Victory Through Prayer

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Main Scripture Text: Acts 12:1–11

"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."
ACTS 12:5

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Introduction

Take God's Word, and find with me, please, Acts chapter 12. We're continuing through the Book of Acts under the theme "That Old-Time Religion." And, I will remind you that that old-time religion is the "new-time" religion, the "all-time" religion, the "every-time" religion, and the "any-time" religion. Today, I want to talk to you about prayer—not just "now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep" kind of prayer, but victorious prayer. As you read the Book of Acts, ladies and gentlemen, there is the shout of victory, the ring of victory, and the shout of triumph on every page in the Book of Acts. These people learned how to pray, and they saturated their lives with prayer. And, God gave the victory.

Now, compare that with the average Christian today. Compare that with the average church today. Compare that with Christendom, as a whole, today. We are failing in our battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And, the reason that we fail, ladies and gentlemen, is that, primarily and fundamentally, we do not know how to pray. There's not a failure in your life or in my life that is not a prayer failure, if you properly analyze it. There's not a need in my life or in your life that could not be met if we knew how to pray and would practice what we know. There's not a sin in my life or in your life that proper prayer would not have avoided. As Jesus said, *"Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into*

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temptation" (Mark 14:38). How important it is that we learn how to pray!

The 12th chapter in the Book of Acts has a wonderful lesson on prayer, and we're going to look at it. I want us to begin reading now in verse 1: *"Now about that time Herod"*—and, by the way, Herod was a vile, venomous king—*"about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword"*—he's a murderous man, you see—*"And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers"*—that's 16 soldiers—*"to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison"*—but now, I want you to notice the key to this passage—*"but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of its own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the LORD hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews"* (Acts 12:1–11).

I. The Freedom of Their Prayer

Now, there are some things that I want you to learn about victorious prayer, and the very first is this: it's what I'm going to call "the freedom to prayer"—"the freedom to prayer," or, "the freedom of this prayer." Now, you notice the Bible says that Peter was in prison, but prayer was made. Now, can you imagine how hopeless it is for this man—I mean, outwardly? Here he is in a dark dungeon—in a deep, secure dungeon. He's such an important prisoner that there are 16 people that are assigned to him personally to guard him. Furthermore, they want to make so certain that he doesn't escape that they have chains on him. He's chained on one side to a soldier, and he's chained on the other side to a soldier. Now, they're going to put him to death. Murderous old Herod has already killed James with the sword. I imagine that he beheaded James. And, he saw that he gained so much popularity with the enemies of the gospel that he said, "I'll do

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the same to Peter. He's the big fisherman. They all like him. I'll put him to death, and I'm going to do it in just a few days." And, he announced the day that Peter is to be executed.

Now, what are these disciples going to do? I mean, how are they going to get Peter out of prison? Are they going to organize a mob and storm the prison? Not a chance with that little handful motley crew. Well, what are they going to do? Are they going to get some petitions up? Are they going to say, "Now look, we are influential citizens in this city, and we demand that you release Simon Peter?" They had no influence. What are they going to do? Are they going to take a collection, get a lot of money, and go in and bribe Herod? They didn't have any money. *"Silver and gold have I none"* (Acts 3:6), and what they had, they had distributed to feed the poor in order to take care of those who were in distress in that time. What were they going to do? I'll tell you what they were going to do: they were going to pray.

Now, the intelligencia would sneer and say, "Look at these silly people down on their knees in prayer." I'll tell you one person who didn't sneer—and it was the devil. It has well been said that Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees. There is an animal named the gnu—G-N-U: that's the way that you spell it—and when he's attacked, he drops to his knees. Would to God that the Church could learn the same thing, dear friend. It is the freedom to pray. Every other door was closed, but there was one that was opened; it went straight up. And, they could pray.

Now friend, the devil may do many things to inhibit you, but there's one thing that he can't do: he can't stop you from praying. I mean, there may be iron doors all around you, there may be chains all over you, there may be people all against you—but you can pray. We talk about how kids can't pray in school—that's ridiculous. You can pray anywhere, any time, and in any place—in prison, in school, in the office, any place—you can pray. Isn't that wonderful—the freedom to pray, the freedom to pray? *"But prayer was made"* (Acts 12:5). Ladies and gentlemen, prayer should not be our last resort; it ought to be our first thought—our first opportunity. There is the freedom to pray. Would to God that we could learn how to pray and to take advantage of the opportunity of this freedom!

II. The Faithfulness of Their Prayer

But, I want you to notice something else: I want you to notice, not only the freedom of that prayer, but I want you to notice what I'm going to call "the faithfulness of that prayer." Look again, if you will, in God's Word in verse 5: *"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing"*—without ceasing. Notice the faithfulness of this prayer. They prayed; they prayed; and they prayed some more. They did not quit praying. Do you know what's wrong with many of our prayers? We have a take-it-or-

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leave-it attitude toward prayer. We ask God to do something for us, and if God doesn't seemingly answer right away, then we just kind of stop praying. But, these people didn't. They prayed; they prayed, and they prayed again.

Now, I don't know why God doesn't always immediately answer our prayers. There's a mystery to prayer. But, I'll tell you this much about it: our God says that we are to keep on praying. As a matter of fact, the Lord Jesus gave a special parable. It's found in Luke chapter 18 and verse 1. Don't turn to it right now, but you might put it in your margin. But, that story begins, *"And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"* (Luke 18:1). That means not to stop praying. *"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not"* (Galatians 6:9). Jesus said, *"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you"* (Matthew 7:7). And, in the Greek language, He is literally saying, "Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. Don't quit!" *"And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"* (Luke 18:1). They prayed constantly. They prayed frequently. They prayed faithfully, "Lord…" They prayed without ceasing—the faithfulness of their prayers.

Sometimes it takes a long time to get your prayers answered. There've been two porno palaces in our city that I have prayed against for a long time, because I have to drive past them when I go home. Now, I have certain prayer habits. One of the habits is this: I pray in different places about different things. When I pass a particular church, frequently I will pray for the pastor of that church, and I'll pray for the ministry of that church. If there's somebody whose house I pass by, I'll pray for that person as I drive past their house, as I think about them. When I would drive past these two porno places, I would put a curse on them. Now, the Bible says that with our mouth we can bless, and with our mouth we can curse. I didn't cuss them. Jesus cursed a fig tree; He put a curse on it. I didn't curse the people—I love the people. God loves the people. We're not angry at people; we're angry at sin. And, in the name of Jesus, I would say, "O God, O God, in the name of Jesus, I put a curse upon that business that's destroying homes and that business that is wrecking purity and spreading disease and vileness. O God, I curse that in the name of Jesus. Lord, I ask You to remove that." It dawned on me the other day, as I drove past, friend, that the buildings are not even there—I mean, not one stone is left upon another. I mean, even the very places have been dismantled. Now, I have to confess that I prayed for a long time, and I would sometimes say, "Lord, why? Why don't You hear my prayer? Why do I wait so long?" But, I've learned that God's delays are not God's denials. *"And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"* (Luke 18:1). There's the faithfulness of their prayers. They prayed continually.

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III. The Fervency of Their Prayer

Now, I want you to notice something else: I want you to notice the fervency of their prayer. Look again in verse 5: these words *"without ceasing"* (Acts 12:5) may be translated into "fervently"—"fervently." It's one of those kinds of words that have double meanings, and it means that they prayed with intensity; they prayed with fire and with fervency. I'll tell you something else that's wrong with many of our prayers: we pray with such casualness—with half-heartedness. Half-heartedness is an insult to God. The Bible says in Jeremiah chapter 29 and verse 13: *"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart"—"with all your heart"* (Jeremiah 29:13). *"A double minded man is unstable in all [of] his ways"* (James 1:8). These people prayed fervently.

I read of the Lord Jesus—about when Jesus prayed—and the Bible says in the Book of Hebrews, chapter 5, and verse 7: *"he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears"* (Hebrews 5:7). When's the last time that you prayed with tears? I read about when our Lord Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane—that the perspiration, the sweat, was as drops of blood upon His brow, as the minute capitularies ruptured (Luke 22:44). He was in such intensity as He prayed. Prayer is hard work. That's the reason that many of us don't pray: it requires concentration, and it requires effort. It's harder to pray than it is to preach. It's harder to pray than it is to study. It's harder to pray than it is to sing. It is harder to pray than almost anything, because prayer is work. I'll tell you, dear friend, prayer is warfare. When you pray, you enter into spiritual warfare; you enter into the heavenlies. And, the devil will oppose you when you're praying. Now, the devil doesn't mind everything else we do as long as we leave out prayer. He'll say, "Go ahead and have your magnificent choir program. Go ahead and have Living Pictures. Go ahead and have your sermons. Go ahead and have your Sunday School. Go ahead and have your fellowship. Go ahead and have your visitation program. Go ahead and do all of it as long as you leave out the power of Almighty God that comes through fervent prayer." The devil sneers at our organization; the devil laughs at our personalities, but he fears our prayer. And, that's the reason, dear friend, that when you go to pray, you're going to feel opposition.

Do you ever feel opposition when you pray? Of course you do. The flesh doesn't want to pray. The Bible says the flesh is in enmity against God (Romans 8:7). There's that old nature that doesn't want to pray. And, not only do you have that inward predisposition against prayer in your flesh, but you have that outward opposition against prayer. And, the devil will cause your mind to wander. The doorbell will ring. The beans will burn. The baby will cry. It doesn't matter what'll happen—something will happen to keep you from praying. Why? Because it is warfare—it is warfare.

Let me give you a verse of Scripture. Paul said in Romans chapter 15 and verse 30:

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"Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me"—notice the words "strive together with me"—*"in your prayers to God for me"* (Romans 15:30). *Strive*—that's a word that means "to labor." Friend, there's the rest of faith, but there is the fight of faith, also. We need to learn how to pray fervently—to mean business with God. I want to tell you one more time that *God does business with those that mean business. "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart"* (Jeremiah 29:13).

There have been times when I've known that I didn't want to pray. Don't look so pious—you've been the same way. And, I'll tell you, dear friend, that when you don't feel like praying, that's the time that you'd better pray. You pray when you feel like it; you pray when you don't feel like it, and you pray until you do feel like it. I have found out that sometimes my carnal flesh doesn't want to pray, and I just make an announcement—I say, "Dear God. I don't feel like praying, but I know that You want me to pray, and I'm going to pray. And, if I die on my knees, then I'm going to stay on my knees until I make contact with You." And, by about that time, I'm already there—at about that time, when I just make up my mind that fears may beset me and foes may oppose me, yet I will enter in. There's the fervency of that prayer. God knows I need more.

In Tibet, they have what they call a "prayer wheel." They write their prayers on slips of paper and put them in a little cup or a little dish. And, they balance that dish on the end of a stick, and they whirl it around like that. And, they just hold it over their heads—just whirling it around like that—and their prayers are in that dish. Every time that the dish goes around, it's supposed to be a prayer. They call that a "prayer wheel." You say, "That's silly." Well, I know Baptists who do the same thing—only the wheels are in their heads. I mean, they just repeat little prayers, little rote memorizations. God doesn't hear that prayer. Jesus said, *"But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking"* (Matthew 6:7). I mean, we need to pray, dear friend, with a fervency—to mean business with God, to strive together in your prayers.

IV. The Fellowship of Their Prayer

The freedom of the prayer—they could pray. The faithfulness of their prayer—they prayed without ceasing. The fervency of their prayer—they did business with God, because, dear friend, they were desperate. I want you to notice, also, what I'm going to call "the fellowship of their prayer." They prayed together. Now, notice: *"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him"* (Acts 12:5). And, by the way, these are the only people that really have the promise that their prayer is going to be answered. Turn with me, if you will, to 1 John

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chapter 5. Let me show you something. John is talking about being saved, and he says here in 1 John chapter 5, verses 13–15: *"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him"* (1 John 5:13–15). Now, who is the "us" to whom he's referring? It refers to those who have believed on His name—to those who are saved. Prayer is for people who can pray in Jesus's name.

Prayer is for the Church. Jesus said to His Church in Matthew 18, verses 19 and 20: *"Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven"* (Matthew 18:19). What a wonderful, wonderful promise that our Lord Jesus Christ has given us in prayer! And so, we need to learn how to pray and to trust the Lord. Matthew 18—let me read that passage of Scripture to you—Matthew 18, beginning with verse 18: *"Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"* (Matthew 18:18–20). And, that tells us that if prayer was made of that church so long ago, then prayer needs to be made of this church. I mean, we need to pray, folks. Your Sunday School class needs to be an enclave of prayer. Your deacon group needs to be a time of prayer. Your fellowships ought to open and close with prayer. Committee meetings need to be saturated with prayer. The orchestra—when you meet, you ought to pray. The choirs—before you get ready to sing, you ought to pray, and I don't mean just say, "Lord, bless us." Now, I mean pray! Everything we do ought to be saturated with prayer. This church ought to run on the engine of prayer—the fellowship of prayer.

V. The Faith of Their Prayer

Now, I want you to notice the faith of their prayer. The Bible says, again, that their prayer was made unto God (Acts 12:5). Notice again, if you will, in verse 5: *"Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God"—"unto God"* (Acts 12:5). This was the faith of their prayer. They weren't praying to impress one another. They realized that they were coming into the throne room—that they were speaking with God.

On a few occasions, I've had the privilege to meet with the President of the United States. That's a great privilege. And, I thought, "What would I say? How will I maximize

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this time?" Try to consider, now—if I'm going to speak to a man who is this important and who has this much power, should I not think in my own heart and in my own mind, "What I will say?" Should I not prepare myself? Ladies and gentlemen, when we pray, we come into the throne room of the Sovereign of the universe. How thoughtlessly, how carelessly, and how flippantly, I'm afraid, that some of us come before Almighty God in prayer. Their prayer is unto God—unto God.

I was in my study one day, and I had a thought that I believe was the most staggering thought that I've ever had in my life. I cannot tell you the weight of that thought as it settled on me. It just shook me to my core; it was the most staggering thought that I've ever had. I can still remember the impact that it had on me—and still has on me. I'm going to tell you what it was, and when I tell you what it was, you're going to say, "Everybody knows that." And so did I, but yet, I cannot tell you the impact that the thought had on me. Are you ready for it? Here it is: God answers prayer. I thought, "My soul, is that true? I mean, is that true—that the One who made the universe, the God of all eternities, will hear me, and I can have influence in His court? Me—He will hear me! I can pray, and He will hear me and answer me." And, He's the One who said, *"Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not"* (Jeremiah 33:3). Folks, what a thought! I mean, what a thought—that we can have that privilege to pray to God!

Now folks, listen, if that's not true—if God doesn't answer prayer—then why don't we just quit playing games and all go home, okay? But, if it is true—and it is true—then we'd better learn how to pray, amen? I mean, we can have an audience with the King of kings. *"But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God"* (Acts 12:5). That's the faith of their prayer.

Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power are such,
None can ever ask too much (John Newton).

Thank God for the faith of that prayer.

VI. The Focus of their Prayer

And then, I want you to notice what I'm going to call "the focus of that prayer." *"But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him"* (Acts 12:5). Whom? Peter. He's in prison. He's going to be beheaded. We need to pray for him: "God, we pray for Peter, who is in prison." The focused prayer—a very specific prayer.

Many of us pray such a generalized prayer that we never have to admit whether God heard our prayer or not, isn't that true? "Lord, save the lost. Lord, bless the sick. Lord, comfort the bereaved." Somewhere, somehow, somebody who's been lost is going to

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be saved, and somebody that's sick is going to get well, and you don't know whether it was your prayer or not, right? You see, that's kind of a safe prayer. But, we need to pray these specific prayers so that we will have to admit whether God answered our prayer.

The average person, if you asked him what he prayed for yesterday, couldn't tell you. And again, it's the prayer wheel—just repeating these particular things. But, when you get concerned—you can tell when a person is concerned and when they mean business—they get specific. You know, have you ever heard any body who has said something to you like this: "Hey, you all come see us some time. One of these days, you'll all have to come over"? They don't mean it. Let me tell you how you can tell when they mean it: they say, "Hey, look, I've got five of the thickest steaks that you've ever seen in the freezer. Saturday at 5:00—I'm going to have the coals hot. We're going to barbeque those steaks. Can you all be here at 5:00 on Saturday?" Now, they mean business, right? They mean business. That's the difference—the difference. Not just: "You all come just see us some time"—"God, bless the lost." No, listen, you get specific. "O God, my neighbor—my neighbor—needs Jesus. O God, here's a problem, and God, You know it. And Lord, we lay it before You. And now, God, we expect You to answer and give us what we need. And, if this isn't what we need, then show us it's not what we need and give us what we need. But, we're praying, Lord, for something specific." Here is a prayer that is brought into focus.

Now, you ought to have in your heart, or in your Bible, a list of prayer requests with dates (a prayer record of when you entered it). And, when God answers it, you can give Him the glory and give Him the praise. So, get specific and focused in your prayer, because *prayer that is channeled is prayer that is powerful.* Prayer was made for people.

VII. The Force of their Prayer

Now, last of all, I want you to notice what I'm going to call "the force of that prayer"—"the force of that prayer." What happened? Well, I'll tell you what happened: God answered it, and God delivered Peter from prison. Now, Peter's there in prison, and he's asleep. Would you be asleep if you knew that the next day they were going to execute you—sleeping between two smelly soldiers, chained to one on one hand, and chained to the other on the other hand? And, there's Peter—he's sound asleep. I mean, Peter was so asleep when that angel came in there, that—if you'll read it—the Bible said that the angel smote Peter and said, "Peter, wake up! Get up!" (Acts 12:7). He gave Peter an elbow in the side. He actually had to shake him in order to rouse him. He had to raise him up. I mean, Peter's sawing logs. Why?

I've tried to think about it, and I think that I know one reason why: John 21. (Peter is a young man when this happened to him.) John 21:18: Jesus said, "When you're an old

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man, they're going to lead you around." Peter thought, "Well, they say that they're going to kill me, but I'm not old yet. Jesus was talking to me about when I'm an old man. So, whatever's going to happen, I'm not going to die." I don't know—I don't know—why Peter was so calm. Maybe that was just it, dear friend. You know, I think we'd have a lot less sleepless nights if we knew the Word of God, believed the Word of God, and stood on the promises of God. But, for whatever reason, here is Peter, and he is asleep. And, this angel says, "All right. Now get up," and then he says, "Put on your shoes. Put on your clothes, and gird yourself" (Acts 12:8). I like that: "We're not sneaking out—we're going out in class. Dress up." Peter gets something, and he dresses up. And then, the chains fall off. Peter rises up (dressed up), and he and the angel walk out. And, as they start to walk, they pass this guard and another guard. Everybody else is evidently asleep, blinded, or in a stupor—whatever happened to them. And then, they come to this huge iron gate—I mean, a big iron gate. Now remember, this is a prison; this is a fortress. Those gates, like having an electric eye, just open. Peter and the angel walk right out. That's the force of this prayer.

Now, the answer to this prayer was late; it came at the last minute. God was on time, however. Don't you get antsy—don't—only was it late; it was leisurely. God moves in majesty, and they walk out. But, I want to tell you something: it was also limited. The interesting thing is this—and we're going to preach more on this—but the iron gates opened by their will. But, when Peter got outside that iron gate, you're going to find out that he said, "Where will I go?" "Well," he said, "I'd better go to the prayer meeting." Now, they were meeting at Mary's house. That was Mary, the mother of John Mark. And, they're having a prayer meeting there. And so, Peter goes there, and there's a door out there, also. There's a door to the courtyard, and it's a wooden door, I imagine. Peter knocks on the door of the gate. They have a maid. She goes to the door, and she looks out. She says, "Would you imagine? Look, that's Simon Peter." They're in there, praying for Simon. "Hey, folks"—she just leaves him standing there—"Peter's at the door." They say, "Well, no. Look, Peter's in prison. It must be…that must be his ghost. That's an angel or something. Hey, Peter, is this really you?" "Yeah, it's me." "He says that it's really him." And, the Bible says there that Peter is knocking, and knocking, and knocking, and knocking. He's got red knuckles. (The Bible doesn't say that, but that's the original Greek.) All right. Now look, here he is knocking; they're over there praying. Point: God is not going to do for you what you can do for yourself. Peter could never have opened those iron gates, but they could open that wooden door, right?

Now, prayer is no substitute for common sense; it's no substitute for labor, and it's no substitute for work. Jesus said, "You roll away the stone," and then He said, "Lazarus, you come forth." They could roll away the stone, but they couldn't raise Lazarus. You understand what I'm saying? Friend, Peter could not have opened that

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iron gate, but they could have opened that wooden door. Now, God does not do for us what we ought to do for ourselves, but we can never do for ourselves what God alone can do. And, when we begin to merge prayer with obedience and common sense, then God begins to work. There's no cheap way, there's no easy way, and there's no lazy way to build a church. And, we must visit, and we must call people if we want our Sunday School class to grow, but we also must pray against the enemy. We must learn, dear friend, that there's a force in prayer—there's a power in prayer. It's not a substitute for work. It's not a substitute for common sense. But, when we begin to pray, then we see what God alone can do. When we depend on organization, we see what organization can do. When we depend upon planning, we see what planning can do. But, when we depend upon prayer, we see what God can do.

Conclusion

Let's bow together in prayer.

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