

Prayer: A Heavenly Invitation

By Max Lucado

Introduction
Opening the Windows

When a believing person prays, great things happen. (James 5:16)

Imagine yourself in a dark room. Windows closed. Curtains drawn. Shutters shut. In the darkness it's hard to believe there's daylight beyond the drapes. So you grope and try to feel your way across the floor. You take a step, disoriented and unsure where you're headed. Progress is slow and the journey painful. Stubbed toes, bruised shins, broken vases. It's hard to walk in a dark place.

Harder still to walk in a dark world. But many try. And, as a result, many are wounded in the effort: tripping over problems, bumping into one another in the shadows, ramming into walls.

But occasionally one of us makes a discovery. Reaching through the blackness, a hand finds curtains and a window latch. "Hey, everybody! The walls have windows!" The drapes are pulled back and the window opened. The sun floods into the room. What was dark is now bright. What was opaque is now clear. What was stale is now fresh. With the light comes a peace, a power, a desire to move closer to the light, and a confidence to step forward. Our timid steps are replaced by a certainty to our walk. A certainty to move through the corridors of life, opening one window after another to illuminate. What a difference! And all it took was one small gesture of opening curtains and raising the window.

Prayer does the same thing for us. Prayer is the window that God has placed in the walls of our world. Leave it shut and the world is a cold, dark house. But throw back the curtains and see His light. Open the window and hear His voice. Open the window of prayer and invoke the presence of God in your world.

Chapter One

The God Who Listens to You

You're at your best friend's wedding reception. The two of you have talked about this day since you were kids, and now it's here. The ceremony was great; the wedding was beautiful. The minister was flawless and the vows were honest. What a day!

"I'll take care of the reception," you volunteered. You planned the best party possible. You hired the band, rented the hall, catered the meal, decorated the room, and asked your Aunt Bertha to bake the cake.

Now the band is playing and the guests are milling, but Aunt Bertha is nowhere to be seen. Everything is here but the cake. You sneak over to the pay phone and dial her number. She's been taking a nap. She thought the wedding was next week. Oh boy! Now what do you do? Talk about a problem! Everything is here but the cake...

Sound familiar?

It might. It's exactly the dilemma Jesus' mother, Mary, was facing. The wedding was moving. The guests were celebrating...but the wine was gone. Back then, wine was to a wedding what cake is to a wedding today. Can you imagine a wedding without cake? They couldn't imagine a wedding without wine. To offer wine was to show respect to your guests. Not to offer wine at a wedding was an insult.

What Mary faced was a social problem. A foul-up. A snafu. A calamity on the common scale. No need to call 911, but no way to sweep the embarrassment under the rug, either.

When you think about it, most of the problems we face are of the same caliber. Seldom do we have to deal with dilemmas of national scale or world conflict. Seldom do our crises rock the Richter scale. Usually, the waves we ride are made by pebbles, not boulders. We're late for a meeting. We leave something at the office. A coworker forgets a report. Mail gets lost. Traffic gets snarled. The waves rocking our lives are not life threatening yet. But they can be. A poor response to a simple problem can light a fuse. What begins as a snowflake can snowball into an avalanche unless proper care is taken.

For that reason you might want to note how Mary reacted. Her solution poses a practical plan for untangling life's knots. "They have no more wine," she told Jesus (John 2:3). That's it. That's all she said. She didn't go ballistic. She simply assessed the problem and gave it to Christ.

"A problem well stated is a problem half solved," John Dewey said. Mary would have liked that, for that's what she did. She defined the problem.

She could have exploded: "Why didn't you plan better? There's not enough wine! Whose fault is this anyway? You guys never do anything right. If anything is to be done right around here I have to do it myself!"

Or she could have imploded: "This is my fault, I failed. I'm to blame. I deserve it. If only I'd majored in culinary art. I'm a failure in life. Go ahead; do the world a favor. Tie me up and march me to the gallows. I deserve it."

It's so easy to focus on everything but the solution. Mary didn't do that. She simply looked at the knot, assessed it, and took it to the right person. "I've got one here I can't untie, Jesus."

"When all the wine was gone Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine'" (John 2:3).

Please note, she took the problem to Jesus before she took it to anyone else. A friend told me about a tense deacons' meeting he attended. Apparently there was more agitation than agreement, and after a lengthy discussion, someone suggested, "Why don't we pray about it?" to which another questioned, "Has it come to that?"

What causes us to think of prayer as the last option rather than the first? I can think of two reasons: feelings of independence and feelings of insignificance.

Sometimes we're independent. We begin to think we are big enough to solve our own problems.

At our house we have had a banner year. Our third daughter has learned how to swim. That means that three can walk. Three can swim. And two out of the three have the training wheels off their bikes. With each achievement they have delightedly pointed out, "Look, Dad, I can do it on my own." Denalyn and I have applauded and celebrated each accomplishment our daughters have made. Their maturity and mobility is good and necessary, but I hope they never get to the point where they are too grown up to call their daddy.

God feels the same way about us.

Other times we don't feel independent; we feel insignificant. We think, "Sure, Mary can take her problems to Jesus. She's his mother. He doesn't want to hear my problems. Besides, he's got famine and the Mafia to deal with. I don't want to trouble him with my messes."

If that is your thought, may I share with you a favorite verse of mine? I like it so much I wrote it on the first page of my Bible.

"Because he delights in me, he saved me" (Ps. 18:19).

And you thought he saved you because of your decency. You thought he saved you because of your good works or good attitude or good looks. Sorry. If that were the case, your salvation would be lost when your voice went south or your works got weak. There are many reasons God saves you: to bring glory to himself, to appease his justice, to demonstrate his sovereignty. But one of the sweetest reasons God saved you is because he is fond of you. He likes having you around. He thinks you are the best thing to come down the pike in quite awhile. "As a man rejoices over his new wife, so your God will rejoice over you." (Isa. 62:5).

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, he'll listen. He can live anywhere in the universe, and he chose your heart. And the Christmas gift he sent you in Bethlehem? Face it, friend. He's crazy about you.

The last thing you should worry about is being a nuisance to God. All you need to concentrate on is doing what he tells you to do. Note the sequence of events in the next verse: “Jesus said to the servants, ‘fill the jars with water.’ So they filled the jars to the top. Then he said to them, ‘Now take some out and give it to the master of the feast.’ So they took the water to the master. When he tasted it, the water had become wine” (John 2:7-9).

Did you see the sequence? First the jars were filled with water. Then Jesus instructed the servants to take the water (not the wine) to the master.

Now, if I’m a servant, I don’t want to do that. How is that going to solve the problem? And what is the master going to say when I give him a cup of water? But these servants either had enough naivete or trust to do what or trust to do what Jesus said, and so the problem was solved. Note, the water became wine after they had obeyed, not before.

What if the servants had refused? What if they had said, “No way”? Or, to bring the pint closer to home, what if *you* refuse? What if you identify the problem, take it to Jesus, and then refuse to do what he says?

That’s possible. After all, God is asking you to take some pretty gutsy steps. Money is tight, but he still asks you to give. You’ve been offended, but he asks you to forgive your offender. Someone else blew the assignment, but he still asks you to be patient. You can’t see God’s face, but he still asks you to pray.

Not commands for the faint of faith. But then again, he wouldn’t ask you to do it if he thought you couldn’t. So go ahead. Next time you face a common calamity, follow the example of Mary at the wineless wedding:

Identify the problem. (You’ll half-solve it.)

Present it to Jesus. (He’s happy to help.)

Do what he says. (No matter how crazy.)

And buy your Aunt Bertha a new calendar.

Chapter Two

The God Who Fights for You

Here is a big question. What is God doing when you are in a bind? When the lifeboat springs a leak? When the ripcord snaps? When the last penny is gone before the last bill is paid? When the last hope left on the last train? What is God doing?

I know what we are doing. Nibbling on nails like corn on the cob. Pacing floors. Taking pills. I know what we do.

But what does God do? Big question. Real big. If God is sleeping, I'm duck soup. If he is laughing, I'm lost. If he is crossing his arms and shaking his head, then saw off the limb, Honey, it's time to crash.

What *is* God doing?

Well, I decided to research that question. Being the astute researcher that I am, I discovered some ancient writings that may answer this question. Few people are aware—in fact, no one is aware—that newspaper journalists roamed the lands of the Old Testament era.

Yes, it is true that in the days of Noah, Abraham, and Moses, reporters were fast on the scene recording the drama of their days. And now, for the first time, one of their articles is to be shared.

How did I come upon this article?

Well, I discovered it pressed between the pages of an in-flight magazine on a red-eye flight out of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. I can only surmise that a courageous archaeologist had hidden it to protect himself from imminent danger of evil spies. We'll never know if he survived. But we do know what he discovered—an ancient newspaper interview with Moses.

So with a salute to his courage and a hunger for the truth, I proudly share with you a heretofore-undiscovered conversation with a man who will answer the question: What does God do when we are in a bind?

This interview is between the *Holy Land Press* (HLP) and Moses.

HLP: Tell us about your conflict with the Egyptians.

MOSES: Oh, the Egyptians—big people. Strong fighters. Mean as snakes.

HLP: But you got away.

MOSES: Not before they got washed away.

HLP: You're talking about the Red Sea conflict.

MOSES: You're right, that was scary.

HLP: Tell us what happened.

MOSES: Well, the Red Sea was on one side and the Egyptians were on the other.

HLP: So you attacked?

MOSES: Are you kidding? With a half-a-million rock stackers? No, my people were too afraid. They wanted to go back to Egypt.

HLP: So you told everyone to retreat?

MOSES: Where? Into the water? We didn't have a boat. We didn't have anywhere to go.

HLP: What did your leaders recommend?

MOSES: I didn't ask them. There wasn't time.

HLP: Then what did you do?

MOSES: I told the people to stand still.

HLP: You mean, with the enemy coming, you told them not to move?

MOSES: Yep, I told the people, "Stand still and you will see the Lord save you."

HLP: Why would you want the people to stand still?

MOSES: To get out of God's way. If you don't know what to do, it's best just to sit tight till he does his thing.

HLP: That's an odd strategy, don't you think?

MOSES: It is if you are big enough for the battle. But when the battle is bigger than you are and you want God to take over, it's all you can do.

HLP: Can we talk about something else?

MOSES: Sure, it's your paper.

HLP: Soon after your escape. . .

MOSES: Our deliverance.

HLP: What's the difference?

MOSES: there is a big difference. When you escape, you do it. When you are delivered, someone else does it and you just follow.

HLP: Okay, soon after your deliverance, you battled with the Ammo . . . Amala . . . let's see, I have it here . . .

MOSES: The Amalekites.

HLP: Yeah, the Amalekites.

MOSES: Big people. Strong fighters. Mean as snakes.

HLP: But you won.

MOSES: God won.

HLP: Okay—God won—but did the work. You fought the battle. You were on the field.

MOSES: Wrong.

HLP: What? You weren't in the battle?

MOSES: Not that one. While the army was fighting, I took my friends Aaron and Hur to the top of a hill and we did our fighting up there.

HLP: With each other?

MOSES: With the darkness?

HLP: With swords?

MOSES: No, in prayer. I just lifted my hands to God, like I did at the Red Sea, only this time I forgot my rod. When I lifted my hands, we would win, but when I would lower my arms we would lose. So I got my friends to hold my arms until the Amalekites were history and we won.

HLP: Hold on a second. You think that standing on a hill with your hands in the air made a difference?

MOSES: You don't see any Amalekites around, do you?

HLP: Don't you think it strange that the General of the Army stays on the mountain while the soldiers fight in the valley?

MOSES: If the battle had been in the valley I would have gone, but that's not where the battle was being fought.

HLP: Odd, this strategy of yours.

MOSES: You mean if your father was bigger than the fellow beating you up, you wouldn't call his name?

HLP: What?

MOSES: If some guy has you on the ground pounding on you and your father is within earshot and tells you to call him anytime you need help, what would you do?

HLP: I'd call my father.

MOSES: That's all I do. When the battle is too great, I ask God to take over. I get the Father to fight for me.

HLP: And he comes?

MOSES: Seen any Jews building pyramids lately?

HLP: Let me see if I've got this straight. Once you defeat the enemy by standing still and another time you win the battle by holding up your hands. Where did you pick all this up?

MOSES: Well, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me.

HLP: Try me.

MOSES: Well, you see, there was this bush on fire for another day.

HLP: Maybe you're right. We'll save that one for another day.

So, what do you think? What does God do when we are in a bind? If Moses is any indication, that question can be answered with one word: fights. He fights for us. He steps into the ring and points us to our corner and takes over. "Remain calm; the Lord will fight for you" (Exod. 14:14).

His job is to fight. Our job is to trust.

Just trust. Not direct. Or question. Or yank the steering wheel out of his hands. Our job is to pray and wait. Nothing more is necessary. Nothing more is needed.

"He is my defender; I will not be defeated" (Ps. 62:6).

By the way, was it just me, or did I detect a few giggles when I announced my archaeological discovery?

Some of you didn't believe me, did you? Tsk, tsk, tsk. . . Just for that you're going to have to wait until the next booklet before I tell you about the diary of Jonah I found in a used book store in Wink, Texas. Still has some whale guts in it.

And you thought I was kidding!

Chapter Three

The God Who Believes in You

I didn't like the preacher I sat by on the plane. I know, I know. You're supposed to like everyone, but this fellow...

To begin with, he took the seat next to me. I'd hoped it would stay vacant. The plane was crowded. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was tired from Sunday morning services. I was speaking that evening in Atlanta and had planned on taking a nap on the flight.

But this fellow had other ideas. Though he had been assigned another seat, he took the one next to me since it was closer to the front. And when he took it, he took every inch of it—and then some. Forgive me, but I get a bit territorial about armrests. This guy staked his claim on the one between us and never relinquished his position.

Knowing I couldn't sleep, I figured I'd review my thoughts for the evening lesson, so I opened my Bible.

"What ya' studying there, buddy?"

I told him, but he never heard.

"The church is lost," he declared. "Hellbound and heartsick."

Turns out he is an evangelist. He speaks in a different church every weekend. "I wake 'em up," he growled. "Christians are asleep. They don't pray. They don't love. They don't care."

With that pronouncement, he took on his preaching tone and cadence and started listing all the woes and weaknesses of the church, "Too lazy-uh, too rich-uh, too spoiled-uh, too fat-uh..."

The folks around were beginning to listen, and my face was beginning to redden. I shouldn't have let it bug me, but it did. I'm one of those fellows who never knows what to say at the time but then spends the next week thinking, *I wish I'd thought to say that*.

Well, I've spent the last few days thinking about it, and here is what I wish I'd said to the bad news preacher: God's faithfulness has never depended on the faithfulness of his children. He is faithful even when we aren't. When we lack courage, he doesn't. He has made a history out of using people in spite of people.

Need an example? The feeding of the five thousand. It's the only miracle, aside from those of the final week, recorded in all four Gospels. Why did all four writers think it worth repeating? Maybe they knew some preachers like the one I sat next to. Perhaps they wanted to show how God doesn't give up even when his people do.

The day begins with the news of the death of John the Baptist. It continues with the return of the disciples from a short-term missionary journey. Following the disciples are five thousand men and

their families. Jesus tries to get away from the crowd by crossing the sea, only to find the crowd waiting for him on the other side. He wanted to mourn in solitude, but instead he was surrounded by people. He wanted to spend time with just the disciples, but instead he got a crowd. He wanted time to think, but instead he had people to face.

He spends time teaching them, and then he turns to Philip and inquires, “Where can we buy enough bread for all these people to eat?” (John 6:5). Keep in mind that Philip has been forcing out demons and healing the sick (Mark 6:13). We’d expect him to be optimistic. A bit of faith would be appropriate. After all, he’s just spent several weeks seeing the impossible happen.

But how does Philip respond? He sounds like the preacher I met on the plane. He knows the problem, but he has no clue as to the solution. “We would all have to work a month to buy enough food for each person to have only a little piece” (John 6:7).

He can cite the stats, but he can’t see how to help. He can crunch the numbers, but he can’t construct the answer. And though the answer to prayer is standing next to him, he doesn’t even pray.

Equally disturbing is the silence of the other disciples. Are they optimistic? Read their words, and see for yourself. “No one lives in this place and it is already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the countryside and towns around here to buy themselves something to eat” (Mark 6:35-36).

Come on, guys. How about a little faith? “You can feed them, Jesus. No challenge is too great for you. We’ve seen you heal the sick and raise the dead; we know you can feed the crowd.”

But that’s not what they said. If faith is a candle, those fellows were in the dark.

It never occurred to the disciples to turn the problem over to Jesus. Only Andrew had such a thought, but even his faith was small. “Here is a boy with five loaves of barley bread and two little fish, but that is not enough for so many people” (John 6:9).

Andrew at least comes to Jesus with an idea. But he doesn’t come with much faith. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find much faith on the hill that day.

Philip was cynical.

Andrew was doubtful.

The other disciples were negative.

The preacher I met on the flight would’ve felt right at home with these guys. Look at them: They aren’t praying, they aren’t believing, they aren’t even seeking a solution. If they are doing anything, they are telling Christ what to do! “Send the people away” (Mark 6:36). A bit bossy, don’t you think?

Looks like the disciples are “hell-bound and heartsick.” Looks like they are “too lazy-uh, to rich-uh, too spoiled-uh, too fat-uh.” Let me be clear. I agree with the preacher that the church is weak. When he bemoans the condition of the saints, I could sing the second verse. When he laments the health of many churches, I don’t argue.

But when he proclaims that we are going to hell in a hand basket, I do! I simply think God is greater than our weakness. In fact, I think it is our weakness that reveals how great God is. He told another struggler, "When you are weak, my power is made perfect in you" (2 Cor. 12:9). The feeding of the five thousand is an ideal example. The scene answers the question, What does God do when his children are weak?

If God ever needed an excuse to give up on people, he has one here. Surely God is going to banish these followers until they learn to believe.

Is that what he does? You decide. "Then Jesus took the loaves of bread, thanked God for them, and gave them to the people who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, giving as much as the people wanted" (John 6:11).

When the disciples didn't pray, Jesus prayed. When the disciples didn't see God, Jesus sought God. When the disciples were weak, Jesus was strong. When the disciples had no faith, Jesus had faith. He thanked God.

For what? The crowds? The pandemonium? The weariness? The faithless disciples? No, he thanked God for the basket of bread. He ignored the clouds and found the ray of sunshine and thanked God for it.

Look what he does next. "Jesus divided the bread and gave it to his followers, who gave it to the people" (Matt. 14:19).

Rather than punish the disciples, he employs them. There they go, passing out the bread they didn't request, enjoying the answer to the prayer they didn't even pray. If Jesus would have reacted according to the faith of his disciples, the multitudes would have gone unfed. But he didn't, and he doesn't. God is true to us even when we forget him.

God's blessings are dispensed according to the riches of his grace, not according to the depth of our faith. "If we are not faithful, he will still be faithful, because he cannot be false to himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

Why is that important to know? So you won't get cynical. Look around you. Aren't there more mouths than bread? Aren't there more wounds than physicians? Aren't there more who need the truth than those who tell it? Aren't there more churches asleep than churches afire?

So what do we do? Throw up our hands and walk away? Tell the world we can't help them? That's what the disciples wanted to do. Should we just give up on the church? That seemed to be the approach of the preacher I met on the plane.

No, we don't give up. We look up. We trust. We believe. And our optimism is not hollow. Christ has proven worthy. He has shown that he never fails, though there is nothing but failure in us.

I'll probably never see that proclaimer of pessimism again, but maybe you will. If you do, will you give him a message for me?

God is faithful even when his children are not.

That's what makes God, God.

Study Guide

CHAPTER ONE: THE GOD WHO LISTENS TO YOU

1. *She simply assessed the problem and gave it to Christ.*
 - What does it mean to “give a problem to Christ”? How do you do this in a practical sense?
2. *What causes us to think of prayer as the last option rather than the first?*
 - How would you answer Max’s question?
 - How quickly do you normally think of prayer when a problem arises? Are you satisfied with this? Why or why not?
3. *My daughters’ maturity and mobility are good and necessary, but I hope they never get to the point where they are too grown up to call their daddy?*
 - What does it mean for you personally to “trust”?
 - What is the relationship between acting in faith and waiting in prayer?

CHAPTER THREE: THE GOD WHO BELIEVES IN YOU

1. *God’s faithfulness has never depended on the faithfulness of his children. He is faithful even when we aren’t.*
 - Why does God’s faithfulness depend on our own faithfulness?
 - Describe a time in your life when this truth was highlighted.
2. *Though the answer to prayer is standing next to him, he doesn’t even pray.*
 - Why do you think the disciples failed to ask Jesus to do something about their situation?
 - In what way are we often like the disciples?
3. *I simply think God is greater than our weakness. In fact, I think it is our weakness that reveals how great God is?*
 - How does our weakness reveal how great God is?
 - How has God shown his greatness through your own weakness?
4. *If Jesus would have acted according to the faith of his disciples, the multitudes would have gone unfed. But he didn’t, and he doesn’t. God is true to us even when we forget him.*

- Why do you think god sometimes chooses to act according to our faith and sometimes not?
- Describe some times in your own life when God was true to you even when you perhaps forgot him.

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Edited by Karen Hill

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UpWords
P.O. Box 692170
San Antonio, Texas 78269-2170

1-800-822-9673

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