

HABIT FOUR

Pray According to God's Agenda

"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."

I John 5:14, 15

Direction is more important than speed. Regardless of the energy expended or speed achieved, if the direction is not right, we cannot reach our goal. If we listen, the direction for each day's decisions can come out of our times of prayer. In our prayer times, we are privileged to work through all the things that need to be done, both seeking God's direction and making petitions regarding appointments. Many days when the alarm goes off, I drag myself out of bed feeling there is nothing I can do that day. However, by the time I finish praying, I believe there is nothing I cannot do. The time I spend in prayer sets the tone for the day. After prayer, the rest of the day is merely an outworking of things previously handled at a spiritual level. Prayer is like the slow grind of the chain that pulls a roller coaster up the long, high track — the rest of the day is the

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adventure of the ride. Prayer is like booting up our computer. When the programs are all ready to go, work is much easier.

Speed is comparatively unimportant. I make progress if I head in the right direction, regardless of how slowly I work my way through the mail, e-mail, papers, reading, studying, classes, or appointments. God's agenda, therefore, is not only the needle on my compass during prayer but throughout the rest of the day. During and after prayer, it is He, not I, who is in charge of the agenda.

I learned this concept during the pastor's session of a youth camp in Canada in the summer of 1965. Since then, I have made it a serious matter to determine what God wanted, and pray accordingly. This includes not only the direction in which to pray but also the choice of the subject about which to pray.

The Sovereignty of God and Prayer

At summer camp, I learned about George Muller. He was the Englishman and legendary founder of orphanages who presented the operation's daily needs to God in prayer. Muller would spend a long time praying to understand the will of God. Then, he would pray a short time according to God's will to get the job done. That made a strong impression on me and has opened up possibilities far beyond what I could have imagined. I established my prayer habit soon after that. Every day since, I still want to know what God is up to and pray accordingly.

While Char and I lived in Beijing in the early 1990s, we determined that we would pray seriously and intentionally for the government of China. We chose to live in Beijing because, among other reasons, we wanted to pray effectively there in the capital city. In Beijing, national decisions affected a larger population than in any other capital of the world. One day, we went to Tiananmen Square in order to walk and pray our way around the Great Hall of the People on the west side of the square. This is the building where the Chinese National Congress meets and central government officials often receive foreign guests. As we walked and prayed our way around the Great Hall of the People, we tried to sense how the Lord was leading us to pray. We were ready to do spiritual battle against the unseen enemy. Instead, we ended up praising the Lord for what He was doing in China. In retrospect, I believe it was more important for us to do what was consistent with the unseen spiritual realities — in this case praising God — than to tear into

a battle motivated merely by our own perceptions of drama and warfare. Someone had interceded before us. Great battles had evidently been fought and won. We were ready to do spiritual warfare and we wanted to intercede. However, we felt it was more important to pray God's will than to proceed with the kind of prayer we thought China needed. We ended up praising God for His victories there.

A similar thing happened in the winter of our first year in China. We went to Qufu, where Confucius was born and buried and where a large Confucianism temple complex still stands. My heart had been drawn toward China during my Confucian family studies several years earlier. I was particularly moved by the plight of the women who the literature said were so mistreated in this system. The primary loyalty required towards parents and ancestors in families produced great difficulties between husbands and wives. (This is explained further in the first paragraphs of Chapter 8.) Once again, it was our intention to pray against the forces of darkness that had blinded the Chinese for centuries. Char and I each began to march around the interior of the walls surrounding the Confucian temple complex. We were ready to intercede, ready to "have at" the spiritual enemy in warfare prayer.

We each went in different directions praying and walking. No matter how I tried, I could not conjure up anything even close to heavy intercession or labor in a spiritual struggle against enemy spirits. Of course, I could have acted or pretended, but I had long since learned not to do that with God. For the duration of the entire "march," I just praised the Lord for what He was doing in China. Once again, it was more important to pray something that fit the spiritual reality than to pretend I knew better than God did about China's needs. Believers at a previous time, perhaps the millions of Chinese Christians in recent years, had been praying effectively. As a result, there had already been a spiritual change in China. Could this be why so many are coming to Christ throughout that land?

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God had a will and timing for each prayer. We needed to discover what God was doing in our years in China and pray accordingly. A previous generation had served God's purpose and won some significant victories that were needed then. In our

generation, we need to do the same. To win the most momentous victories, we need to understand God's agenda for the time and pray according. Sometimes we do the will of God — too long or in the wrong place. God has moved on to another phase, but we are still working and praying according to the "old" need. Perhaps we are praying about the right need, but that "need" is in another place — not where we are. We must ask ourselves, "What does God want to do here and now through me?" To learn that very important answer, we must rigorously work to yield the prayer agenda to Him.

In both of the illustrations above, I prayed according to God's direction, but I chose the subject about which I prayed. What about the times when Spirit-led prayer takes us not only in another direction, but also to a different subject altogether? Many times, we simply do not know what we should pray for; the Holy Spirit always knows. He can help us pray according to a higher, better, more glorious plan. This has happened to me numerous times. You may have had these experiences, too.

It is good to find a regular time and place where you can pray freely and unhindered in whatever way works best for you. Praying aloud helps me focus. I regularly pray in either our garage or a wooded area near our home. On Sunday morning, August 27, 2000, I was walking, praying, and worshipping God. I was ready to work my way through my regular routine of prayer subjects when I felt gradually more and more clearly being called to pray about something else. I continued to pray with the prompting of the Spirit for well into the second hour. It progressively became clear I was praying about the chapters you are now reading. When I got out of bed on the morning of August 27, I had no concept of this project. However, by the time we left the house to go to church that Sunday morning, I had the list of chapter titles basically written.

Praying according to the will of God is essential for increased effectiveness in prayer. However, there is still another dynamic involved. God allows an enormous freedom. It is possible to pray a wrong prayer and consequently get a "wrong" answer that is not good for us. The Bible teaches us to pray according to God's will. Several examples illustrate the danger of praying amiss. If it were not possible to receive wrong answers to wrong prayers, then the instruction to pray according to God's will becomes meaningless. If God canceled every prayer that was not His will, then we could pray carelessly, knowing that God would cancel the wrong prayers. However, this is not the case. We can and may pray amiss and suffer the consequences if we do.