

MAKE
YOUR
VOICE
HEARD
— IN —
HEAVEN

How to Pray with Power

BARRY C. BLACK

Chaplain of the United States Senate

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Make Your Voice Heard in Heaven: How to Pray with Power

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INTRODUCTION

In our “connected” society, we work to make our voices heard on earth. We tweet and blog, post videos to YouTube, and use various other forms of social media to get the word out—whatever that word might be. Here in Washington, DC, where I work, people march, lift placards, and petition Congress, hoping their voices will be heard and will make a difference.

Whenever I see people gathering together to make their voices heard, I’m reminded of the promise in Matthew 18:20 that whenever even two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, he is in their midst. As followers of Jesus, we need to realize that when we come together to pray, we invite the palpable presence of Almighty God, and we make our voices heard in heaven.

I know there are some who say that the efficacy of prayer does not extend beyond the interior life of the one who prays. “Prayer may change *us*,” or so their logic goes, “but it doesn’t change anything else.” But I’m more

inclined to agree with Alfred Lord Tennyson, both in principle and prescription:

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain . . . night and day.
For what are men . . .
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?¹*

In prayer, I believe humanity cooperates with divinity. As we bring our souls into alignment with the Creator of every good thing, we avail ourselves of God's goodness, wisdom, and power. Moreover, there are things we will never receive except by request only—blessings that hang on the silken cords of prayer.

James 4:2 (NKJV) says, "You do not have because you do not ask." Moreover, we must pray believing, as Abraham did, that whatever God has promised, he is also able to perform.²

When Jesus went to his hometown, as recorded in Mark 6, the people there were skeptical of him.

They asked, "Where did he get all this wisdom and the power to perform such miracles?" Then they scoffed, "He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas,

and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us.” They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him.

Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.” And because of their unbelief, he couldn’t do any miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.³

Mark 6:5 is one of the most startling Bible verses I know: “Because of their unbelief, he couldn’t do any miracles among them.” It doesn’t say he *wouldn’t* do any miracles; it says he *couldn’t* do any miracles. Such is the dampening effect of unbelief. On the other hand, Jesus says that if we have faith “even as small as a mustard seed,” we can move mountains.⁴ Such is the power of making our voices heard in heaven.

When we lift our voices to heaven, it makes an unmistakable difference. So how do we do that?

First of all, we must pray from a sense of *need*. God instructs us through the psalmist Asaph: “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”⁵ When I was a young man, I used to have about forty-five seconds of prayer material. It wasn’t that I didn’t have needs, but I often didn’t recognize them as prayer

worthy. Then I got married and became a parent—and suddenly I had *plenty* of prayer material.

God wants us to pray when we *need* him. And in our day and age—with everything happening in our nation and around the world—we don't have to look very far to see our need for God. At the same time, we're not to worry. In Philippians 4:6, the Bible says, "Have no anxiety about anything, but pray about everything—with thanksgiving."⁶

When Jesus prayed his wonderful intercessory prayer in the upper room the night before he was crucified, the Bible tells us "he lifted his eyes to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that your Son also might glorify you. As you have given him power to give to as many as would receive him eternal life. And this is life eternal, that they might know you—Abba, Daddy—and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'"⁷ God wants to have an intimate relationship with us, in which we come to him as our Father, and our voices are heard in the courts of heaven.

Why do we pray?

We pray to "acknowledge that the LORD is God! He made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture."⁸ We also pray because we share mutual interests with him. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."⁹ Moreover, we pray because we and God have a mutual enemy. "Be sober, be vigilant; because

your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”¹⁰

For whom do we pray?

The apostle Paul instructs us: “I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.”¹¹

We should pray with the knowledge that we have been invited to speak to our omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. When our prayers are directed toward the enhancement of God’s name and the accomplishment of his purposes, we can expect that our voices will be heard in heaven. When our prayers are heard in heaven, our need for guidance, strength, healing, mercy, grace, and wisdom will be met by the God who has given us this promise: “All glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.”¹² We can pray with effectiveness, even when it seems that God is silent. We can pray every prayer expecting divine assistance.

Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, I was approached by two senators as I walked into the US Capitol building one morning. You may forgive my brief anxiety, but at first it seemed as if it might be an intervention.

But I calmed myself with the truth that I had been their chaplain for nearly fourteen years, and their true purpose soon became clear.

“Barry,” one of the senators said, “we would like you to deliver the keynote address at our 2017 National Prayer Breakfast.”

Did I hear that correctly? Was he really talking to me?

The annual prayer breakfast, which was started during the Eisenhower administration, is an iconic event that attracts US leaders, heads of state, members of Parliament, and other luminaries from around the world. Past keynote addresses have been given by the likes of Billy Graham, Bishop Fulton Sheen, and even Mother Teresa. Was I now being offered that privilege?

I heard myself say, “Senator, I’d be delighted to serve in any way you deem helpful,” but I projected far more confidence than I felt. Even as I spoke those optimistic words, I sought to be heard in heaven, whispering silently this prayer: “Lord, I surely do need you. And I need you *now*.”

With about three months to prepare, I began to sleep, eat, think, walk, and talk about prayer. The book you are now holding is the result of those three months of ruminating, agonizing, and organizing. Having practiced these principles in my own private prayer life and in my role as chaplain of the US Senate, I offer my observations and advice about how to pray with power and make your voice heard in heaven.

PRAY WITH ASSISTANCE

If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.

MATTHEW 18:19-20

On July 7, 2003, I began work as the sixty-second chaplain of the United States Senate. When I walked into my Capitol Hill office for the first time, with its mesmerizing view of the Washington Monument standing majestically on the Mall, my eyes traced a path beyond it to where shimmering sunlight glinted on the surface of the reflecting pool that provides a mirror for the Lincoln Memorial. The memorial's stately pillars brought to mind Dr. Martin Luther King's involvement in the 1963 March on Washington, when he aroused the nation's conscience by articulating his dream of freedom and equality. How fortunate I was to now have a job that provided me with an office from which I could gaze upon such beauty and have a front-row seat to human history.

I surveyed the beautiful mahogany bookcases that would soon provide a residence for my personal library—allowing my mentors to join me in my work: Aristotle, Epictetus, Boethius, Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Adler, Augustine, Aurelius, and Aquinas, to name a few. They had been my companions since my sojourn to college in Alabama in the 1960s, and subsequently traveled with me to eleven churches I pastored and on numerous military deployments. They wouldn't forsake me now. I felt very much at home.

As chaplain for the upper chamber of America's legislative branch of government, I offer an invocation at the convening of each new session of the Senate. This is a wonderful opportunity to frame the day for the members, using a one-minute prayer to remind them of the importance of the spiritual, moral, ethical, and religious aspects of their work. I view this prayer as a conversation with God, evolving from the overflow of my daily devotional reading, my pastoral outreach to the thousands on the Senate side of Capitol Hill, and my daily commitment to "practice the presence" of our transcendent God.

I remember my knees knocking together the first time I ascended the steps to the Senate podium as a guest chaplain, trying to forget that countless viewers would be watching me on C-SPAN 2, in addition to the august assembly in the Senate chambers. But knowing that I would be speaking to the sovereign God of the universe,

and that my voice would be heard in heaven, I felt less intimidated by my immediate surroundings, enabling me to enjoy my guest-chaplain responsibilities.

But on that July day, as I stood nervously on the Senate floor, listening to Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, the president pro tempore, gavel me in, I was no longer a *guest* chaplain; this was my new calling.

“The Senate will now come to order,” Senator Stevens intoned. “The chaplain, Dr. Barry Black, will lead the Senate in prayer.”

As I began my first prayer, I once again experienced reverential awe in light of the privilege I had to speak to God on behalf of the Senate and our nation. The sound of my voice, a natural baritone I’ve had since puberty, brought a soothing rush of relief as the words of the prayer flowed easily. I found myself thinking, *This may work out just fine.*

With my inaugural prayer, my purpose was to announce a new beginning, celebrate God’s sovereignty, acknowledge the contributions of my predecessor, Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, encourage bipartisan cooperation, and challenge our lawmakers to reach out to the marginalized—to the lost, last, lonely, least, and left out. My fervent hope was that all this would be accomplished with a standard of excellence—as captured in the words of the apostle Paul: “I pray that . . . you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives.”¹

Help from Heaven

Living pure and blameless lives is not something we come by naturally. The Bible says we were conceived in sin and “brought forth in iniquity.”² In the words of the apostle Paul, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t.”³ The good we desire to do, we often don’t do. The evil we hate, we find ourselves doing. We encounter a civil war inside of ourselves, and we cry out with Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”⁴

Fortunately, we serve an all-wise God who “knows our frame” and “remembers that we are dust.”⁵ God knows we need help, and he has not left us unprepared.

Jesus, during his last days on earth, knowing that his disciple Peter would be tested, said to him, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.”⁶ Imagine the leverage of having God’s Son interceding on our behalf. Well, according to the book of Hebrews, we don’t have to imagine it—because it’s true! What Jesus did for Peter, he continues to do for us today.⁷ Thank God for this assistance, because as humans we indeed have infirmities. We have blind spots and often act in ignorance. As Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”⁸ Those who drove the nails into his hands did so in ignorance.

We're born with these blind spots and shortcomings. Some of us are born with physical infirmities, and all of us are born with moral weaknesses. Hereditary moral infirmity may be what “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation” means in Exodus 20:5 (ESV). Our infirmities can be exacerbated by poor education, bad habits, and other negative environmental factors. Praise God that the Holy Spirit is willing to help us with our infirmity.⁹

Think about how, throughout human history, God has helped humanity with its infirmities. He helped Moses, who murdered a man in a fit of rage. He helped Peter with his impulsiveness and vacillating. He helped Saul of Tarsus with his misplaced zeal, and Thomas with his doubting, and he unburdened Mary Magdalene of the oppression of seven devils. God also empowers *us* to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”¹⁰ so that we may overcome our hereditary and cultivated tendencies to sin.

New Beginnings

God not only helps us in our weakness, but he also gives us a fresh start when we turn to him in faith. He is the author of new beginnings, as declared in the very first verse of Scripture: “In the beginning God created. . . .”¹¹ The apostle John speaks of the Creator’s power with these

words: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”¹²

God’s authorship of beginnings means that we can trust him to have a plan for what he starts—even the varied journeys of our lives. In Jeremiah 29:11, God says, “I know the plans I have for you.” Imagine that. The sovereign, omnipotent, and omniscient God of the universe has a detailed strategy for each of our lives. I found this promise to be very reassuring as I began my service as chaplain of the Senate, confident that God would choreograph my new vocational journey, just as he would guide the steps of the legislators I now served—*if* we would but acknowledge his sovereignty.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart;
do not depend on your own understanding.
Seek his will in all you do,
and he will show you which path to take.¹³

I knew I had so much to learn, but I clung to the prophet Zechariah’s admonition: “Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin.”¹⁴ Yes, I had little experience in the legislature, but I served a God who equips people to walk through the doors of opportunity he opens. He gave Joseph and Daniel the ability to interpret dreams, he provided Samson with remarkable strength, and he blessed David with amazing

hand-eye coordination. He gave Esther great beauty and courage, equipping her for an assignment to help her people escape the genocidal intentions of Haman.¹⁵

When I remembered how Jacob, Moses, and David started as humble shepherds and God splendidly used them for his glory, I became more optimistic about what God could do through me. I recalled that when Jesus chose his disciples, he didn't select them from among the aristocracy but from the blue-collar ranks.¹⁶ That was *my* echelon, making me feel optimistic about what the future might hold.

Striving for Excellence

In my first prayer before the Senate, I wanted to mention the indispensability of *excellence*, establishing this value as a motif in subsequent prayers. Excellence has to do with finding the superior path, a practice that is certainly needed by lawmakers. It usually entails striving for great preparation, expending one's energies in a worthy cause, seizing life's opportunities, and refusing to settle for less than our best.

As I reflected on the attribute of excellence, my mind wandered back to the events of May 6, 1954, when Englishman Roger Bannister ran the first sub-four-minute mile. Many people at the time believed it couldn't be done, that it was a physiological impossibility, but Bannister did it

nonetheless, recording a time of 3:59.4. What's interesting is that his record stood for only forty-six days before Australian John Landy lowered it to 3:57.9. Over the next five years, another twenty runners bested Bannister's mark as well.¹⁷ Today, sub-fours have become almost commonplace among elite distance runners—which would seem to suggest that the standard of excellence was set too low to begin with.

In the Bible, when Daniel and his friends were examined by King Nebuchadnezzar after they had completed three years of specialized training, the monarch found them far superior to any of the other students in the program. “Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found them ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom.”¹⁸ Could it be that the standard for excellence is actually that high? If it is, we all must do more to passionately pursue God's best. One way we can do that is by praying with God's assistance.

We need God's assistance when we pray because we don't know the future. We can't see even one hour ahead. I remember talking to a friend who was contemplating an assignment that would take six years to complete. But we had no idea that he would die eleven days later. The Bible says, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”¹⁹

We also need assistance with our prayers because we rarely know what is best for us. In the eleventh grade,

I asked God to make a certain young lady fall in love with me so that we would eventually marry. I'm certainly glad that God didn't answer in the way I had hoped. I didn't know what was best for my life, but he did.

The mother of James and John came to Jesus, requesting that her sons be permitted to sit on his right and left in the new Kingdom.²⁰ Jesus responded, "You don't know what you are asking!"²¹ You see, Jesus had no intention of setting up an earthly kingdom, as the disciples' mother (and others) had assumed, and what she requested would probably bring martyrdom to her sons. So often, we really don't know what is best. We're like children who get upset because our parents won't let us play with knives, when all our parents are trying to do is keep us from harm.

We also need to pray with assistance because two are stronger than one. "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble."²² Moreover, Jesus declared, "If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you."²³

We also need to pray with assistance because God's Spirit is willing to intercede for us. Romans 8:26-27 puts it this way: "The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows

all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will." What a marvelous way to ensure that our voices are heard in heaven! When the Holy Spirit pleads our case, we can be certain that God's purposes for our lives will prevail.

We need to pray with assistance because it enables us to follow God's strategy for praying with power. We can take advantage of the sympathy and help that God provides to remedy our defects. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus provided his disciples with seven petitions.²⁴ When we pray the "Our Father," we are praying God's Word. It is God who takes the initiative in causing us to even desire to pray: "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him."²⁵ Then the Holy Spirit, through God's Word, reveals God's will to us. With the aid of scriptural inspiration, we pray according to God's will. We find ourselves responding to what God is impressing upon our hearts, giving him the courtesy of starting the conversation and assisting us in our prayers.

When we pray before an open Bible, we receive assistance as we cry out with Samuel, "Speak, for your servant is listening."²⁶ I can tell you that praying with the assistance of Scripture and the Holy Spirit has energized my prayer life.

We need to pray with assistance because we cannot grasp God's infinite plan with our finite minds. In Isaiah, God reminds us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . For as the heavens

are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”²⁷ In the final analysis, perhaps we would do best to pray Jesus’ last prayer on Calvary: “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit!”²⁸

Just as I Am

The knowledge that God offers us divine assistance with our prayers should motivate us to come to him just as we are to receive his gifts and blessings. I know of no better way to do this than to “stupid-proof” our lives by praying for the wisdom that God makes available upon request. James says, “If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.”²⁹ I marvel at this promise, for wisdom covers every critical area of our lives, and we need it in order to live well. We don’t have to go forth in our own strength. God’s Spirit will help us in all of life’s seasons.

When we appeal to God for wisdom, he promises to generously provide it. In short, we’ll receive *more* than we need, but we must ask without doubting. The Bible says, “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”³⁰ Faith, then, is a critical

force in receiving God's wisdom and in making our voices heard in heaven.

Without God's wisdom, how can we live well or pray with power, particularly when we realize how little we actually know? When we, with great faith, make a request of God for wisdom, he will provide us with all that is necessary to make our voices heard in heaven and for living lives that will glorify him. This is the assistance from heaven we need in order to pray with power.

With the assistance of the Holy Spirit, I daily attempt to remind our lawmakers of God's providential power over the course of the nation—and the nations. It's not enough to have a strong military or competent governmental branches; we must look to God as the source of our nation's ultimate survival and success. "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."³¹ What is true for houses and cities is true for nations as well. Proverbs 14:34 says, "Godliness makes a nation great, but sin is a disgrace to any people." Unrighteousness, therefore, is a national security issue.

Because righteousness emerges more from unity than division, from concord than discord, I encourage our lawmakers to build bridges, to find common ground. The Bible says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!"³²

True unity usually entails a humility that esteems

others as better than ourselves³³ and is “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.”³⁴ It’s a humility that reflects bipartisan cooperation, which the American framers attempted to build into the upper chamber of our government’s legislative branch, where a simple majority would usually be insufficient to win the day.

My first prayer as Senate chaplain was also about the inescapable laws of sowing and reaping. In our work, we may plant and water, but God gives the increase. As Paul writes, “I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow.”³⁵ I wanted to remind our lawmakers of the certainty of a harvest if they persevered in doing what is right. “Let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don’t give up.”³⁶

In this planting of seeds, encounters with unproductive soil could bring discouragement. When some seeds fall on hard, rocky, or thorny soil, it might engender in the sower a cynicism and despair. But it’s all just part of the process. “As long as the earth remains, there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.”³⁷ Our responsibility is to persevere in praying with God’s assistance.

This sowing and reaping also requires that we seek the wisdom of the Lord of the harvest. Like all of us, our lawmakers shouldn’t lean primarily on their own wisdom, but instead should trust in a God who knows the future and

has promised to direct their steps. “Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”³⁸

I felt such spiritual strength as I attempted to depend on God’s Spirit to help me write my initial prayer. How I wanted our lawmakers to focus on being faithful. The issue is always one of fidelity to God, regardless of how our circumstances play out. I wanted them to permit praises to go up so that blessings could come down, for God is “enthroned on the praises” of his people.³⁹ I wanted this spiritual approach to produce in our legislators an equanimity of temperament, as the peace of God that transcends understanding guarded their hearts.⁴⁰

I knew my small contribution had been assisted not only by the inspiration of God’s Word and his Holy Spirit, but also by the intercessions of the tens of thousands of people of faith who had prayed with and for me.

Over the years, I have learned how to pray with assistance, as the opening verses of this chapter, Matthew 18:19-20, recommend. I have found this to be an important step on the journey to learn how to make our voices heard in heaven.