

# If My People - 13

## *A Call to Prayer (1)*

We come now to one of the most important words in this entire verse. In fact, when our study of this verse is over, we may conclude that this word is the essence of this verse and that everything written before and after this word points to it and gives meaning to it. Of course, that word is PRAY.

Prayer lies at the heart of this exhortation. God is asking His people to prepare themselves to pray, and He promises them that He will hear their prayers and heal their land. Prayer is so central and so vital in this verse and in our whole experience of God, that we will be camping at this point for a couple of weeks until we have a clear understanding of the nature, purpose, and priority of prayer.

This verse does not say that the God will heal the land if His people humble themselves. Humility is the position we must take in order to pray and seek the face of God. Prayer lies at the heart of it all and it especially lies at the heart of revival.

I believe all sincere Christians desire a dynamic and fruitful prayer life. Yet so many find themselves defeated when it comes to their communication with God. If the average Church member were to be asked how much time he or she spends in prayer, most would probably be too embarrassed to answer the question. That's not a criticism. Just a statement of fact. Yet, prayer holds the key to developing intimacy with God and consistency in our walk with Him.

There is a great difference between religious praying and Christian praying. Most praying today consists of religious duty rather than genuine Christian praying. Muslims pray. Jews pray. Hindus pray. So, what's the difference in Christian praying and religious praying? Religious praying is man's attempt to reach up to God. However, genuine Christian praying is God making a way for us to enter into His presence and have fellowship with Him.

God is holy. It would be impossible for anyone or anything unholy to come into the presence of a completely holy God. That's the whole reason that Jesus died on the cross 2,000 years ago. When Jesus died on the cross, the Bible says, "*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*" (Matthew 27:51). The curtain was that which separated the holy of holies, from the holy place. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the holy of holies because that was the place of the manifest presence of God and a sinful man or woman could not enter into the presence of a Holy God. But when Jesus died, He made available to us the forgiveness for our sin and provided cleansing for all who embraced His gift of salvation.

Therefore, by the grace of God, we have access into the presence of Almighty God. Think about that. You and I, by the blood that Jesus shed on the cross, can have access into the presence of the Creator of the universe. That's Christian praying. Coming to God - not by our own religious works of righteousness - but by His grace. That changes the whole concept of prayer. It's no longer duty, it's delight. It's not religion, but relationship. It's not defeat, it's victory - victorious Christian praying.

In order to become victorious in our prayer lives we must understand the nature of prayer. The first step in victorious Christian praying is an understanding that prayer is God's invitation of grace for each of us to enter into His presence. The Bible describes the throne of God as the "*throne of grace.*" (Hebrews 4:16). The only way that we can approach an absolutely holy God is by His grace. When we understand that great truth, then prayer becomes dynamic, and peace and joy flow from our time with God.

Every morning, we should stand amazed in the presence of God. When we come into His presence, it's not to get something from Him, although He gives us more than we could ever ask or think of asking. We don't try to twist His arm. Rather, we try to bend our heart to merge with His heart.

The primary purpose in coming into the presence of God is to get to know Him personally, intimately deeply. It's experiencing Him fully. Prayer is the practical method of developing a love-relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There's nothing boring or ritualistic about that! It's an unparalleled adventure! Getting to know the One who knows everyone and everything!

Prayer is the communion of two hearts - the heart of God and the heart of His children. God's heart is absolutely pure and holy. His heart is the almighty, eternal heart. Our hearts are the tiny, impure, deceitful-above-all-things hearts. Yet, by the blood of Jesus, we are granted entrance into His presence. Wow! That's victorious praying. Just getting to know God - by His grace.

Now in the context of 2 Chronicles 7:14, we see the vital link between prayer and revival. God has promised that if His people humble themselves and **pray** .... He will heal their land. We all want revival ... we all want to see our land healed by God ... but we don't all want to pray like we should and like we need to in order to see that revival come.

Over 160 years ago, the great English Baptist pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, wrote the following:

*"The times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord have at last dawned upon our land. Everywhere there are signs of aroused activity and increased earnestness. A spirit of prayer is visiting our churches ... The first breath of the rushing mighty wind is already discerned, while on the rising of evangelists the tongue of fire has evidently descended."*

The "spirit of prayer" that Spurgeon described has always been at the root of every great awakening of the Christian Church. It matters not whether you search the New Testament or look in the halls of history, revival has always been preceded by prayer. In Acts 1, the Church was birthed in a prayer meeting. In the next chapter, we read where 3,000 people were converted. Throughout the book of the Acts, the Church prayed, and God moved.

The first great missions movement was birthed in prayer. Time and time again, the Church took great strides forward because someone or a small band of people prayed. Victorious praying lays the foundation for revival.

Over the last several decades, I've studied many of the great evangelical revivals, and I've discovered what many have discovered over the years and that is that all revivals have prayer at the heart of them. Someone gets a burden and begins to pray. They wait upon the Lord and in His divine time, He answers their prayers. They meet with God and God manifests Himself to them.

I would not try to make you believe that I understand all the reasons why that is so. I just know it's a spiritual law of life. It's true. Prayer and revival are always partners in the manifestation of the glory of God. His glory comes when He comes. When that happens, the Church is accelerated in its spiritual and numerical growth. Revival precedes great harvests of souls, and prayer always precedes great revivals of the church.

In its simplest form, prayer is intimacy with God. When we become intimate with Him, then we're on the road to revival. One can't be intimate with God and wear a religious mask. Genuine prayer produces genuine repentance. Deep repentance releases the Spirit of God in our lives. When that happens, then we are already on the road to revival.

There's much talk today about revival. I simply know one thing about revival. It always descends on the wings of prayer. A praying people will ultimately be a revived people. The New Testament Church was born in a prayer meeting, and it was sustained by God through men and women of prayer. While fervent prayer seems to be the abnormal experience of believers today, it was the norm in first-century Christianity.

In Acts chapter one, we find the Church crying out to God. In the next chapter, Peter and John are going to a prayer meeting when God heals a lame man. In Acts chapter four, the Church is seeking God's face. All through the book of Acts, the Church is found in a position of absolute dependence upon God. The church not only prayed during those early days of its history, but it also grew. And it grew rapidly - so rapidly that the Scriptures record that thousands were added daily to the Church. The Church had a phenomenal growth rate for many, many years.

It's interesting to note that prayer has always been a propelling force in the Church. The great historic revivals have always had their silent heroes of prayer. It's the one indisputable common denominator of the revived church. A fresh passion to reach the world is birthed in the revived Church. The pattern normally goes something like this. The church slips into lethargy. That always leads to moral impurity and spiritual apathy. The Church may be asleep, but the Holy Spirit isn't. The Spirit begins to stir in the heart of a faithful remnant, and they begin crying out to God for revival and renewal.

God responds to their cries and begins to arouse the passions of the prophets and teachers. They begin proclaiming God's word with renewed power and authority. The slumbering Church begins to awaken from its sleep. Sins are confessed. Repentance grips the hearts of God's people, and a passion for a lost world starts to overwhelm those who have experienced Christ's forgiveness. The result is that multitudes are born into the kingdom of God. This pattern has been an historic reality, repeated over and over again. Prayer is always a precursor of great revivals. It's the expression of humble hearts. Genuine prayer says, *"God, I need you. Without You, I can do nothing."* It's absolute dependence upon God.

Revival is the manifest grace of God upon His people. That grace is always released in and through humble hearts. *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* (James 4:6). God hates pride as we well know from this teaching, but He's tender and merciful towards the humble. The humble, praying Church always sets the stage for the revived Church.

Prayer has not only preceded revivals throughout Biblical times, but it's been at the inception of every great historical revival of the Church. God's hand was mightily upon John Wesley and George Whitefield during the 1700s. God used them to bring multitudes into the kingdom of God. Mr. Whitefield was especially used of God to spark revival in the early history of the United States.

Arnold Dallimore, biographer of Mr. Whitefield, wrote of what took place. Mr. Whitefield said,

*"Early in the morning, at noonday, evening and midnight, nay, all day long, did the blessed Jesus visit and refresh my heart. Could the trees of a certain wood near Stonehouse speak, they would tell what sweet communion I and some others enjoyed with the ever-blessed God there ... I would be so overpowered with God's Infinite Majesty that I would be constrained to throw myself on the ground and offer my soul as a blank in His hands, to write on it what He pleased."*

What was the result of such praying? Whitefield described it beautifully:

*"I preached about five times a week, but the congregations grew larger and larger. It was wonderful to see how the people hung upon the rails of the organ loft, climbed upon the leads of the church, and made the church so hot with their breath that the steam would fall from the pillars like drops of rain. Sometimes almost as many would go away for want of room as came in."*

The secret to the great revival of the 1700s was that God found men and women of prayer. God has not changed. What He did then, He is more than willing to do today. The only question is whether we have changed since those revival days.

We live in a time when we tend to think that it's by our human talent and ingenuity that we'll reach the world rather than by God's power. However, the fact is, the great growing Churches around the world who are bringing new people into the Kingdom every day are the praying Churches.

God is still on His throne. He has not changed. He revives His people when they pray and seek His face. It has been true historically, and it's still true today. The promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a promise about prayer. This whole verse is about prayer and revival and the promise of God that the two will go hand in hand. God hasn't changed. He will revive His people today just as He's done throughout history. He will do so ... as we pray.

There has been a pattern in the great soul harvests throughout the history of the Church. It was the pattern of the dynamic fast-growing Church in Jerusalem as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The Bible says, *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."* (Acts 4:31).

There were four things that took place according to the Scripture. First, they prayed. Second, God shook everything up. Third, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Finally, they had a new power to speak the word of God with courage.

The end product of prayer was evangelism. When we draw near to God, we are filled with His presence. He is love, and His perfect love casts out all fear. That's why they had power to speak with boldness. They had been in the presence of the One who is absolute love. Fear flees in the presence of Divine love. A praying Church will always become an evangelistic Church. Evangelism and revival aren't the same things, but when we pray, we're already on the road to revival. And when revival genuinely takes hold, evangelism is the supernatural natural result.

Evangelism is on the heart of God. The Bible clearly tells us that God's loves a lost and dying world. Jesus whole mission was summed up in His words, *"I came to seek and to save the lost."* The world is on the heart of God, and the world ought to be on the hearts of God's people. When it is, then we'll begin to weep for those who've never come to know the Saviour.

Prayer is the secret to evangelistic outreach. Prayer is intimacy with God and when we're intimate with God, we'll seek His kingdom to come in the hearts and lives of the people around us. Humble, holy, praying men and women have always been God's weapons in evangelism. He's still looking for such people because prayer prepares the heart of an unbelieving generation. Jesus said, *"No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."* (John 6:65).

We don't reach people with the message of Christ because we're super salesmen or great orators. We get through to people because God the Holy Spirit has done a deep work in their hearts. It's because the Spirit has drawn them to Jesus. Prayer releases the Holy Spirit to tear down spiritual walls that have been built in the hearts of a lost and dying world. God's method hasn't changed. He's still looking for a humble, holy praying man, woman or young person. When He finds such a person, watch out! All the resources of heaven will be released, and the spiritually blind will see and broken hearts will be mended.

Let me tell you a story finish this first message on prayer. It was an historic moment. Thousands had gathered in the stadium in Moldova for the first time to hear the gospel. At that time, Moldova was still a part of the former Soviet Union. Christians were persecuted. Life was difficult. Everyone had been brainwashed with atheism. But Christians had prayed for God to open the doors, and this was that day.

The preacher, an evangelist from Texas, was very nervous as he stood to proclaim the name of Christ. Questions filled his mind. What would the people think? Would they respond to an open invitation to come to Christ? Several years earlier he had been deported from the Soviet Union for telling university students about Jesus. Now, he stood at this historic moment to proclaim the great gift of God's salvation.

At the close of his message that afternoon, he extended the invitation for people to come to Christ. At first he asked people to lift their hands if they wanted to know Christ, and he told them that he would pray for them. No one lifted a hand. He prayed, *"Oh God, what do I do now?"* The Holy Spirit seemed to whisper in his heart, *"Press on. Press on."*

He then called for people to join him at the front of the platform if they wanted to place their faith in Christ and follow Him. No one responded. He prayed again, but God seemed to indicate that He had it all under control. He looked up, and to his surprise, a poor peasant woman came out of the stands all by herself. She was carrying a bouquet of flowers over her head. She marched all by herself in front of an overflow crowd in the stadium, right up to the pulpit. She then handed the preacher the flowers and knelt in front of the pulpit and began to cry out to God in deep travail. Her prayers echoed throughout the entire stadium.

As she began to pray .... the Holy Spirit swept through the stadium with awesome power. Tens, then twenties, then fifties, and then hundreds of people began to respond to the invitation to come to Christ. It was an incredible sight to behold. Close to 2,500 people made committed their lives to Christ that afternoon. The preacher was so moved by the courage of that one poor peasant woman that he wrote the story of what had happened in his newsletter. He actually had pictures of what took place.

Not long after the newsletter was sent out, he received a phone call from a lady who had been in a women's prayer group with the preacher's wife. She said, *"Can I come to your office? There's something that I must show you."* She came to him and brought her prayer diary with her. Every day she would record how God had impressed her to pray. She had been praying for two months for the Moldovan crusade.

God had laid it on her heart to pray specifically for a poor peasant woman in Moldova *"to have the courage to do whatever God was telling her to do."* She had recorded those exact words in her diary consistently as she prayed ... not knowing what they meant or what God had planned.

One woman in San Antonio, Texas prayed, and God shook an entire nation. Prayer prepared the heart of one peasant woman, and God was able to work a miracle. I believe that when we get to heaven we'll discover that the true heroes of heaven aren't necessarily the great platform personalities. They won't necessarily be those well known to the world, but they will certainly be those well known to God - those who have tarried in the quiet place of prayer.

**Matthew 6:6** *(Jesus said), "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."*

One day we will all discover who God's secret heroes have been. They are those who wrote the history of the kingdom with the secret prayers of their hearts.