

The Divine Exception

God's Response to Fervent, Prevailing Prayer

By Bill Elliff

What do you do when you don't know what to do anymore? When the rising tide of moral degradation in the nation seems unstoppable? When the church seems to be lifeless and ineffective in reversing the cultural freefall? When our churches or families of churches seem to be declining year after year?

Or, more personally, what do you do when your child has become a prodigal and nothing seems to touch him or her? When those you love are caught up in a lifestyle of horrible immorality or gender confusion? When you are in a serious financial crisis? When you cannot seem to overcome a habit that is destroying your life and the lives of others? When you've been deeply hurt and you cannot seem to forgive? When someone you love is lost and headed to an eternity without God, and your best words can't persuade him or her?

Do we devise a new program? Look to a new agenda? Mount a campaign?

Or do we return to the means that God has ordained—the only practice that will bring dramatic reversals and spiritual breakthroughs?

Light, religious measures will not solve overwhelming problems. These are moments that call for persistent, fervent prayer. Prayer that moves God.

Prayer that brings a Divine Exception.

Early, Insurmountable Problem

The days surrounding Pentecost were stunning for the early believers (Acts 2). Lives were instantly transformed. People miraculously healed. A plan of generosity had been embraced so that there was “no more need” in the large movement of new believers.

And the gospel was advancing. Anyone would surmise that the lightning-speed growth of the church would soon dominate Jerusalem—and perhaps the whole world. It seemed that the mission given by the ascending Christ could be accomplished in a matter of a few years.

The great enemy of God, though, would not allow this to be. Opposition began to grow. The new believers encountered a rising tide of serious persecution that threatened their future. And it was aimed at their leaders.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison (Acts 12:1–5a).

Everything was going so well, but suddenly something threatened the glory of those early, effortless days. James was killed and Peter was imprisoned. Herod was so paranoid that he tasked four squads of the toughest soldiers in the world (16 men!) to hold Peter. He was placed in prison and chained to a guard on his left and right.

Imagine these early believers’ fears. Picture them huddled in their houses, wondering what was happening. Feel their

hopelessness. James was gone. Now Peter is in jail and they had good reason to believe they would be next. They'd witnessed the merciless killings by their oppressors for years. It could all fall apart.

It seemed there was nothing that could be done. Nothing.

Your Dilemma

We might be surprised to view heaven at such a moment. God allows things to happen in this world (and sometimes causes them) to shut us up to Him alone. To bring us to such desperation that we have nowhere to turn except Him. Ask Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Joshua about their impossible problems. The barren Hannah, Daniel in the lions' den, and his friends in the fire.

One of my mentors, Manley Beasley, often said, "Needs are God's messenger boys, telling us that He has an answer." If we respond rightly, we will see the glory of God and the world will be amazed. But our common tendency is to seek human solutions to Divine-sized situations.

I always imagine heaven's throne room at such moments. I envision the Father turning to His Son and saying with a knowing smile, "Watch this!"

The Divine Exception

A conjunction in the English language is used to connect two thoughts.

*"She told her husband to get milk on the way home **and** he heard her."*

But there's another type of conjunction that is common. It's an oppositional conjunction. It connects two or more parts of a sentence but offers an oppositional thought.

"She told her husband to get milk on the way home and he heard

her, **but** he forgot to do it!”

God’s vocabulary is filled with oppositional conjunctions.

- *And you were dead in your transgressions and sin . . . **but God**, being rich in mercy . . . (Eph. 2:1, 4, esv).*
- *Indeed he was ill, near to death. **But God** had mercy on him (Phil. 2:27).*
- *. . . our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. **But God**, who comforts the downcast, comforted us . . . (2 Cor. 7:5–6).*

The story of Paul’s imprisonment contains one of these oppositional conjunctions that is priceless and important:

*So Peter was kept in the prison, **but prayer** for him was being made fervently by the church to God (Acts 12:5, nasb 1995).*

What changed everything in the midst of a hopeless situation? The church decided to pray. In response to their fervent prayer, God intervened. There was a Divine Exception to a helpless, hopeless situation.

But this was not light prayer. This was no “and help Sister Susie’s sore toe and, by the way, help ol’ Peter in prison” kind of intercession. Adverbs are used to indicate the type of prayer that engaged them. And it gives us the key to the kind of praying we must use in our current crisis.

Personal Prayer

Generic prayers are often useless. “Lord, bless all the missionaries” may be heard by God, but prayers by name for individuals, pleading with the Lord for specific needs and answers indicate that we are seriously engaged. These believers prayed by name for their friend.

*So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer **for him** was being*

made fervently by the church to God.

And God heard their cry.

Prevailing Prayer

This was not a “one and done” prayer.

*So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him **was being made** fervently by the church to God.*

“Was being made” indicates continual action. Perseverance in prayer was needed in this occasion (and in most). We grow faint in prayer and this is why Christ warned us so often. He asked Peter, “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” as He persevered in prayer in the garden (Matt. 26:40). Jesus told them the parable of the persevering widow “to show that at all times they ought to pray and not become discouraged” (Luke 18:1, nasb). *ALL times.*

S.D. Gordon, in his book *Quiet Talks on Prayer*, writes:

Prayer is warfare . . . it is a fiercely contested conflict. And the enemy yields only what he must. He yields only what is taken. Therefore, the ground must be taken step by step. Prayer must be definite.

He yields only when he must. Therefore, prayer must be persistent. He continually renews his attacks, therefore the ground must be held against him in the Savior’s name.

Great dilemmas call for great prayer. Persevering problems call for persevering prayer. We might wonder at this requirement from God, but our frustration with this indicates we misunderstand one of the great purposes of prayer.

Prayer is not just about getting things, it’s about *God getting you*. God longs for you, more than you long for your own children. He designed you to walk in unceasing communion with Him.

He allows problems—often overwhelming situations—to draw you to His side and teach you how to live with Him in intimacy. He wants you to know His love and see His gracious, providing care. He wants you to see the perfection of His timing. To understand His sovereignty. To grasp the precision of His ways. To train you to live in dependency upon Him.

Only in persevering, continual prayer do we experience the depth of this intimacy. Only there do we come to know Him as we should and as we can.

Intense Prayer

Fervently can be translated as “zealously, unceasingly, intently, with unfailing intensity.”

*So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made **fervently** by the church to God.*

Fervently is not a word that could be used for most of our praying, which could explain the smallness of our faith, the weakness of our compassion, and the infrequency of our results.

Hannah is a priceless example as she prayed so fervently that the aged prophet thought she was drunk.

She, greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli was watching her mouth.

As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make

yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.” But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:10–15).

Look at the words and phrases that describe her praying: *Distressed, wept bitterly, made a vow, continued praying, oppressed in spirit, I have poured out my soul before the Lord.*

Does this describe your praying? The praying of your church? If not, it may explain why we see little response to our prayers.

Responsible Prayer

Imagine getting a frantic call from a neighbor that robbers have broken into their home. You call the police and run down the street to their house. To your amazement, when you arrive you see two police cars with multiple officers causally leaning on their cars. You hear screams from inside the home, but the policemen are doing nothing.

This would never happen in our nation because our policemen and women are incredibly committed in their task to protect and to serve. They accept their responsibility with amazing faithfulness, regardless of the cost.

Does the church do the same? People are being terrorized by the enemy. He has come to steal, kill, and destroy—and He is good at His evil task. The attack on our nation’s children is epidemic, as the enemy invades their minds and brings such moral confusion that they don’t even know if they are a boy or a girl anymore. He is on the attack in every home in your neighborhood, every student at every school in your city, every church, every business.

And where is the church? Are we standing with arms folded, merely observing?

. . . *but prayer for him was being made fervently **by the church to God.***

There is much we can do, but the one thing that can change everything is fervent prayer “by the church to God.” Prayer brings God into the equation to accomplish this amazing feat.

Somehow in the last decades, many churches have come to believe they can accomplish God’s mission without prayer. The New Testament Church didn’t believe that. Paul wouldn’t dream of that preposterous idea.

And of course, Christ Himself accomplished His task by unceasing prayer. All-night prayer. Fervent prayer. Prevailing prayer. He knew it was His responsibility to pray and He fulfilled it fully. And so must we.

The Divine Exception

No one dreamed what God would do in response to the humble believers’ fervent prayers. In fact, when God answered their prayers for Peter, they were amazed! Read the story in Acts 12. One night as they were praying, Peter’s chains fell off, an angel gave him a personal escort out of prison, and he headed to the home where “many were gathered together and were praying” (vs. 5). The poor little servant girl came to the door, saw Peter, and closed the door in his face in her excitement!

God had done something beyond their imagining. The church—and even a watching world—was amazed at this Divine Exception.

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