



The Prayer of Unbelief
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You've heard of the prayer of faith. I believe there is a mirror image of this prayer. It's a prayer that is based on flesh. I call it the prayer of unbelief.

The Lord knows we don't pray nearly enough. We don't weep before him as we ought. And, sadly, when many Christians do pray, their prayer is one of unbelief. Such prayer is totally unacceptable to God. In fact, Scripture says it's sinful in his eyes.

I want to pose a question to you. Have you ever heard the Lord tell you, "Quit praying. Get up off your knees"? Has his Spirit ever commanded you, "Stop crying, and wipe your eyes. Why are you on your face before me?"

You may not be able to imagine God ever saying such things. But the Lord spoke these very words to Moses: "The Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me?" (Exodus 14:15). The literal Hebrew meaning of this verse is, "Why are you shrieking at me? Why all the loud pleading in my ears?"

I wonder: why would God say this to Moses? Here was a godly, praying man in the crisis of his life. The Israelites were being chased by Pharaoh, with no escape. They were surrounded by mountains on either side, and before them was an impassable sea. So, as Moses prayed, he knew the destinies of multitudes hung on his words.

What would you have done if you were in Moses' shoes? Up to this point, he had faithfully followed God's calling at every step. In fact, he knew Israel's present crisis was ordained of God. Yet ringing in Moses' ears were the panicked cries of hundreds of thousands of people: "You're a killer, Moses! There weren't enough graves in Egypt to bury us, so you brought us to a wilderness to die."

Most Christians would probably react as Moses did. He set out for an isolated hillside and got alone with the Lord. Then he poured out his heart in prayer. The words for "shrieking" and "loud pleading" here tell us Moses cried out from his very gut.

Have you ever been in a crisis of confusion like Moses? Think back to a predicament when you thought there was no way out. You got alone with the Lord, someplace where no one could hear you. And you let God have it. You screamed, shouted, poured out your insides. You wept until there were no tears left.

Now, our God is a loving Father. He's moved by our piercing cries. And he answers the prayers of every sincere person. He even encourages us to cry aloud to him. Scripture tells us Jesus himself "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears" (Hebrews 5:7).

I can relate to this kind of loud crying. I remember my agony when our daughter Bonnie was bombarded with cobalt treatments for cancer. She had to be isolated in a hospital room for three days. Only her doctors could enter, wearing lead shields. My wife, Gwen, and I had to wait outside. All we could do was weep over our daughter's ordeal.

At one point, I left the hospital and drove to an isolated country road. I stopped by a field, got out of my car and screamed at God for three hours. I cried at the top of my lungs, "First, there was Gwen's cancer, then our daughter Debbie's. Now it's hitting Bonnie. Where is it going to end, God?"

I know the Lord heard my cries. And I know he was moved by my pain. You see, I realize it's okay to scream at him. He wants to hear our agonies and share our burdens. But such prayer isn't acceptable to him when it's spoken out of unbelief. Let me explain.

God did not take kindly to
Moses' all-night crying.

You would think God would be pleased to hear Moses' agonizing prayers. Israel's leader spent hours crying out, "What am I going to do, Lord? This situation is hopeless. What do you expect of me here? Please, speak to me, I need your help."

There is a time to weep all night and agonize in prayer. But when God heard Moses shrieking here, he told him, "Enough." Scripture isn't explicit about what follows. But at that point God might have said, "You have no right to agonize before me, Moses. Your cries are an affront to my faithfulness. I've already given you my solemn promise of deliverance. And I've instructed you specifically on what to do. Now, stop crying."

Indeed, God had already given Moses his entire plan, from the very beginning. In fact, Moses learned the whole pattern while in the desert, tending sheep. God had told him, "When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand" (Exodus 4:21). God was saying, "I've shown you the things you are to do, Moses. Now, go and do them."

So Moses performed all the wonders before Pharaoh, bringing the ten plagues upon Egypt. Everything had come to pass, just as God promised. Now, as Moses agonized in prayer at the Red Sea, the Lord reminded him of this. God was saying, in essence, "This isn't a time to agonize, Moses. It's a time to act."

The Bible tells us Moses was a meek, godly man who had the ear of God. Yet evidently, Moses also had a root of unbelief in his heart. Think about it. When God called Moses to deliver Israel, he promised to give him a voice that people would listen to: "(Thy brethren) shall hearken to thy voice" (Exodus 3:18). But Moses responded with unbelief: "They will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice; for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee" (4:1).

So God promised Moses further, "Don't worry, I'll be with you. You're going to bring a great deliverance to my people." But again, Moses responded with unbelief: "O my Lord...but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (4:10). In fact, Moses accused God of failing to give him a voice: "I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant" (4:10). In short, Moses was saying, "Send somebody else, Lord. I don't measure up."

Think of how foolish Moses' unbelief was. By God's powerful Word, this man had already performed incredible wonders. He had turned his staff into a wriggling snake. And when he picked up the snake by the tail, it changed back into a staff. He also placed his hand in his vest and pulled it out leprous. Then, when he put it back into the vest, he pulled it out healthy and clean.

I ask you: what speech could be more eloquent or powerful than this? If I saw Moses do these things, I wouldn't care if he were tongue-tied or stuttered. I'd be ready to listen to him. His very presence would put the fear of God in me, before I even heard him speak. Why? I'd know he had the power of demonstration by the Holy Ghost. In the New Testament, Paul testifies of having this power. He said that although his own speech was poor, he spoke with the power of the Holy Ghost. This surely would have been true of Moses as well.

So, at that point, "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses" (Exodus 4:14). The full meaning here is, "God was enraged against Moses." The Lord wouldn't accept any false humility from this man. Why? He knew it would abort Moses' calling. He wasn't about to let Moses say, "I'm not capable," or, "I'm not smart enough," or, "I don't have the right stuff."

So the Lord answered him, "No, I won't choose somebody else, Moses. I won't look for someone who's eloquent, or educated, or who has got it all together. You'd better face it - you're it. I've chosen you, and you have no excuses.

"I've known about your weaknesses all along. I saw your lack of confidence, your proneness to put yourself down, the way you measure yourself against others. You think you're nothing. But there's no use trying to run away. I'll never let you change the plans I made for you before you were even born. I'm not asking much of you. All you have to do is believe what I've promised, and act on it. Trust that Almighty Jehovah God is with you. Keep your eyes on me, not on your weaknesses."

Moses preached a
great message on faith
at the Red Sea.

Moses urged Israel, "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day...The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Exodus 4:13-14). This sermon shows that Moses knew what God would do. Yet, immediately after preaching it, Moses retreated in unbelief. That's when he got alone with God and cried aloud. It wasn't that he thought the Lord would fail Israel. No, Moses was afraid he would fail in his own calling. Maybe he feared making a mistake, or not pleasing God, or not having enough faith. So he shrunk back in fear.

Remember, this same Moses later became a great champion of prayer. He would experience face-to-face intimacy with God, as no one else in history would. He would speak with God for forty days at a time, emerging with his face supernaturally aglow. But

before all that could happen, God had to teach Moses when to pray and when to act. He had to learn when it was time to cry, and when it was time to simply obey.

Here now, at the Red Sea, it was sheer unbelief for Moses to pray. Why? God had already told him to stretch out his rod, and he would faithfully part the waters: "Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it" (14:15-16).

Let me remind you that Moses didn't receive this word while shrieking in prayer. God had spoken it to him long before, while he was still a shepherd: "When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand" (Exodus 4:21). This is why the Lord said to him now, "Stop crying. There's no reason for you to weep all night. I've already commanded you to take spiritual authority over this crisis. Now, get up and do it. I promised I would break up the crisis before you. So move forward in faith. Hours from now, you'll be dancing with joy."

As we face our own crises, we may convince ourselves, "Prayer is the most important thing I can do right now." But a time comes when God calls us to act, to obey his Word in faith. At such a time, he won't allow us to retreat to a wilderness to pray. That would be disobedience. And any prayers would be offered in unbelief.

Joshua spent an entire
day weeping and agonizing
in prayer, to no avail.

In Joshua 7, we find the entire nation of Israel wailing in prayer. The village of Ai had just defeated them and put them to chase. So Joshua called an all-day prayer meeting, and the people gathered before God's mercy seat to seek him.

If you walked into Israel's camp that day, you might think a great revival had taken place. Everyone was grieving and mourning. Men were on their faces, tearing their clothes and throwing dust in the air. Women covered their faces with their hands, weeping profusely. And Joshua and the elders lay prostrate, overcome with sorrow.

But this was no repentance meeting. And it wasn't a revival of God's presence among them. The truth is, God was angry about the whole affair: "The anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel" (Joshua 7:1). Why? It was a "blame God" meeting. The people cried out, "Lord, why didn't we take the victory? You could have stepped in and defeated the enemy, but you didn't. Where was the help you promised? You left us to our own abilities and allowed the enemy to destroy us. Where was your covenant when we needed it?"

The defeat by Ai had totally baffled Joshua. The Israelites had just come from a huge victory over mighty Jericho. Yet now they were defeated by this tiny, insignificant enemy. He couldn't understand it. He prayed, "Lord, why did this happen? Your holy name is at stake. Your reputation as a deliverer is going to be reproached."

Joshua's prayer sounds spiritual. He seemed jealous over how God was represented. Yet we read, "The Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?" (Joshua 7:10). God stopped the meeting cold. He declared, "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them" (7:11).

The implied meaning is, "You can pray all night and day. But until

you deal with your sin, you're going to keep falling before your enemies." How did Israel sin? Scripture explains, "The children of Israel committed a trespass...for Achan...took of the accursed thing; and the anger of the Lord was kindled" (7:1). Achan had disobeyed the clear Word of God. And now the Lord told Israel, "Get up off your knees. I won't hear your prayers until you remove the accursed thing from your midst."

Let me make plain what
the prayer of unbelief is.

The prayer of unbelief takes into account only God's goodness. It ignores the severity of his holy judgments. Paul writes, "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Romans 11:22, italics mine). The apostle purposely mentions God's goodness and severity in the same breath here. He's saying one can't be separated from the other.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah stated it this way: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood" (Isaiah 59:1-3).

Beloved, God didn't change between the Old Testament and the New. He's a God of love and mercy, as Isaiah points out. But he still hates sin as well, because he's holy and just. That's why he told Israel, "I can't hear you because of your sin."

The same applies to many Christians today. Such believers once prayed hour upon hour. They stayed up all night at times, weeping with great tears. Yet despite their efforts, God never heard their prayers. Why? Consider the Psalmists' words:

"I called upon him with my mouth, with a psalm of exaltation under my tongue. Had I regarded iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened...But, behold, God hath heard. He hath listened unto the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God who hath not removed [ignored] my prayer" (Psalm 66:17-20, Helen Spurrell translation).

The Psalmist is saying, "I saw there was iniquity in my heart. And I refused to live with it. So I went to the Lord to get cleansed. Then he heard my prayer. But if I had held onto my sin, God wouldn't have listened to my cry."

I ask you: can a Christian who's unfaithful to his mate expect God to answer his prayers? If a believer is living in adultery, will God hear his intercession for his family, his job, his direction?

The prophet Malachi says no. He told Israel, "This have ye done again, covering the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant" (Malachi 2:13-14). Malachi was saying, "You ask me how your prayers could be wearying to God. The reason is clear. You continue willfully to sin against your mate. And you have the audacity to believe that God still delights in you."

If this describes you, Malachi offers a warning: "You're taking your sin lightly. And the longer you hold onto it, the easier it will be for you to accept. You're already convinced you're more spiritual with

your lover than with your spouse. No! You've lost the fear of God. You're calling evil good, and turning darkness into light. The Lord won't hear a word you pray."

Peter offers the same warning to husbands who treat their wives badly: "Ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (1 Peter 3:7).

The word for hindered in this verse means cut off. Peter is saying, in essence, "You can't mistreat your spouse all week, then go to church expecting God to hear your prayers. Such behavior isn't of Christ. It's of the devil. Yet you don't believe God will judge you for it. I tell you, your prayers have been cut off from heaven."

When Scripture says, "Be sure your sin will find you out," it's referring to more than public exposure. It includes every area of your life, including prayer. God will turn a deaf ear to your words. And your fellowship with him will be cut off.

You may object, "That's Old Testament teaching. It doesn't apply under a covenant of grace."

Jesus disproves this. He says the Father demands righteousness under the New Covenant as well as the Old: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

It doesn't matter how holy you may think you are. You can believe you're infused with Christ's righteousness. You can testify you're justified by his blood, saved by faith, sanctified by the Holy Ghost. You can pray for hours, study Scripture daily, minister to the poor, preach with fire, even work miracles of faith. But if you haven't forgiven someone's sin against you, you're wasting your energy. God won't hear a single prayer you pray. In fact, he withholds his own forgiveness from you.

Are you angry with someone? Is there a family member you refuse to speak to? Do you constantly think of a certain person as a fool? Jesus declares, "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:22-24). Christ is saying, "You can forget all about fasting and weeping. Your prayer won't be heard. First, go make things right with your brother or sister. Then come back to the altar."

A godly pastor came to me recently, frustrated over trying to reconcile two ministers. The two men had been enemies for years. One had sued the other and won a multimillion-dollar judgment. After that, they spewed bitterness toward each other. But recently, both men have sought to reconcile. "They're ready to talk," the pastor told me. "But there's a problem. The wife of the preacher who lost the lawsuit refuses to forgive the other minister. She swears she'll never speak to him again."

This woman is directly opposing God's work. And the tragedy she's

causing is twofold: she's not only hindering reconciliation, but she's cutting herself off from God. He doesn't hear her prayers. And he won't be reconciled to her until she repents.

I believe the Lord is especially enraged against those who hold racial prejudices. God help the man or woman who worships alongside a person of another race while carrying a deep prejudice. And woe to that believer if he participates in ethnic jokes. The Lord will become his enemy. And his prayers will be an abomination in God's sight.

We may not be able to serve in a reconciliation ministry, but God does call us to look at the prejudice in our own hearts. Maybe you grew up disliking certain political figures, whether white or black. Maybe you grew up in a prejudiced home, whether white or black. Or, worse, you attended a church that taught racism. You may not be able to apologize to the entire community you've been prejudiced against. But if you know a believer of a different race, you can go to that person and say, "I want to say to you before the Lord, I'm sorry."

I've spoken about the prayer of unbelief. Now let me give you an example of a prayer of faith. In Daniel 9:13, Daniel tells Israel why their prayers haven't been answered for seventy years: "All this evil is come upon us: yet we made not our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and understand the truth."

Israel's prayers were hindered for decades by sin. Daniel was saying, "I see now why God wasn't listening to us. It's because we refused to deal with sin. We didn't make our iniquity a matter of prayer. It cost us God's favor and blessing."

So Daniel prayed this prayer of faith: "I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: and I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments; we have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments" (9:3-5).

Before Daniel could even finish praying, God sent the angel Gabriel to him: "Whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel...even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation" (9:20-21).

Daniel was touched by God himself. And immediately, Israel was back in covenant with the Lord. I ask you, why was this man's prayer answered so quickly? It's because it was a true prayer of faith. In short, Daniel believed God judges sin as well as shows mercy.

The Lord is ready to answer your every prayer today. He wants to bless you as never before. But you have to believe his Word fully, to accept what he says about sin. Ask him if there's any iniquity that might be hindering your prayers. Then face your sin. Make things right with your brother or sister. Then you'll know God is hearing your prayers. And he'll come to you quickly.

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