

## Prayers that Change Lives

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In a small Canadian town, a large bar that doubled as a nightclub opened its doors. Young people flocked there nightly to have fun. Concerned about the increased noise and potential negative influence on the youth, the town's elders convened at the church. Devoted church members began to pray, specifically asking, "Please cause a fire to break out at the nightclub so that it can no longer operate!" Miraculously, the nightclub did indeed catch fire and was forced to close.

When the nightclub owner discovered that the church members had prayed for the fire, he filed a lawsuit against them. The nightclub owner and a church representative appeared before the judge. The nightclub owner argued that since the church's prayer caused the fire, they should be held accountable. However, the church members countered, "It's not as if everything we pray for happens exactly as we ask! We cannot be held responsible."

Rendering a verdict, the judge offered his opinion. "While, of course, the church cannot be held legally responsible, it seems the nightclub owner has more faith. He believes in the power of prayer, while the church members do not."

This story raises questions about the church members' faith in the power of prayer. While they prayed for the nightclub to close, they seemed hesitant to believe that their prayers could have such a direct impact. It also prompts us to consider whether their prayer was appropriate. We should not pray asking for harm to others. Do we believe in the power of prayer? And what kind of prayers do we offer?

Let us reflect on today's powerful scripture passages. Both speak to the transformative power of prayer, how it reshapes us, others, and the environment around us. They also guide us on what to pray for.

In the Book of Esther, we encounter a story of imminent destruction and how prayer, combined with courageous actions, saved an entire nation. Esther 9:20-22 describes the establishment of the festival of Purim, commemorating the Jewish people's deliverance from a death sentence orchestrated by Haman, a high-ranking Persian official. This miraculous victory, however, did not come without prayer, fasting, and action.

Before approaching the king, Esther, at Mordecai's urging, called for a three-day, three-night fast (Esther 4:16). This communal act of seeking divine intervention demonstrated Esther's understanding that her strength came not from her position but from God's favor. Through this prayerful submission, she found the courage to act.

Mordecai's role was equally significant. His unwavering faith in God, coupled with his wisdom and actions, played a crucial part in delivering his people. His persistent prayers and efforts to save them illustrate how prayer propels us to work toward solutions rather than passively waiting for miracles.

Prayer did not replace the need for Esther and Mordecai to act bravely. After their time of prayer and fasting, they made bold decisions, as Esther said, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). Esther risked her life by going before the king unsummoned, and Mordecai worked tirelessly to save the people from Haman's plot. Their prayers were not just about seeking personal safety but about securing the survival of their entire community. This highlights the transformative power of prayer in empowering individuals to take courageous steps.

Turning to the New Testament, James 5:13-20 emphasizes the importance of prayer in the life of believers, whether in times of suffering or joy. This passage underscores how prayer has the power to heal, restore, and change lives.

James urges believers to pray in all circumstances—whether in trouble, sickness, or joy (James 5:13-14). Prayer is not reserved for moments of desperation but is a continual practice that sustains us in every season of life.

James provides the example of Elijah, whose fervent prayers brought both drought and rain upon the land (James 5:17-18). Elijah's prayers were not self-serving but were for the people, calling them back to faith in God. His intercession led to a radical shift in the physical environment, but more importantly, it turned the hearts of the people back to God. This shows that prayer has the power to influence not only our personal lives but also our communities and even the natural world.

Prayer is often seen as a way to change circumstances, but its first and most profound impact is on ourselves. Through prayer, we align ourselves with God's will. In the case of Esther, her prayers strengthened her to carry out a divine purpose, despite her fears. Similarly, when we pray, we allow God to shape our hearts and minds, preparing us for the tasks ahead. Prayer helps us to see the bigger picture, moving us beyond our immediate concerns to embrace God's larger plan for the world.

When we pray, we are transformed. Esther's prayer gave her the courage to risk her life for the sake of others. Mordecai's prayerful heart led him to strategize and work tirelessly for the safety of his people. Prayer doesn't just change our external situation; it renews our strength, increases our faith, and equips us to face challenges with grace and boldness.

If our prayers primarily focus on changing circumstances, we may need to reprioritize our approach. Prayer is a process of communicating with God. As we pray, we inevitably place ourselves before God. When humans stand before God, we cannot help but see ourselves and be humbled. This process is transformative.

While prayer changes us, it also has a powerful effect on those around us. Both Esther and Mordecai interceded on behalf of their people. Their prayers were not self-centered but focused on the well-being of others. Additionally, all the Israelites prayed before God. This process helped the entire Israelite community bond together and made them take the necessary actions during the crisis. Eventually, Esther's attitude toward the king, influenced by their collective prayers, touched the king's mind. As we pray, our attitudes change, and this can also change the hearts of others.

Similarly, James encourages us to pray for one another (James 5:16). Prayer builds community, connects us to the needs of others, and allows us to participate in God's work of healing and restoration. James reminds us that prayer, especially when done in community, brings healing and restoration (James 5:16). When we pray for others, we are not just asking for a change in their circumstances; we are participating in their healing process, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Prayer binds us together, fostering unity and mutual care.

Finally, prayer has the power to change not just our hearts or the people around us but even the physical world. Elijah's prayer affected the weather, bringing both drought and rain. This dramatic example demonstrates that prayer can have far-reaching effects, even beyond what we can see or understand.

In the Book of Esther, we see that through prayer, all events occurred at the right time, the unfair adversity faced by the people was clearly revealed. The decree of death was reversed, and a day of mourning was transformed into a day of celebration (Esther 9:22). Prayer can change the course of history, alter the direction of nations, and bring light to the darkest of circumstances.

In both Esther's story and James' teaching, we see that prayer is not a passive activity; it is a dynamic force that changes lives. It begins by transforming us, giving us the strength and courage to act according to God's will. It extends to others, bringing healing and restoration. And it even has the power to change our environment, transforming the world around us.

Remember, we can pray because God loves us first. This unconditional love empowers us to approach God with confidence and boldness. Now, let our prayers reflect God's love, as Mordecai declared in Esther 9:22, "days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor," and James was concerned about the suffering. When we pray with love, we not only express our gratitude to God but also intercede for others with compassion and concern. Let us remember that our prayers, filled with God's love, can bring healing, restoration, and transformation to ourselves and to those around us.

Let us remember that our prayers, like those of Esther, Mordecai, and Elijah, can change lives. Let us pray with boldness, knowing that God works through our prayers to bring about transformation in us, in others, and in the world. Amen.