

# THE PRAYER of LAST RESORT

BY STEPHEN CHAVEZ

**N**ot long ago, I rode my motorcycle to a luncheon meeting. Upon arriving, I went to the restroom to change out of my motorcycle clothes and into my meeting clothes. After the meeting, I went to another restroom to change back into my motorcycle clothes. But when I got back to my motorcycle, I couldn't find the key—it wasn't in my pants pocket. So I searched the pockets in my other pants—nothing.

*No problem, I thought, I must've dropped the key ring in the restroom when I changed clothes.* So I went to the first restroom—nothing. I went to the second restroom—nothing. I went to the dining room—nothing. I went to the hostess' desk and asked: "Has anyone turned in a set of keys?" Nothing.

So I retraced my steps. I walked through the parking lot, back to the first restroom, then the second restroom, then the dining room, then the parking lot—nothing. I didn't have a set of spare keys (I do now), and I distinctly remember praying, "God, I need a miracle." After all, keys just don't disappear. God knew where my keys were. And if He did, why wouldn't He help me find them?

So back through the parking lot, into the restrooms, into the dining room, back to the hostess' desk—nothing. I finally had to call

my wife to come pick me up, and I spent most of the next 24 hours trying to figure out how to get a spare set of keys for my motorcycle.

## The Problem of Prayer

Most of us understand prayer as some kind of cause-and-effect deal we transact with God. Our part is to ask and have faith; God's part is to give us what we ask for. Go to any Christian bookstore, and you'll find shelf after shelf of books about prayer: how to pray effectively, how to get answers, how to pray and get results. Most of these books reduce prayer to some kind of formula: ask, believe, claim; confess, praise, and petition, etc.

It's almost as if prayer is the same as slipping some coins into a vending machine, pushing the right buttons, and, *voilà!*, answered prayer.

I do believe God answers prayer; I've experienced answered prayer countless times. But I also believe that prayer is exceedingly complex and mysterious—just as God is. Often our questions and descriptions of prayer defy simplistic explanations.

Where I live, in the United States, Christians have a tendency to trivialize prayer. We find a parking place close to the store and we say, "Thank you, Jesus!" We get stopped by a police officer who lets us off with a warning and we say, "Thank you, Jesus!" We go to the doctor who says, "That lump on your arm is nothing to worry about," and we say, "Thank you, Jesus!" The implication being that God

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has somehow intervened to make our lives easier or more comfortable.

If that's so, why do so many people around the world—including some Christians—live such pitiful, desperate lives?

In some parts of the world, corrupt dictators perpetrate—or at least ignore—the brutality inflicted on religious and ethnic minorities. In one country in Africa, the inflation rate is 66,000 percent. In the spring of 2008, massive flooding displaced thousands and caused billions of dollars of damage in the Midwestern United States. This past summer, hundreds of people lost their homes to rampaging forest fires in the western United States.



The author with his motorcycle.

Presumably, at least some of those people prayed to be spared, but to no avail. Is it because they didn't pray correctly? Did they not have enough faith?

### Some Biblical Models

When we talk about prayer, it's important to do more than just cobble together a few verses and draw some snap conclusions. It's important to look at some models of prayer.

Let's start with Abraham (Genesis 18). You remember the story: Three visitors approached Abraham's camp and were invited to enjoy his hospitality. One of the Beings announced that within the next 12 months, Abraham and Sarah were going to become parents. Then, as they prepared to leave, Abraham was told that God's judgment was about to be poured out on Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham's nephew, Lot, lived with his family.

So Abraham engaged God in conversation: "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?" (Genesis 18:24, NIV).\*

"The Lord said, 'If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake'" (vs. 26).

Then Abraham, essentially playing the part of a used-car salesman, says, "What if there are only forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?"

**G**od and Abraham are involved in a conversation. They both have opinions, points of view. Abraham knows

God's character of love and compassion, so he boldly asks Him to extend mercy toward a community he knows well to be corrupt and nearly irredeemable.

Did God answer Abraham's prayer? Well, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. But Abraham's nephew, Lot, and his two daughters, were spared.

### Wrestling With God

Another story I like is that of Jacob. Let's pick it up where Jacob receives news that his long-estranged brother, Esau, is making his way to meet him as Jacob is returning to Canaan (Genesis 32).

With his 400 men, the warrior Esau approaches Jacob's company of women, children, and flocks. Twenty years before, Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, and stolen Esau's birthright. So Jacob had every right to believe that

his elder brother was approaching with revenge on his mind.

Jacob did what any prudent man in his position would do: He divided his group into sections and sent them ahead in this

order: first, his least favorite handmaid and her children; second, the next least favorite handmaid and her children; third, his least favorite wife and her children; then his favorite wife. Then knowing that, humanly speaking, he's still no match for Esau should he be attacked, Jacob goes to a solitary place to pray.

**T**here in the dark, Jacob feels a presence; and fearing an attacker, he engages the individual in fierce, hand-to-hand combat. As Jacob struggles, he realizes that he's fighting something more than human. Then the Stranger touches Jacob and puts his hip out of joint. Near dawn, when the Being warns, "Let me go, for it is daybreak," Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless

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you bless me?" (vs. 26).

This is one of the Scripture's great statements of faith. While Jacob was in physical, emotional, and spiritual agony, he threw himself on God's mercy and prayed a simple prayer (if you can call it that): "I will not let you go unless you bless me." In other words, "Where can I go; what can I do; where can I find relief from the burdens I'm carrying?" Jacob didn't ask for anything specific; he asked, begged, demanded, only a blessing.

Did God answer Jacob's prayer? The immediate threat posed by Esau and his 400 men was removed, but Jacob experienced many other heartaches, trials, and disappointments. However, God changed his name, so that he faced those trials not

as Jacob, "he takes by the heel [deceiver]," but as Israel, "he struggles with God."

#### **What it Is; What it Isn't**

Prayer is not a tool to get God to give us what we want; it is a means of communicating with the Almighty. Prayer didn't keep Daniel out of the lions' den; in fact, prayer got him thrown in there. Prayer didn't keep the three Hebrews out of the fiery furnace, but in answer to their prayers, they didn't face the flames alone.

Prayer is simply the mechanism by which we communicate with God. We share with Him the burdens of our hearts, and He opens our minds to the unsearchable depths of His love, mercy, and justice.

When Paul was afflicted by "a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12:7), God did not answer by way of physical relief. Instead, He answered Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (vs. 9).

**W**hen Job found himself an unwitting pawn in a cosmic struggle between good and evil, he lost his wealth, his family, his health, and very nearly his sanity. But in another great statement of faith, he exclaimed, "Though [God] slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). In other words, "Where else can I go? To whom else can I turn? If I can't get help from God, from whom will it come?"

Prayer is not handing God a list of favors to be granted, it is bowing in humility before the Sovereign God of the universe, sharing with Him our heartaches and burdens, and allowing Him to craft an answer to our prayer that is at the same time loving, merciful, and just; not just for us, but for the entire universe.

#### **Bruce Almighty**

A few years ago a film called *Bruce Almighty* was released. It concerned a character named Bruce Nolan (Jim Carrey),





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and he ends up messing everything up. His job, his relationship with his girlfriend, Grace (Jennifer Aniston)—indeed, nearly everything he touches—gets ruined.

But in one scene near the end of the film, Bruce finally learns something about what God looks for when we pray:

“What do you want me to do?” Bruce asks God.

“I want you to pray, Son,” says God.

“Lord,” Bruce prays, “feed the hungry. And bring peace to all of mankind. How’s that?”

“Great,” says God, “if you want to be Miss America. Now, come on. What do you really care about?”

“Grace.”

“You want her back?”

“No,” says Bruce, “I want her to be happy, no matter what that means. I want her to find someone to treat her with all the love that she deserved from me. I want her to meet someone who’ll see her always as I do now, through Your eyes.”

who believed God was treating him unfairly. In the film, God (Morgan Freeman) hands over His supernatural power so that Bruce can solve all the world’s problems (at least the ones in Buffalo, New York).

Nolan soon discovers, however, that being God is not easy;

**T**he scene ends with God saying, “Now that’s a prayer.”

When we pray, we’re essentially saying to God: “Here’s where I’m at; here are my struggles; here’s what I need to survive physically, emotionally, spiritually.” But prayer isn’t over until we say, “God, please don’t just answer my prayer. Help me recognize how Your answer is building up your kingdom and accomplishing Your will on earth.”

No wonder the apostle Paul counseled us to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

### Teaching About Prayer Depends on the Spiritual Maturity of the Students

#### Discussion Questions

What’s the most important thing students of the following ages should know about prayer?

Pre-school to grade 2

Grades 3 through 6

Grades 7 through 9

Grades 10 through 12

When talking about prayer, why is it important not to promise too much?

Why is it so easy to talk about prayer in terms of what we say, rather than what we hear? How can that be changed?

How can classroom prayers be more conversational and less demanding (“Gimme, gimme, gimme”)?

When is it most appropriate to share prayer experiences—when you get answers, or when it appears your prayers are ignored?

Who, for you, are some role models of great pray-ers? Why do you think of them when you think of prayer?

#### And Finally . . .

Two weeks to the day after I lost my keys, I rode my motorcycle to another luncheon meeting at the same restaurant. When I walked in, the woman at the hostess’ podium held up a set of keys and said, “Do these belong to you?”

I had to wait two weeks for an answer to my prayer, “God, I need a miracle.” And when I had all but given up, God answered my prayer of last resort. ✍



**Stephen Chavez** is the Managing Editor of the *Adventist Review/Adventist World*, in Silver Spring, Maryland. This article is adapted from a sermon he preached at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland, in July 2008. The spoken quality has been retained.

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