

What if We Really Pray?

“What if” is a fun game to play. What if someone handed you a million dollars? What would you do with it? Or, what if we had no mosquitoes this summer in Minnesota? Or what if we had actually had summer this year in Minnesota?

As I let my imagination soar, I wonder what if we really prayed? What if every Christian prayed the way God wants us to pray? What if we really believe what the Bible tells us to believe? And, what if prayer became the top priority for Christians around the world just for a single day? What if?

There are two ways to talk about such a wonderful dream: one produces guilt and one creates excitement. The guilt trip approach tells us that we don’t pray very much and we don’t pray very well, and life is lousy because God is a grouch and God always takes it out on people that don’t do what he wants them to do. Guilt is a very powerful motivator. Using guilt you can get people to do what you want them to do and manipulate them more quickly and effectively than probably with just about any other motivation. The difficulty is that it doesn’t last very long. You need to keep piling it on, plus guilt has a way of coming around to get us with a terrible backlash.

Evoking excitement is another choice that is a lot more fun and much more effective. It is seeing the possibilities in prayer. It is living by faith. It’s prayer that tunes in to God. It’s choosing good because we want to rather than because we have to. So with that kind of excitement about the possibilities of prayer, let’s do some dreaming. Some imagining.

For starters, what if we were to really pray privately the way Jesus taught his followers to pray? He told them in Matthew 6:6,

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

With those words Jesus taught what is the cornerstone of a significant prayer life in relationship with God — private prayer. Praying alone.

The elements are simple, although doing it can be very hard. The elements include a place, Jesus

said, “go into your room.” It could be any room. It could be a bedroom, an unused room in the house, maybe a corner of the basement where no one else wants to go, or it may be in your car at lunch hour in some distant part of the parking lot. It takes a place and it takes a time. Some people have picked early in the morning. There are some morning-type people who don’t even need to set an alarm. They get up before dawn and pray every day. There are other people who pray during lunch hour or coffee break and for some it’s those final moments before going to sleep at night. Try to make it the same time every day. Start out by taking five minutes to worship God and to tell him how great he is, to say I love you, to confess sin, to experience forgiveness, to say thank you and to ask — to present requests to God. Let the time increase naturally until the five becomes ten and the ten becomes fifteen minutes every day. For some people it may even stretch beyond that to more like a half an hour.

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The hard part is to do it. We have a thousand different distractions. Life is busy and life is full. And prayer, to be candid with you, is not a

natural activity. It’s a supernatural undertaking and it’s not easy to do. Because it is connecting with and deploying the power of God, it is entering into spiritual warfare. Satanic forces work to keep us from private prayer. But I’m convinced that for those who do it, it is without doubt the most significant and life changing pursuit that any Christian can follow.

Just imagine what would happen to all of our lives if we prayed this way every day? We would experience personally the presence and the power of God. Everything would be supernaturally different from our relationship to God to our families, jobs, friendships and all other circumstances.

Here’s a challenge. Try it — not for a day or a week but for a year. Set aside a place and a time. Start with five minutes if you’ve not done it before and let it grow as God grows it. If you want written documentation of your efforts, keep a journal. Start out with a description of where you are in your re-

lationship with God. Keep records of the prayers and the differences and the changes that come. And then on the three hundred and sixty-fifth day, write a new description of your relationship with God and where you're at. See the difference and the transformation that private prayer can make. You won't be sorry!

But as essential as private prayer is, there is an extra effectiveness and power when we pray together. Again, it was Jesus who said, this time in Matthew 18: 19-20,

If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Jesus doesn't explain why prayer together differs from private prayer, he just states it. By the way, this is not talking about a gathering where someone stands up front and says, "Let's all bow our heads and silently pray." All that is, is a lot of people privately praying in the same place at the same time. What is here described is when two or three people get together to pray and they agree concerning the direction of their prayer before the prayers are spoken and perhaps again after they have prayed. I try to understand exactly what occurs when two or three people pray that is different from when a person prays alone. The difference is probably a mixture of the natural and the supernatural.

The natural reason that prayer together is so powerful is because of the expectation that two Christians should come to agreement together before they ask. There's a different dynamic whenever we do something together that is empowering in a way that doesn't happen when we are alone. Praying together also balances our private idiosyncrasies. We are far more likely to ask inappropriate and unbiblical prayers alone than in cooperation with other believers.

Someone once told me about an experiment that was done with two champion draft horses. One of them was able to pull a 4,000 pound load and the other a 4,500 pound load. Then they teamed them together and discovered they were able to pull over 12,000 pounds as a team. Together they could do far more than the sum of what they could do individually.

A physician once remarked to me that there are different dynamics that take place with different combinations of antibiotics, but occasionally it hap-

pens that there is a synergism between two antibiotics and they are able to accomplish far more together than either one could accomplish independently. There's something natural about the compounding and multiplying effect of our prayers when we pray together.

But there is also something supernatural that happens when two or three pray together. Jesus Christ is present in a way in which he is not present when we pray alone. And I don't know the explanation to that. I don't know how even to discuss it except to say that he is there in presence and power in a way that is impossible to experience when we pray by ourselves.

When we begin to understand this amazing supernatural truth, you would think that Christians would flock together to pray with each other. You would think that in every Christian marriage there would be a driving desire for the couple to spend some time together praying. You would think that prayer meetings would be the most popular and best attended of all church events. Yet it is often not that way.

What if we really got into praying together? What if everybody found a prayer partner with whom to share and to come to an agreement and pray once a week? What if we all insisted that part of our Christian lives be regular participation in a prayer gathering either at church or in a small group? Or perhaps in our neighborhood or as a couple or as a family at home? Not doing it because we have to, but in order to experience Jesus Christ's supernatural presence and to agree together with another Christian in a way that is binding, by God in heaven. What a difference that would make!

But what are we going to pray, whether privately or together? What is the subject matter of our prayers? I know the number one subject matter of my prayers — me! I pray far more for and about myself than for anyone else. I assume that is everyone's experience. It's really not as selfish as it is understandable. I need to confess my sins. I must every day renew my commitment to Jesus Christ as my only Savior from sin and my commitment and submission to him as the Lord of my life. I must pray that he will give to me help and wisdom for the issues for which I deal. And I must personally declare to him my gratitude for the ongoing difference which he makes in my life.

But you know, I need a lot more prayers than I

can pray for myself. I need your prayers. After all, which is better — that I just pray for me and you just pray for you? Would it not be better if I also prayed for you and you also prayed for me? It's a little bit like a chain letter that actually works! When we pray for one another the results multiply out infinitely because God is involved.

The idea is not original with me. It's in the Bible many times including in Ephesians 6:18,

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

In the New Testament, "saints" is a synonym for Christians. As Christians, we're to pray for one another. I have to tell you that that personally I greatly value the prayers of the saints for me. I need Christians to pray for me to have a close walk with Jesus Christ. I need to have others pray that God will protect me from temptations and from sin. I need for other Christians to pray for my marriage, for my children. I need for other Christians to pray that I will have wisdom to do what is good and what is right. I need people to pray for me every time I stand in front of a group of people to speak because every time I am frightened.

What if we all prayed for one another? What if each one of us prayed for at least five others of us each day of the week? That would mean that I would pray for thirty-five other people and that you would pray for thirty-five other people each week. You multiply that out times three or four thousand people and it comes out to over a hundred thousand prayers for one another, every week. What difference do you think that would make? What do you think that would do for couples that are on the brink of divorce? What difference would that make for those who are sick or unemployed, or for struggling families? Wouldn't it be great if we really prayed for one another and not just for ourselves?

And what if we really prayed for the ministry of the church? One of the most familiar prayer lines in the New Testament is Philippians 4:6.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

It is interesting to note that these words were not written to an individual but to a church. The context surrounding those words tells of a conflict in the Philippian church between two women who couldn't get along with each other, about the ministry of the apostle Paul and about money that was needed for ministry. What we have here is a call to pray for the ministry and for the life of the church.

The church is composed of Christians, but the church has a body life of its own. If a church is healthy that is good for God and good for the people making up that body. If a church is unhealthy that is bad for God and bad for the people in the church. Just as we pray for one another as individuals, it is important to pray for the church body and its ministry as a whole.

What if we really prayed for the church? I don't mean the building, but the corporate body that makes up the church. What if we prayed for unity in the church the way Jesus prayed in John 17? Or what if we prayed the way Paul prayed in Philippians 1 for the elders of the church to be godly, wise and competent in the leadership that they are called upon to give? What if every Christian prayed seriously about the finances of the church, that there be both adequate giving and appropriate spending in order to do the work of Jesus Christ. I'll tell you frankly, that I believe that much of God's blessing on Wooddale Church is the result, humanly speaking, of Christians who pray.

I sometimes hear people talk about Wooddale and what happens here and I wince at their explanation. People say that it's the building or the music or the preaching

that makes it a successful church. That misses the mark so far that it's embarrassing. What this church is all about is Jesus Christ and the work of the Spirit in the lives and the corporate relationships of people. All those other things are merely the expressions, the trappings, the externals. The core of what it is all about is what God is doing through the prayers of his people.

Did you know, for example, that every Sunday morning there is a group of people who gather in a small room here at the church to pray through the services of the church — for the music, the sermon and for those who are worshipping. What if, instead

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of those few who volunteer to come, there were a thousand who prayed during each service for the presence and power and the moving of the Spirit of God in this place? What if we all prayed about the financial needs of the church or the staffing needs? What if we all prayed for God's wisdom to figure out mundane things like scheduling and parking problems?

Or more broadly, what if we were to all pray for this church to fulfill its purpose of honoring God by making more disciples for Jesus Christ? What if we all prayed that every single day? Please don't get me wrong, I love this church and think that Wooddale is wonderful. But if we really prayed, this would be a far greater church for Jesus Christ!

Last but not least, what if we prayed for the world? Jesus, in Matthew 9, had compassion on the crowds and the people touched his heart when he looked at them and their needs. In I Timothy 2:1, the apostle Paul urges Christians to pray for political leaders. What if we all prayed for peace in Bosnia? I'll tell you when I watch this on television, when I read about it in the newspaper, I just don't understand it. I don't understand how hatred can run so deep between people or why the international community can't do anything. What if we all prayed as Christians that God would bring peace to that area of the world?

Or what if we prayed for people whose lives are being tragically destroyed by AIDS? What if we prayed that God would intervene and not only miraculously heal them physically but bring them to Jesus Christ spiritually? Or what if we stop criticizing President Clinton and started praying for him? I hear all the jokes but who's praying for this man — who is really concerned about who he is and what God has given him to do? What if we lightened up on political parties and petitions and picketing, and prayed instead? And what about the most divisive moral issue in America today — abortion. I wonder if we prayed for God's supernatural intervention in this nation's abortion tragedy if that wouldn't be far better than any political solution? Now please don't misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting that Christians ought not be involved in politics or political process, in fact, to the contrary, I think it's great. But the Bible says comparatively little about political action and a great deal about prayer.

Well my time is gone, but the dream isn't. What

do you think that you would commit to do? There are some astounding spiritual movements happening around the world today. The estimate is that there are ten thousand people in South America committing to Jesus Christ as Savior every day. Ten thousand a day. The Associated Press reported that there are fifty thousand new churches every year in South America. Did you know that in the United States there are sixty churches a week closing? That's about three thousand per year out of three hundred fifty thousand. Almost one percent of the churches in this country shut down every year. One analyst claimed that the Spirit of God is now accomplishing the greatest spiritual awakening in all of human history, everywhere in the world except in North America.

What if, what if we really prayed: privately, together, for one another, for the church and for the world. What if we really prayed?

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