

## **In His Name**

*“And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” (John 14:13)*

As apparent fulfillment of this remarkable promise, the apostles of Jesus—notably Peter and Paul—work wondrous miracles in the name of their resurrected Lord. Shortly after Pentecost, for example, Peter heals a man lame since birth, saying, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6). As their reputation grows, the crowds would bring the sick to line the streets near where the apostles preached so that ever Peter’s shadow might fall on them and they would be healed (5:15).

Years later, in similar fashion, “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them” (Acts 19:11-12). When reading of these astonishing marvels, inevitably we wonder what it was that made these handkerchiefs—sweat rags, really, from Paul’s leather-working shop—and aprons so powerful. The answer, of course, lies not in the objects he used, but in the name he proclaimed. F.F. Bruce reminds us, “No intrinsic healing efficacy is ascribed to these things; the healing efficacy lay in the powerful name of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> The story this remarkable preface introduces proves his assertion right.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Sons of Sceva**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988): 367-368.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Luke explicitly acknowledges as much in Peter’s story, as he commands the lame man to walk in Jesus’ name. And even the story of his shadow quickly moves to a discussion of the proclamation of Jesus’ name (Acts 5:28ff.).

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Having seen the apostles work their “magic,” others soon try to imitate them, invoking the name of Jesus to drive out demons and heal the sick. Infamously, seven sons of Sceva—a magician who styles himself a “chief priest” in order to attract more customers,<sup>3</sup> it seems—try this incantation with a powerful demoniac. They prayed over the afflicted man, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out” (Acts 19:13). It does not produce the intended effect. Turning on them in a display of unholy power, the evil spirit responds, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” (verse 15). They are put to rout, and flee naked, bruised, and ashamed.

What had gone wrong? Had they not prayed in Jesus’ name? Jesus promises that whatever we ask in his name will be done. So why the spectacular failure?

Of course, these are easy questions to answer. The sons of Sceva were not really praying in Jesus’ name—their lives displayed neither submission nor reverence—but were rather using his name like a magic charm. But the name of Jesus, like the name of his Father, is not a trivial incantation to be used whenever we want the genie to pop out of his lamp. We snicker condescendingly when we read of the sons of Sceva because we know how little they have understood of the triune God whose name they invoke.

But before our snicker grows into outright chortling, perhaps we should give pause and consider our own lives. Were we to examine our prayer lives honestly, I suspect we would see far too much of the Scevian approach creeping in. Many of us, most of the time, pray hurried, human-centered, even selfish prayers. We do not wait on the Lord, seeking the Spirit’s guidance in prayer. Instead we remind God of the things we would like done that he still has not taken care of, signing off with the revealing elision “inJesus’nameamen.”

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<sup>3</sup> “Chief priest” would be a good advertisement, as many pagan magicians were attracted to the Jewish religion precisely because of the Name. God’s ineffable name, unspoken as it was by Jewish leaders, seemed a particularly powerful magic charm to outsiders. See Bruce, 368.

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Why do we end like this? What purpose could it possibly serve? Have we, like the sons of Sceva, fooled ourselves into thinking this makes our prayers more acceptable to God or powerful in this world? Praying in Jesus' name has become either empty religion—meaningless words we utter without understanding why—or dangerous paganism. Closing our prayers by invoking Jesus' name grants us false permission to offer God self-serving requests while still guaranteeing an answer. Thus, when we do not get the answer we receive, despite having checked our pagan boxes, we can blame God rather than examine ourselves to see what has prevented God from hearing and responding.

To remedy this incipient, insidious paganism, we must return to Scripture and reconsider what it means to pray in the sweet, precious, holy name of Jesus.

### **Whatever You Ask**

Jesus himself sets the conversation going, offering a remarkable fivefold promise in his Farewell Discourse. The strongest statement comes in John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." Because the promise seems so limitless—*whatever* you ask—we must begin to wonder if he really meant it. This seems all the more unlikely if only because we so rarely see clear answers to prayer in our lives. Does Jesus really do whatever we ask?

And yet the promise stands, and our Lord was not in the habit of deceiving his followers. Perhaps the issue comes from the three-word qualifying phrase: "in my name." The author of *The Kneeling Christian* strikes at the heart of the matter:

If, therefore, we ask and do not receive, it can only be that we are not fulfilling this condition. If then we are true disciples of His, if we are sincere, we shall take pains (infinite pains, if need be) to discover just what it means to ask in His name, and we shall not rest content until we have fulfilled that condition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *The Kneeling Christian*, 62.

If we ask and do not receive, the only possible reason is that we have not asked in Jesus' name. If this is a regular—or even rare—occurrence in our lives, we would move heaven and earth, I trust, until we laid hold of what we could do to change.

It is worth looking at an extended section from *The Kneeling Christian* because its author addresses the issue with care and concern:

Five times over our Lord repeats this simple condition, "In my name" (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23, 24, 26). Evidently something very important is here implied. It is more than a condition. It is also a promise, an encouragement, for our Lord's biddings are always His enablings. What, then, does it mean to ask in His name? We must know this at all costs, for it is the secret of all power in prayer. And it is possible to make a wrong use of those words. Our Lord said, "Many shall come in my name, saying, 'I am Christ,' and shall deceive many" (Matt. 24:5). He might well have said, "And many shall think they are praying to the Father in my name, while deceiving themselves."

Does it mean just adding the words, "and all this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ," at the end of our prayers?

Many apparently think that it does. But have you never heard, or offered, prayers full of self-will and selfishness that ended up in that way, "for Christ's sake, amen"?<sup>5</sup>

We do not wish to deceive ourselves, so we must take care to understand what it means to pray in Christ's name and for his sake—and then apply that understanding to our every supplication.

The negative example of the believers James addresses reminds us of how real the temptation is to pray in our flesh—self-serving, self-willing prayers—while claiming the name of Jesus. Caught up in petty quarrelling because of their selfish desires, they have not experienced the power of God unleashed in prayer. Why? "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3). The trouble with our prayers is not with our words, with adding or omitting some mystical formula, but with our corrupt, sinful hearts. We are the problem. If self is the issue, the Other is the solution.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 63.

## In My Name

Praying in Jesus' name suggests two related ideas. First, we must recognize that only those who are in Christ may pray in his name. The unregenerate cannot expect answers to prayers offered apart from the atoning sacrifice of the spotless Lamb. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us,

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place *by the blood of Jesus*, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (4:19-22)

The confidence we have in approaching God springs from our redemption by the blood of Jesus. While praying in Jesus' name surely means more than that, it cannot mean less.

Second, praying in his name implies praying in submission to his will and desires. To pray in his name is to pray with the thorough understanding of all that his name connotes. We have already seen the inseparable connection between God's name and his character. To pray in Jesus' name, then, is to pray in accordance with his character. What would the compassionate and gracious God desire in this moment? Let us seek that in prayer.

Thus, to pray in Jesus' name is to pray, as the Lord himself taught us, that his will would be done. By invoking his name, we invoke his will as well, and consciously submit ourselves to it—just as the Christ consciously submitted himself to his Father in Gethsemane. He sought not his will but God's, and we, when we pray in his name, do as he has done. John, the very evangelist who records the fivefold promise of prayer in Jesus' name, makes this explicit in his first epistle: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (5:14-15). This seems to be a verbatim repetition of Jesus' promise on the night of his betrayal, except that John replaces "in my name" with "according to his will." Is there any difference? Surely not.



While not difficult to understand, this proves trying in our personal prayer lives, for we do not know what the will of God is. I believe many of us would submit ourselves to God's will *if only* we could discern it. Thus, we depend absolutely on the *Word* and the *Spirit*.

As we read and study Scripture meditatively, we are driven to our knees in prayer. Grasping something of God's will for this world in his revelation, we seek that his will would be done here on earth—in our own lives, in the lives of those we love, in all people—as it is in heaven. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his devotional classic *Life Together*, speaks of how the Word then guides us in prayer:

We have already said that the most promising method of prayer is to allow oneself to be guided by the word of the Scripture, to pray on the basis of a word of Scripture. In this way we shall not become the victims of our own emptiness. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness and willingness to receive and appropriate the Word, and, what is more, to accept it in one's personal situation, particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations. . . . And we may be certain that our prayer will be heard, because it is a response to God's Word and promise. Because God's Word has found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, all prayers that we pray conforming to this Word are certainly heard and answered in Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The Word informs and guides, granting stronger assurance that what we have asked, we have asked in his name and according to his will.

When the Word directs our prayers, we find ourselves praying "according to the mind of God," as the great Puritan theologian John Owen put it. This happens when God's people "are *guided by the Spirit* to make requests for those things unto God which it is his will they should desire—which he knows to be good for them, useful and suitable to them, in the condition where they are."<sup>7</sup> We depend on the

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<sup>6</sup> *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954): 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007): 235. One of the surest ways to pray thus, Owen argues, is to pray according to the promises of God, as revealed in his Word. We do this by praying "in the promise"—that is, by recognizing that the promises are "yes and amen" in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20), and then asking according to the purpose or "end" of the promise. See pp. 235-236.

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Word to shape our prayers, but we concede that even our understanding of Scripture is corrupted by our finiteness and fallibility. So we must yield to the Spirit's direction too.<sup>8</sup>

When faced with the realities of everyday life, we soon come to the end of ourselves—not only in turning to prayer, but in realizing we cannot even pray, for we do not know what to ask. Heads bowed, teeth clenched, we search for words but find only raw emotion and sanctified passion. Paul well knew this, and provides us blessed hope in the midst of our frustration—the Spirit of God. He writes, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but *the Spirit himself intercedes for us* through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because *the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God*” (Romans 8:26-27). When we pray in the Spirit—that is, when the Spirit assumes control of our intercession and groans within us—we may be sure we are praying according to God's will, for God knows the mind of the Spirit, and the Spirit brings that intimacy and unity to the intercession. Thus, to pray in Jesus' name may well mean not praying at all, but yielding ourselves instead to the Spirit's wordless intercession through us. “To pray in Christ's name is therefore to be identified with Christ in our desires by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To pray in the Spirit, to pray according to the will of the Father, to pray in Christ's name, are identical expressions.”<sup>9</sup> In defining one, we have had to define all three, for prayer is as Trinitarian as the God to whom we pray.

So prayer in Jesus' name depends on the Word and the Spirit for guidance and direction, trusting not in the subject of prayer, but in its object. Casting the flesh aside, it casts itself on the mercy, revelation, and presence of the divine:

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Murray reminds us of the importance of keeping Word and Spirit united in prayer: “It is this union of the teaching of the word and Spirit that many do not understand, and so there is a twofold difficulty in knowing what God's will may be. Some seek the will of God in an inner feeling or conviction and would have the Spirit lead them without the Word. Others seek it in the Word without the living leading of the Holy Spirit. The two must be united: only in the Word, only in the Spirit, but in these most surely, can we know the will of God and learn to pray according to it” (*With Christ in the School of Prayer*, 78).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, 65.

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Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word and has nothing to do with vague, self-seeking vagaries. . . . This is what the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit prays in us and for us, that Christ prays for us, that we can pray aright to God only in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

To pray in Jesus' name, then, means to deny the self, turn to the Word, yield to the Spirit, and seek the will of another. But what is the Other's will?

### **That the Father May Be Glorified**

Praying in Jesus' name, according to the Father's will, in the Spirit will mean praying for the Father's glory, as our Lord himself points out: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, *so that the Father may be glorified* in the Son." This is the Other's will. As the great missionary to South Africa Andrew Murray says, "Every answer to prayer He gives will have this as its object. When there is no prospect of this object being obtained, He will not answer. It follows as a matter of course that with us, as with Jesus, this must be the essential element in our petitions. The glory of the Father must be the aim—the very soul and life—of our prayer."<sup>11</sup>

Here we begin to sense why powerless, ineffectual prayer commonly becomes the norm. The "essential element" of our petitions, zeal for the Father's glory, is lacking. We do not pray for the sake of his name, but rather for our own pleasures. We ask with wrong motives because we do not have a clear sense of the aim, the purpose, of our prayer.

Take as an example Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. He expresses his own desire at first, as we can and should do: "Take this cup from me." But he does not stop there, because he has a greater vision than his own will and desires. He consciously submits his will to the Father's because he seeks God's glory. What would have happened if Jesus had not continued on in his prayer? What if God had answered the first petition, to spare him the coming wrath? These are interesting, but ultimately

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<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008): 51.

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meaningless questions. God does not answer every prayer offered devotedly in the affirmative. To take the cup of God's wrath away from Jesus would not bring the Father glory; therefore, it was not according to the Father's will. Jesus recognizes as much, and—as an example of what it means to pray in his name and in the Spirit—he presses on, yielding his desires to the Father's perfect will. He does as we should do.

This radical reorientation in prayer has profound practical application. We are so used to seeking our own will in prayer—financial solvency, health, fertility—that we rarely pause to think what the Father's will might be. Having surveyed the circumstantial landscape, we choose what path seems best to us and then ask God to lead us down it. Having lost a job, we ask God to give us new gainful employment; growing sick, we ask for health; facing trial or temptation, we ask God to remove it. However, God may have redemptive purposes for all these—and so may choose to keep us in them (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9; James 1:2-3). We only consider our will—take this cup from me—and never the Father or his glory. In essence, we do not pray in Jesus' name, but in our own.

Of course, part of the difficulty we face is discerning what will bring God the most glory. Consider a family who learns that a faithful loved one has terminal cancer. Both unexplainable, miraculous healing of a terrible illness *and* a saint dying with faith, joy, and hope will bring God glory in the eyes of Christians and unbelievers. For which do we pray?

In situations like these especially, we follow Christ's example in Gethsemane. We make our desires known, but then seek the Father's will above our own. We also rely on the guidance and wordless prayers of the Spirit and the faithful intercession of the Son at the Father's right hand. What we do imperfectly they perfect in us. Undoubtedly we would seek the beloved's healing, in this example, but we do so recognizing the good and often inscrutable purposes of God the Father. Do we trust him enough to say, "Thy will be done," even in such circumstances? Prayer is an expression of faith, and

prayer for the Father's will, not our own—for the Father's glory, not our desires—demonstrates certain trust in his purposes.<sup>12</sup>

## Greater Things

Perhaps this discussion could also make some sense of the “greater things” Jesus declares we will do as his disciples. Just before offering the stunning promise—“I will do whatever you ask in my name”—he speaks even more impressive words: “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). Many have guessed at the meaning of this remarkable assurance, in part because a cursory reading seems like it would open a Pandora's box of potential heresies. Is this speaking of evangelism—something Jesus really did not do—as the salvation of a sinner is certainly the strongest display of God's wondrous power? Actually, what could even be greater than the things Jesus did, like raising Lazarus from the dead? Does he mean we will simply do it more often (and more of us), so that it is greater in

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<sup>12</sup> Some have argued that following Jesus' model here is actually a mark of faithlessness. Benny Hinn, for example, enjoins his readers to “never, ever, ever go to the Lord and say, ‘If it be thy will. . . .’ Don't allow such faith-destroying words to be spoken from your mouth. When you pray ‘if it by your will, Lord,’ faith will be destroyed” in *Rise and Be Healed!* (Orlando, FL: Celebration Publishers, 1991): 47-48, as quoted in Hank Hanegraaf, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997): 271. Of course, this is not only unbiblical, but utter foolishness (and probably heretical), especially since it would suggest that Jesus lacked faith—or that he, somehow, is a less-than-perfect example for us. Much of the issue stems from Hinn's—and others in the prosperity gospel movement—misunderstanding of the nature of faith. For them, faith is all about the subject, whether or not *we* have enough “faith” to move mountains; scripturally, however, what matters is the *object* of our faith, whether or not *he* is good and sovereign, and thus worthy of our absolute devotion. Matthew 17:20, which drives much of this wayward thinking, proves exemplary: while *we could* command mountains to move into the sea, the question is why *would we*? That is, what purpose would it serve in glorifying God? If it were to bring him fame and honor, he would answer; but because it unlikely would, so far no one has done as Jesus said. Indeed, the word here translated as “little faith” probably suggests *bad* faith, rather than a small amount. What makes it bad is that they are using the authority given them like a magic spell, not altogether unlike the sons of Sceva (and most prosperity preachers). What they need instead is true faith—like Jesus—trusting that God will do what is best and right and good in every situation. Mark 9:29 provides a good parallel, given the similar context of the disciples failing to cast out a demon: there, Jesus assures his disciples that prayer alone can accomplish what they desire. Undoubtedly the disciples had prayed to cast out the demon. What is missing, then, is a lifestyle of prayer—the expression of unrelenting trust in God to which we keep returning.

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terms of quantity if not quality? A focus on God-centered prayer might lead us out of this interpretive quagmire.

I suspect that most of our confusion stems from our overweening human-centeredness. When we hear the phrase “greater things,” our flesh creeps in and fills our proud minds with delusions of self-glorifying grandeur—foolish fancies, really. Many of us desire certain spiritual gifts—healing, miracles, tongues, prophecy—or to perform mighty works *not* because we want to glorify God, but because we want to exalt ourselves. I imagine few of us are even aware of how much flesh we have in our prayers. Undoubtedly this is why the sons of Sceva failed so spectacularly when trying to exorcise the demon: they sought their own honor and wealth, not the Lord’s glory. We must remember that Jesus promises we will do these greater things, surely the “whatever you ask in my name” of the next verse, *so that* God will be glorified. How will that affect our view of the greater things?

If our focus is on God’s glory—his kingdom coming, his will being done—then those “greater things” will be whatever most exalts and honors him. And we will pray thus. Do not misunderstand me: given the context, with Jesus speaking about the “works” he has been doing, the greater things must be miracles, supernatural displays of God’s loving power. But supernatural displays of God’s loving power are not always obviously so. Sometimes this involves raising the dead, healing the sick, stilling the storm—when all present identify the supernatural quality of the work. At other times, however, only those in the Spirit, connected to the Vine, will discern the Lord’s outstretched hand.

Consider the many conversations Jesus had with unsuspecting people, ripe for an encounter with God’s grace. In the narrative of his interactions with Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well, both narrators express the notion of divine necessity—that Jesus had to do as he was doing in order to submit to the Father’s will (Luke 19:5 and John 4:4). Both conversations lead to miraculous conversions and the spreading glory of God. Is this any less a demonstration of God’s power than our usual conception of miracles?

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I have a friend who committed to times of regular silence before the throne of grace, zealously pursuing the Spirit's guidance in every aspect of his life. For months he persevered in these times of conscious submission to the Father's will—eventually for two hours each day—but grew increasingly frustrated because he was not seeing the greater things. Until one day, while having breakfast with some men from his prayer group, he sensed the Spirit leading him to say to one of his friends, “You need to talk to those two guys at work.” He had no idea who these two men were, but he knew he had to say it. His friend appeared stunned—because he worked on an assembly line between two coarse unbelievers, openly antagonistic to the Christian faith. For months he had steadfastly refused to make his faith known for fear of what they might say or do. So he went to work the next day and shared his faith, and hearts were softened. My friend never experienced the overwhelmingly miraculous, despite his zealous pursuit of it, but he saw God move in power and love—and that is a great thing.

Are you experiencing power in prayer? Do you see many requests answered? Have you performed greater things recently? If not, it may be that you pray in the flesh and not the Spirit, in your own name and not Jesus'. “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives” (James 4:3). Like the sons of Sceva, we treat the name as a charm to get us what we want; or we say it ritualistically, expecting nothing in return. Perhaps this is so because we do not heed Paul's words to believers: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, *do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Colossians 3:17). If our lives are not lived in his name, for his sake, how will our prayers be offered thus?

We see thus that everything depends on our own relation to the name: the power it has on my life is the power it will have in my prayers. . . . To do all and to ask all in his name—these go together. . . . [W]e see what our relation to the name must be: when it is everything to me, it will obtain everything for me. If I let it have all I have, it will let me have all it has.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, 64. Here we see the connection between prayer and obedience, which makes sense, since both are the fruit of a robust faith in a gracious God.

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Let us bring not just our prayers, but our lives under his name, yielded to his glory. What greater things would await us were this true!

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