

# Power

## Opening

Hymn “O Praise the Gracious Power” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 651) or “Take My Life, That I May Be” (*ELW* 685)

## Text

### READ EPHESIANS 3:14–21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

## Prayer

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, but always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 86)

## The Power of Prayer

In our first two sessions we learned about the importance of persisting and patiently waiting for God in prayer. In this final session we will seek to discover the power that is available to us as believers through the practice of prayer.

When I think of the word *power*, the first thing that often comes to mind is electricity, that invisible flow of energy or power which makes our lives easier. Even as you are reading this, you might be sitting near a fan or in an air-conditioned room, reading by a lamp, sipping a cup of tea whose water was heated on an electric stove.

My point is that electricity, while so necessary to our lives, is something we rarely think about until we do not have it. Like air and water, we tend to take electricity for granted. But we use electricity to do many jobs for us every day—from lighting, heating, and cooling our homes to powering our televisions, computers, washing machines, and countless other appliances and conveniences.

Of course, it is living within our North American context that makes it possible for us to have round-the-clock electrical service. In many rural, war-torn, and developing places and countries throughout the two-thirds world, electricity is either unavailable, or if it is available, may be so only sporadically at best.

Now imagine what life would be like if we couldn't plug in to a power source? Our sense of connection to others and the world would be severely limited and we might very well feel isolated and alone. Our ability to navigate through life is

to a great extent dependent on our connect-ability, our ability to stay continuously connected to our energy or power source so we can do what we need and want to do in life.

For Christians, prayer is one of our chief sources of power that enables us to connect to God. While worship is the main font from which God's baptismal grace and power flow to and through us, many of us only attend worship on Sundays, leaving six other days in which we need to connect to God through our Great High Priest, Jesus. Prayer is a way in which we make that connection or tap into God's power in Christ.

Both the context and the content of our prayers can be as varied as we are as individuals. The primary point is that we make the connection. It doesn't matter whether we're kneeling, standing, or driving; alone or in a group; praying spontaneously or through the *Lectio Divina*, a traditional way of praying meditatively with the Bible so that the Word of God can reach into our hearts and minds. The main issue is that we make the connection.

#### ► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do you have a favorite way of praying that you use more than others? Look at one of the settings of the liturgy in an *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Book of Worship*. How often are the words *pray* and *prayer* used within our liturgy? How would you describe the relationship between our liturgy and prayer?

#### Does “Plugging In” Make a Difference?

So often we wonder if our prayers are really heard and answered; we ponder whether our prayers truly work. When we ask these very human questions we are basically wondering about prayer's power or efficacy. Do my prayers make a difference at all—to God, to and for the one being prayed for, to and for me?

Yet the power of prayer is not dependent on the person praying; rather, it resides in the One who is being addressed in prayer. Time and time again, Scripture tells us that God hears and answers prayer. In Matthew 7:7–11, Jesus assures us that our prayers will be answered. He says,

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Even with Jesus' assurance that God does answer our prayers we wonder if we can we trust Jesus' promise. For sometimes we pray and do not get the answers we had hoped for. A marriage is strained and we pray for reconciliation only to have our sacred union end in divorce. We ask God to keep our son or daughter safe as they go off to war and instead they come home as amputees. How can we be confident that God is listening, especially when God's response to our prayers is not always what we expect?

The power of our prayers is not dependent on the person praying, the passion behind the prayer, or even the purpose of the prayer, for God answers prayers that are in accord with God's will. Sometimes God's answers are hard to discover and even harder for us to accept. But if we listen carefully, we will eventually discern what God is saying to us.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he taught them what we have come to know as “The Lord's Prayer.” The third petition of the Lord's Prayer says, “Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.” In his Small

Catechism, Martin Luther asks, “What does it mean when we pray that God’s will be done?” And his explanation is as potent now as it was when the catechism was first written. “In fact God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.”

A colleague of mine Pastor Barbara Berry-Bailey said it a different way. She wrote: “We want what we want, not what God wants for us. We pray ‘your will be done.’ We really mean: ‘Your will be done, my way.’ Although our prayer is answered, it doesn’t look exactly like what we had in mind.” God’s answers may not always be what we want to hear, but we can be confident that they will always be in our best interest.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Re-read Matthew 7:7–11. While Jesus says, “Ask and it will be given,” the reality is that God’s answers to our prayers may take several forms: “Yes. No. Wait.” Or “This is even better!” Share a time when God answered your prayers. How did you know your prayer was answered?

### For What Should We Pray and When?

If we believe that God hears and answers our prayers, even if in God’s own time and way, then what should we pray for and how often should we pray? Jesus taught us the importance of daily prayer. When he taught his disciples to pray, he told them to ask God for their daily needs.

Jesus also set an example of daily prayer by praying himself during all kinds of circumstances. He prayed at his baptism (Luke 3:21). He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16; Matthew 14:23). And of course, Jesus prayed as he faced his impending death. (Matthew 26:36–45, Luke 22:39–46; 23:34, 46).

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What is your prayer life like? Do you pray daily or multiple times throughout the day? Do you have a favorite place to

pray? Are there times you are more prone to pray than others? What are they?

Some people think that we should only take our most serious requests to God and leave the little things to our own devices. Others ponder the virtue of asking for such things as parking spaces or lottery winnings, questioning whether these requests are in accord with God’s will. But prayer is not magic. God is not some Santa Claus in the sky ready and willing to give us everything we write on our heavenly wish lists.

Some contemporary spiritual leaders would have us believe that prayer is as simple as attracting what we want through the positive energy we put out into the universe. The power of positive thinking is indeed biblical. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” But I repeat, prayer is not magic; it is mystery.

While we do not know exactly *how* prayer works, we do know *that* it works. When we faithfully come into the presence of the living God through prayer, it changes things. In our conversations with God, which comprise both speaking to God as well as listening to what God has to say to us, we often gain insight, clarity, peace, and hope.

Reinhold Neibuhr’s “Serenity Prayer,” with which many of us are familiar, captures this sentiment well:

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.”

God does indeed want us to earnestly come to God with our needs and hearts’ desires. And God’s help through the power of prayer is available for all kinds of requests and issues. Right before the verse in Philippians quoted earlier, St. Paul writes about prayer. He says in 4:6–7, “Do not worry about anything, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Not only does God give us peace, but God’s power working through us and available to us in prayer, enables us to do far more than all we might ask or imagine. The question is: Do we trust it?

Ten years ago, I was eager to support the ministries of those who were living with and dying from HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in the United States. I had met Bishop Ambrose Moyo of Zimbabwe and asked what he might do if he received some money to support HIV/AIDS work in his country. His response was immediate. He would help AIDS orphans.

Although I wasn’t a cyclist at the time, I had dear friends who were involved with the Boston-New York AIDS Ride the previous year and had raised a few thousand dollars to support those living with HIV/AIDS in these two large U.S. cities. I wondered what would happen if I were to do the ride myself and ask folks to give two gifts: one to support those in the United States and a second-mile gift to care for those living in Zimbabwe.

The response I received was overwhelming! The New Jersey Synod of the ELCA became fully supportive of the idea, encouraging congregations and individuals to support the ride. Sunday school children and congregations of those living in pover-

ty got involved, sharing their limited resources for the sake of those who had even less. By the time the ride occurred, we had raised more than \$16,000; \$5,000 of which went to AIDS centers in Boston and New York City and the remaining \$11,000 was transmitted to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ) for AIDS ministries.

In 1999, \$11,000 U.S. dollars was the equivalent of almost half a million dollars in Zimbabwe currency. And this all came about because of a simple conversation and a trust in God’s power to accomplish abundantly far more than all I could ask or imagine. The initiative was communal from start to finish. And God was glorified through the compassionate care of both the dying and the living.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

How have you seen God’s power at work through the prayers you have offered? Where have you experienced God’s activity in healing, guiding or changing life’s circumstances? How has that power been evident in your life?

### Closing

Prayer is such a powerful force that we will never be able to fully plumb its depth and breadth in our lives of faith. My prayer is that throughout these sessions you have gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of persisting in your prayer life, of being patient, and for your growing confidence that prayer does change things.

Let’s close these studies by singing a wonderful prayer by John L. Bell (*ELW* 814) “Take, Oh, Take Me As I Am.” As you sing this prayer, ask God to use all that you have learned during these sessions to help you be and become what God would have you be—a beloved, gifted child of God and disciple of our Savior Jesus Christ. 🌿

# Power

Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 2, 1990, after 27 years at Robben Island near Cape Town, South Africa. When the iconic freedom fighter came to the United States and visited New York City in June of that same year, 50,000 people gathered in Yankee Stadium to greet him. As he arrived, they repeatedly and enthusiastically shouted the very word he himself spoke when he stepped outside the prison gates: “Amandla!”

Some people had difficulty pronouncing the Zulu word for *power*. People yelled “A-Mandela” or “Awanda.” Some even called out “Amanda!” which prompted a confused police officer to ask a fellow officer, “Who is this Amanda, anyway?” For some, understanding the power of prayer can seem as confusing as trying to pronounce the Zulu word for power, *amandla*. Our task in this final Bible study session on prayer, however, is not so much to understand the power of prayer than it is to recognize and trust it.

## Further Preparation

If you have a copy of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, re-read the section on the Lord’s Prayer. You can find it on page 1160 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer petition-by-petition is both a wonderful teaching tool and a good devotional practice as you get ready for this session. One of the things that makes it so helpful is the down-to-earth way in which he reflects on this ancient prayer that Jesus taught us.

## Praying When We Feel Powerless

One of the issues that may arise as you lead this session is the inevitable question of what happens when we pray and God’s answer is delayed or perhaps even “No.” It’s important to remember that you don’t have to be the fix-it person. Rather try to understand yourself as one who facilitates the individual’s or group’s ability to listen to their own voices. Should such questions arise, count on the group’s wisdom too. It’s amazing sometimes how the well-timed words of a fellow believer can calm our fears and settle our hearts even when we still don’t have solutions to our problems.

## Feedback and Closing

Since this is the last session in this series, rather than doing a question form of evaluation, use the time to pray about ways in which the group has been challenged or has grown through these studies. Give thanks for the growth and the challenges and for one another. And be sure to offer your thanks for the privilege of leading the group. 🌿

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*Has your group used this study for a one-day retreat? Let us know how it went. Email a brief description of your retreat (with photos, if possible) to [lwt@elca.org](mailto:lwt@elca.org).*