches. And that is often not a very faith-inspiring model for us to follow. Just as we neglect the person of the Holy Spirit, we also neglect or gloss over the idea that prayer can secure answers from God. "It is a concept from another day, another time," we say. Yet when we consider Jesus' prayer life and the amazing deliverance granted through Abraham's intercession, we easily understand why Satan targets corporate and individual prayer. He doesn't like when we gather to sing praises, study God's Word, and fellowship together. But if we ever commit to giving ourselves over to *real prayer*, the kind that moves mountains, well, then all the enemy's heavy guns will be brought out against us. After all, prayer links us to the promises and power of the Almighty.

This powerful weapon in our spiritual warfare is first mentioned in Genesis when “people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26). Thousands of years later, the apostle Paul declared that the Lord “richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Romans 10:12-13). Calling out to God threatens Satan’s kingdom because it brings the blessings of heaven to earth and grants salvation to the ungodly.

Oswald Chambers said: “The prayer of the feeblest saint who lives in the Spirit and keeps right with God is a terror to Satan. The very powers of darkness are paralyzed by prayer; no spiritualistic séance can succeed in the presence of a humble praying saint. No wonder Satan tries to keep our minds fussy in active work till we cannot think in prayer.”

It’s easy to understand how prayers can be stopped in public schools filled with unbelieving students and teachers. But when God’s own people and Christian churches have little or no time for prayers, that’s another story. The angels must weep when they see our disinterest in prayer! Do we realize we’re forfeiting the help and strength promised by a faithful God to those who will simply take time to ask?

The early church devoted itself to prayer (Acts 2:42) and even prayed Peter out of prison the night before his scheduled execution (Acts 12). The first time the believers were persecuted, they met together in corporate prayers and “raised their voices together” (Acts 4:24). God responded by granting them a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit and a boldness to witness for Christ.

After Saul was blinded by his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus, he was visited by Ananias. Through a vision, the Lord had informed Ananias that Saul, the church’s archenemy, had converted to the Way. But Ananias was still fearful, so God gave him definitive proof of Saul’s salvation, saying, “Behold, he is praying” (Acts 9:11 NKJV). It sometimes seems that God divides humankind into two simple categories, folks who pray to him and those who don’t.

## **Lifting Our Hearts to a God Who Can Be Trusted**

I think most of us are aware that Jesus insisted that his followers “always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). And although his disciples never once asked him for lessons in preaching, they did ask, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). They were aware of what we might call “the spiritual secret” behind Jesus’ life and ministry. When they requested his help to pray, I think they were asking not only what prayer looked like – what to say – but also how they could be inspired to do it and persevere in it. They wanted to practice daily prayer just like their Master. It’s all too easy to admire from afar the power of prayer and understand the promises attached to it without ever experiencing its reality in our lives.

At its core, prayer is not about the words that are spoken. Rather, it’s about uplifting our hearts to a God who can be trusted. It’s not about religious-sounding phrases, since tears and groans often receive the strongest responses. It is primitive and heart-centered, which is what makes it so unacceptable to many refined, intellectually proud believers and churches. In its purest form, prayer has a raw fervency and faith that prevails with God and secures answers otherwise thought impossible.

As we have learned, “Love one another” and “Rejoice always” can only be obeyed through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Andrew Bonar, a nineteenth-century minister from Scotland, once masterfully said, “All merit is in the Son; all power is by the Spirit.” Our acceptance and salvation are always through the grace of Christ and his cross, but at the same time, all obedience to God is only possible through the Spirit’s enablement. And that is also true for the kind of praying we see in Scripture – the Holy Spirit makes it possible. To see that, we only need to compare our hollow habits of merely “saying prayers” to Elijah’s bold petitions, Moses’ intercession for the Israelites, or Paul’s travail like a mother giving birth.

When witnessing to a nonbeliever, many of us rely on the power of the Spirit to open the mind and heart of the listener, so why don't we rely on that same Spirit when we pray? "Why do you suppose it is that so little stress is laid on the influences of the Spirit in prayer when so much is said about His influences in conversion?" asked Charles Finney.

"Many people are amazingly afraid the Spirit's influences will be left out. They lay great stress on the Spirit's influences in converting sinners. But how little is said, how little is printed, about His influence in prayer! How little complaining there is that people do not make enough of the Spirit's influence in leading Christians to pray according to the will of God! Let it never be forgotten that no Christian ever prays aright, unless led by the Spirit."

### **Spirit-Enabled Prayer**

The apostle Paul, writer of most of the New Testament, made an extraordinary admission in Romans: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans" (8:26). Notice the key phrases:

- "We do not know what we ought to prayer for." That is written in first person plural – Paul included himself! The mightiest apostle in history didn't know how to properly pray?
- "The Spirit helps us in our weakness." Are we really all so spiritually frail that we need assistance from God to simply pray the right way?
- "The Spirit helps us." All power is in the Holy Spirit, including the grace to pray right so God can hear and answer.



The Spirit helps us *to do prayer*, to get away from the bustle of life and get alone with God. He reveals our critical need of daily grace by contrasting God's strength with our human frailty. He tenderly reminds us of our structural vulnerability to temptation, our cowardice, and our unkind reactions to people and situations. He draws us gently to our Source and helps our hearts to sincerely bow, believe, and petition at God's throne. The Spirit readjusts our priorities based on eternal values; and by helping us to be spiritually minded, he convinces us of our overwhelming need to talk with our Father.

We all know there are things we should never pray about because they dishonor God or don't comply with his holy instructions. It would be utter foolishness to pray, "God, should I cheat on my income tax form or not? Guide me in the path I should follow." But what about complex questions that don't have answers in Scripture? Many times we face situations in life that are quite complicated and we are unsure what we should pray for – there is no obvious right or wrong choice. Maybe an opportunity arises for a short-term mission trip, a rebellious child gets in trouble with the law, or a pastoral staff faces the possibility of a move to a larger facility and it will involve raising millions of dollars. What is God's will in those situations? How should we pray? That is where the Holy Spirit helps us by revealing God's will and granting us the faith to pray in the right direction.

The prayer of faith moves mountains (Mark 11:23 – 24; James 5:15). The Spirit alone makes the power of God so real to our inner person that we are enabled to ask, seek, and knock with bold assurance. This is another reason why the deepest truths and secrets of prayer can never be learned by lectures, teaching tapes, or books (including this one!). Prayer is learned by praying, and the heart usually learns faster than the head. "So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17 NKJV). The Holy Spirit marries prayer and faith together within us, and the results are life changing.

## **Let the Spirit Blow**

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of true prayer; he is both its origin and its lifeblood. That's why we must be careful, individually and corporately, not to grieve him.

I spoke some time ago at a large leadership conference where sincere men and women gathered to have their spiritual batteries recharged. I felt God's anointing as I delivered his Word, and then I concluded by calling forward all those who desired fresh grace to help them fulfill their callings. Hundreds responded, and soon there was an awe-filled sense of the Spirit's presence. Fervent, sincere, and humble petitions mingled with tears and audible cries rose heavenward. It was the kind of praying that brought spiritual renewal to churches across the centuries, the kind that replaced luke-warm-ness with a burning desire to be like Christ and sacrifice everything for him. The Holy Spirit had come to help us pray! No one glanced at his or her watch to see what time it was, because in God's presence, in a sense, time stands still.

Eventually I had to leave the platform to talk with a fellow minister who had been very ill. As I left, people were sitting, kneeling, standing, or lying prostrate on the floor – physical posture is irrelevant when the heart meets God in prayer. But in the midst of all that fervent prayer, someone suddenly took the microphone and ordered everyone back to their seats. “Before the service ends, the choir and orchestra will close with two anthems that will just blow you away!” It was an intrusion of the human element into the gentle work of the Spirit. It must have felt like a punch in the stomach to those who were lost in the sweet presence of Jesus. Anthems, hymns, and sermons all have their place, but not when the Spirit is helping God's children to plead for fresh power. There *is* a time for everything under the sun, but wisdom must help us know what the moment calls for.

I've noticed that church services and conference gatherings are increasingly (and proudly) governed by "tight timelines" as we try to imitate corporate America. A song here, announcements there, move on to this, and keep with the timeline, please. Above all, let's avoid downtime with no one at the mike. Heaven forbid that we'd ever dare to entrust the service or conference to the wind of the Spirit and not know what we're going to do next! The Bible cautions us not to grieve the Holy Spirit – offend, distress, vex, or sadden him. At that leadership conference I spoke at, it sure seemed too many of us that the Holy Spirit was saddened that a conference schedule with choir anthems was a higher priority than following his sovereign, sweet, and much needed ministry.

### **Praying in the Spirit**

Paul told the Ephesians to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18). What an interesting phrase and word picture – *pray in* the Spirit. Pray in, through, and by the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself! That's a vital truth and probably one of the least taught subjects in the New Testament. In addition to that reference in Ephesians, there are more references: "So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding" (I Corinthians 14:15). Notice that Paul prays not only with his mind but also with his spirit, stirred and prompted by the Spirit of God.

Where else would the Spirit primarily work but in our human spirits? Also to combat those who divide the body of Christ, those who follow "mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit," Jude told his leader to "build yourselves up in your most holy faith and *pray in the Holy Spirit*" (Jude 20, emphasis added).

All those directives about prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit might seem like some kind of emotional fanaticism to some. They feel it's for those "other folks" who always sing too loud and lift their hands in church every six seconds. They say, "That's not how I was raised in church." Does it matter one iota how we were raised and what we saw in our particular denominational cultures? Didn't God give us the Bible so we could prayerfully and humbly search its depths and experience what it promises? Did the Holy Spirit's power to inspire prayer somehow evaporate during the centuries following the book of Acts? Will the Spirit help us today any less, especially when we need him most? This doesn't sound like what a merciful God would do.

Often when I speak at a pastor's conference, a Q&A session follows my presentation. The most common question by far is along the lines of "How can my church become more of a house of prayer?"

In answering, I try to help my listeners understand that being a true "house of prayer" is directly related to the degree to which the Holy Spirit is honored. How will we boldly pray in faith if the Holy Spirit is not helping us? Is it not amazing that some of the best Bible teaching churches are at the same time basically prayer-less? Without an understanding of and hunger for the Spirit, prayer will never grow as a dynamic force to secure God's blessings.

The same is true for you and me as individuals. Only as the Spirit leads and inspires will we rise to a new level of prevailing prayer. Then strongholds *will* come down, loved ones *will* be visited by God's grace, and people around us *will* be reminded that Christ is a living Savior and not a mere theological concept. Samuel Chadwick wrote long ago: "We are never really men [and women] of prayer in the best sense until we are 'filled with the Holy Ghost.'"

Recently I met a preteen girl in our BT Kids program. Although she is pretty and intelligent, she barely looked at me when I was introduced to her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She didn’t pause for a second with her answer. “I’m mad at my mother, my father, my school, God, Jesus – I’m angry with everyone!” I learned gang members were trying to recruit this precious girl who was already fighting against so much. She lived in a tough neighborhood that swallowed kids like her. In addition, she had a difficult and challenging life at home. No one talked to her or tried to understand what she was feeling. I shared with her Jesus’ love and plan for her life as best I could, but it seemed as if I got nowhere.

Although I talked and prayed with dozens of people that Sunday, I couldn’t get that young lady out of my mind and my heart. Even without pursuing it, I found myself praying daily for her with a deep concern, as if she were my own grandchild.

With so many prayer requests in a church like ours, how do you think that preteen became a main topic of my petitions and intercession? Could Satan, my carnal nature, or the spirit of this selfish world be behind it all? Not hardly. For some reason, the Holy Spirit arranged for me to meet her, and then he deposited a burden of prayer in me so I could fight for a girl whom Christ loves and died for. I didn’t ask for that. I wasn’t looking for another personal prayer project. But although her battle is far from over, I’m already beginning to see answers to my petitions.

How about you? Do you have a concern for a loved one living too close to Sodom? Abraham stood in between God and his nephew Lot, whom he loved. What a marvelous deliverance Abraham’s prayers brought about? Do you have a relative or friend facing eternity without a Savior? Maybe you know a parent or child who seems to get harder by the day and you’re wondering what to do. Let’s try following God’s directive – *prayer!*

God is reminding us that *nothing* is too hard for him. All that's needed are believers yielded to the Spirit's influence so that prayer that shakes the kingdom of darkness can be offered to the glory of Christ.

Lord, teach us to pray, and let it be prayer in the Holy Spirit.

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