

# The Power of a Praying Church

CFBC Wednesday Night Study, March 5, 2025

Dr. John Aaron Matthew, Pastor of Discipleship & Missions

Churches in North America are dying and in need of [prayer](#).

**Consider:** Mark Clifton says in his book *Reclaiming Glory*, “We are facing a dying-church dilemma in North America. Every year in my denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), nine hundred churches disappear from our rolls. Most of them close their doors. But the reality is that’s just the tip of the iceberg. According to LifeWay Research statistics, only about 15 percent of SBC churches are healthy, growing and multiplying churches. The vast majority of our churches in North America are struggling. There are fruitless churches all across North America, churches where new disciples aren’t being made and neighboring communities aren’t being transformed. A church that is not producing fruit does not accurately reflect God’s glory.”<sup>1</sup>

Prayerlessness contributes to the [death](#) of a church.

**Consider:** Leonard Ravenhill in his book *Why Revival Tarries* says, “Poverty-stricken as the Church is today in many things, she is most stricken here, in the place of prayer. We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, few pray-ers; many singers, few clingers; lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion; many interferers, few intercessors; many writers, few fighters. Failing here, we fail everywhere.”<sup>2</sup>

**Biblical Truth:** “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” (Rev 2:4–5)

Churches cannot be renewed without [prayer](#).

**Consider:** Churches cannot be renewed without prayer. Harry L. Reeder in his book *From Embers to Flame* says, “When we desire to see our churches go from embers to a flame, prayer is the spiritual element that corresponds to oxygen in a fire. Without the oxygen of prayer to produce the flame of renewal, no amount of human effort can make it happen. In fact, the more we work at revitalization, the more frustrated we will become—unless our constant prayers are providing the spiritual spark we need...And if there is anything that a dying church needs, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1987), 25.

prayer... On the other hand, any church that commits itself to prayer, no matter how bad things may have become can be renewed and rebuilt by the power of the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

Only God can renew his church.

**Biblical Foundation:** *“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. 2 And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. 3 And he said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ 4 Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.’ 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”* (Ezek 37:1–10)

#### Discussion:

- Where did God lead Ezekiel and what did it look like? (1–2)
- What did the LORD ask Ezekiel? Why did Ezekiel respond that way? (3)
- What did God ask Ezekiel to do and what happened? (4–8)
- Why did God ask Ezekiel to prophesy again and what happened? (9–10)
- What do you see as some of the greatest challenges in our church and community?
- What would it look like for God to renew our church?
- What God sized dreams do you think we should pray for together?

#### Observations:

- God brings hope to the most hopeless circumstances.
- God desires a relationship with us.
- God gives life through the Spirit.

The Bible reveals factors that limit the church’s effectiveness in prayer.

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<sup>3</sup> Reeder, Harry L. III with David Swavely, *From Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church* (publishing location: publisher, year), 101.

**Consider:** Tom Elliff, in his book *A Passion for Prayer* says, “At the heart of genuine revival is repentance. Prayers of confession are harbingers of changed attitudes and lives. We readily acknowledge the necessity of repentance (turning away from our sin) in salvation. But remember, our salvation is to be the pattern for the balance of our Christian life as well: ‘As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him’ (Col2:6). Since repentant confession was fundamental to our salvation experience, it must also play an important part in our daily walk with Christ. Every true child of God can rejoice in the eternal security of his or her relationship with Him. But sin drives a wedge between us and God. Therefore, all disobedience must be prayerfully confessed and rejected if the intimacy of the fellowship is to be maintained.”<sup>4</sup>

R. C. Sproul adds, “We are alerted to the importance of properly approaching God in prayer. If there is anything worse than not praying, it is praying in an unworthy manner.”<sup>5</sup>

**Biblical Foundation:** Let’s explore five biblical obstacles to praying effectively.

**1. You don’t ask.**

*“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.” (Jas 4:2)*

*“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:7–11)*

**2. You don’t have faith.**

*“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Heb 11:6)*

*“And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” (Matt 21:22)*

**3. You ask for the wrong things.**

*“You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” (Jas 4:3)*

*“And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’” (Matt 26:39)*

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Elliff, *A Passion for Prayer: Experiencing Deeper Intimacy with God* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC, 1998), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Sproul, R.C. *Does Prayer Change Things?* (Sanford: Reformation Trust, 2009), 74.

#### 4. You don't know how to pray.

*"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" (Luke 11:1)*

#### 5. Your prayers are hindered.

- **Hindered by unbelief**

*"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; 2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. 3 For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness." (Isa 59:1–3)*

- **Hindered by unconfessed sin**

*"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. 19 But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer." (Ps 66:18–19)*

- **Hindered by unforgiveness**

*"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matt 6:14–15)*

- **Hindered by ungodly relationships**

*"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." (1 Pet 3:7)*

*"Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison." (Matt 5:24–25)*

Jesus teaches the church how to pray.

**Consider:** Jesus gave the disciples a model prayer in Scripture (Matthew 6:9–13.) Sproul says, "I have always been amazed that the disciples didn't ask Jesus how to walk on water, how to still tempests, or how to do any of His other miracles. They did, however, ask Jesus to teach them about prayer. Note that they did not ask Jesus to teach them how to pray; instead they begged. 'teach us to pray' (Luke 11:10). I'm certain that the disciples clearly saw the inseparable relationship between the power Jesus manifested and the hours He spent in solitude, conversing with His Father... Jesus was not so much giving us a prayer to recite as a pattern to

show us the way in which to pray. Jesus was providing us with an outline of priorities, or those things ought to be priorities in our prayer lives.”<sup>6</sup>

**Biblical Foundation:** “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread, 12 and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.’” (Matt 6:9–13)

#### **Observations:**

- We pray to God personally and respectfully as “our Father.” (9)

The God of the universe invites us to speak to him in a loving relationship as children dependent on their Father. However, we should not approach him lightly; we should have respect for his high and holy place of authority.

- We submit to “your name,” “your kingdom,” and “your will.” (9–10)

The purpose of this prayer is to align our desires with the desires of God as we holistically and joyfully submit ourselves to God.

- We depend on God to “give us,” “forgive us,” “lead us,” and “deliver us.” (11–13)

We are to remember our complete dependence on God and know that he is able to provide all that we need.

#### **Discussion:**

- Why is it important to remember that we are to pray to God as “our Father?”
- What kinds of needs should we bring to God in prayer?
- What are some things that we are dependent on God for as a church?
- What can our church pray for that would be consistent with his will?

Jesus teaches the church what to pray.

**Consider:** Jesus gives us an example of what to pray. Elliff says, “On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus was moved to intercede not only for his disciples, ‘but also for those who will believe in Me through their [the disciples’] word; that they all may be one in us, that the world may believe that You sent Me’ (John 17:20–21). Notice that the two basic issues of Jesus’s intercession were fellowship (‘that they also may be one in Us’) and usefulness (‘that the world may believe’). Intercession seeks the mind of God.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Sproul, *Does Prayer Change Things?*, 21–23.

<sup>7</sup> Elliff, *A Passion for Prayer*, 150.

**Biblical Foundation:** *"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:15–23)*

**Observations:**

- Christ intercedes for the church in prayer.
- Jesus intends for his disciples to be involved in the world.
- God has power over Satan.
- God uses his word to sanctify Christians.
- Jesus and the Father are one.
- God desires perfect oneness in His church.
- Christ is made visible to the world when his church shows unity.

**Discussion:**

- What is Jesus mean when he said, *"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one?"* (15–16)
- What does it mean to be sanctified in the truth? And why did Jesus say, "your word is truth" instead of "your word is true?" (17–19)
- Why did Jesus want the church to be "perfectly one?" (20–23)

**Application:**

- Pray for the church to be kept "from the evil one" (15) as we live in the world for Christ.
- Pray for the church to be committed to the "truth" (16) of God's word in our living, teaching, and preaching.
- Pray for the church to "become perfectly one" (23) for the sake of the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

We pray because God invites his people into a relationship with Him. God could have raised the dry bones all by himself, yet he invited Ezekiel to participate in the redemptive miracle (Ezek 37:1–10). Jesus reveals his nature of this personal relationship that God invites us into as he teaches us to pray to God as "our Father." When we pray to God, we pray to him as his children knowing that he loves and cares for as a perfect and personal father (Matthew 6:9). John 17 reveals that the Father and the Son are one and that Jesus desires his disciples to be

one as they are one. We are invited to pray and participate in the unity of God by aligning ourselves in prayer in pursuit of the perfect will of God (John 17:15–23).

These passages give hope to the church that we have a God who is able to do “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.” (Eph 3:20) Because of these passages, we can know that there is no obstacle in our churches that is beyond the hope of that we have in Christ and there is no church so dead that it is beyond the power of Christ to raise it to life. In light of these passages, we should find hope for our churches and immediately begin to align ourselves with his will in prayer, begging for God to glorify himself in his church once again. If God sees fit, he will renew his church through prayer for his glory and when he does may we be reminded of what he said to Ezekiel, “then you will know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it declares the LORD” (Ezek 37:14).