

## Bending Heaven

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The notion of prayer is challenging in a secular age. Instead, we like to “send thoughts and prayers your way,” as if to bypass God. Others insist we “name it claim it,” as if faith unlocks our every want. Why should we pray? How should we pray? What should we pray?

### Why Pray

Israel has cut a swath right through the land of Canaan, driving a wedge between north and south, controlling the middle of the land. And Gibeon was the last city to fall. So five kings take a stand and attack Gibeon. The people of Gibeon send for help from Israel, as the kings close in. Joshua responds by going up with all the mighty men of war and the Lord speaks to Joshua: “**Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you**” (10:8). Notice God speaks to Joshua *on the fly*: Joshua went up *and* the Lord spoke to him. How is your prayer life we say? Sometimes people respond, I pray all the time, throughout the day, whenever something comes up. If I need something, I just ask. Jesus, “**Ask, and it will be given to you seek, and you will find**” (Matt 7:7). Indeed, we can speak to God, and God speaks on the fly. We are in *continual* relationship with God. But prayer is also *concentrated*, “**But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret**” (Matt 6:6). Notice Jesus teaches to go to a quiet place, a closet. To secure silence, close the door. Jesus himself withdrew often to a desolate place to pray. Why? Because in the silence we can hear, in the secret place we find great reward, **And your Father who sees in secret will reward you**. What’s the reward? **To know the Lord. You get the sense this person is there to know someone, not just in line to get some thing**. As though God is *the best*. Since our kids were little they’ve asked us for things: food, toys, playtime. But as they grow older they ask about us. I’ll come home from work, and my son will ask, How was your day dad? What was so good about it? As we mature we ask, not just to get, but to *know* the Lord. One reason we pray is to know God. He says to Joshua, “**Do not fear them, for I have given them into your hands. Not a man of them shall stand before you**” (8). Now why would he say that? **God knows Joshua**. He knows Joshua is prone to fear; it’s why he gave him this promise back in chapter one, **Do not fear...** (1:5,9). Now he’s facing not just one king, but five! Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Here we have another reason to pray, not just to know God, but because God knows us. A friend of mine was struggling with some elderly patients who wouldn’t sit still in the MRI machine at work. She wondered if God cared about that kind of thing, and if she should pray about it. As she did she discovered that God wanted, not to make her patients still but to make her more patient. As she prayed, she began to take on God’s character of patience. He knew what she needed most. We pray not just to know God, but because God knows us. Through prayer, the Lord reminds Joshua of a promise, exactly what he needs as he launches out in his most daunting campaign yet. He doesn’t stay in the closet, but gets out on the field. You could say **prayer moves him beyond himself. It compels him to encourage others**. Speaking to his men he says, “**Do not let them enter their cities, for the LORD your God has given them into your hand**”. God gives us promises in prayer that are meant to move us beyond ourselves. Why should you pray? To know God, to be known by God, and to know, love, serve others.

## How to Pray

Joshua and his army march all night to reach the city, and when they do, an epic battle breaks out. We're told, "[At that time Joshua spoke to the Lord in the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the sons of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, "Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon, in the Valley of Aijalon." And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies"](#) (12-13). This raises several questions. Perhaps what jumps out most to modern people is the idea that the sun stood still. We know better. The sun doesn't move; the earth does. But we say similar things, "The sun is going down a lot later. You get up before sunrise?" The sun doesn't go up or down. The Bible isn't making a scientific claim; it's simply reporting celestial activity *from the vantage point of an observer*, just like we do. More to the point, what is Joshua asking for? There are several views on this. Some think he's asking God to give them more *daylight* so they can finish their campaign and win the day. Others argue that the words stop and stand don't mean cease to move but *cease to shine*, and there's a fair amount of support for this. This would mean Joshua is asking for *darkness*. Why would he do that? Well, he arrived after marching all night and then attacked (9). So perhaps he's asking for cover of night to continue as a tactical advantage. Regardless, Joshua asks God for a celestial miracle. Now how God accomplished this is beyond us, like how Jesus turned water into wine without grapes. That doesn't sit well with us. We want exhaustive explanations because, whether we realize it or not, we've decided to live in a closed universe, where there is a rational explanation for everything. [But miracles, St. Augustine said, are not contradictory to the universe; they are just contradictory to what we know of the universe.](#) There could be more, but we settle for a disenchanted world, to live in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls the immanent frame, a view of the world that boxes out the transcendent, responding only to what can be measured and seen. And when we live in this frame, it makes prayer difficult because prayer moves beyond the frame. Now unconsciously we find ourselves longing for things beyond the frame, outside the box. We want justice and goodness, things the Greeks recognized as *transcendentals*. Prayer, connects us to the Transcendent, opens up possibilities for justice and goodness in a way that staying in the box cannot! Joshua, of course, along with most cultures of most of history believe the universe is open, and that God (although outside our frame so to speak) *can be accessed through prayer*, worship, meditation. So he prays. He prays as if the transcendent can penetrate the immanent, as if heaven can infiltrate earth. It's why Israel builds altars, says prayers, recites the Scriptures. When they do this they are saying God you are big enough to change the world. You can stop the sun. You can tell from their prayers. They pray big and specifically. Joshua prays *specifically*: sun and moon, at the cities of east and west. Joshua prays *big*: stop, stand still, cease! He prays as though heaven meets earth. Do you? Are you praying specifically? Pray big? Like you know the transcendent God? Or are your prayers trapped in a box? See, the real miracle here isn't that the sun stood still, or that God listened to Joshua; it's that God heeded a man's prayer: [There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel](#) (14). This is the point of the story—God heeds our prayers. So: [Ask, and it will be given to you, seek and you will find.](#) How should we pray? Big and specifically. Like heaven infiltrates earth.

## What to Pray

Joshua prays and here's the result: "And the LORD threw them into a panic before Israel, who struck them with a great blow at Gibeon (10). the Lord threw down large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died. There were more who died because of the hailstones than the sons of Israel killed with the sword (11). Do you see it? A great blow, more died because of God's action than theirs. *Prayer bends heaven*. Not that we're asking for hailstones, but we should ask heaven to infiltrate earth. Let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Pray big. Ask specifically. Ask God for faith to pray big, for forgiveness for praying small. Ask God for freedom from besetting sins, reconciled relationships, victory over addictions. But also let *prayer take you beyond yourself*. Ask for more city groups and leaders downtown, where the population has quadrupled since 2000 and three-quarters do not believe Jesus is the Son of God. Ask God for salvations, by name. Plead with God for justice in our city: racial, economic, social. Ask God to give us a building downtown where we can stake a gospel flag, and 24-7/365, provide a gospel witness in the heart of our city. Ask for new church planters to be sent from our church, with the good news of Jesus—Asia, Europe, Africa. *Pray* God uses us to renew *cities* socially, spiritually and culturally with the gospel of Jesus. Ask and it will be given to you. Knock and the door will be opened. Why? To know God, be known by God, and to serve and bless others. In short, to glorify Christ. This is the guiding principle of all prayer. Ask anything "in my name," which means we put our prayers under the name of Christ not over the name of Christ. We don't name it; he names it. On earth as it is in heaven—why? Hallowed, glorified be your name. If you're praying for things more than you're praying for God's glory, if you're asking for things, more than you're asking for God, he may not grant them. Why? Because you've missed the guiding principle of prayer—*for the glory of Christ*. Let's bend heaven with our prayers *for the glory of Christ*.