

fearless
prayer

Craig Hazen



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover by Aesthetic Soup

Fearless Prayer

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-7379-3 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-7380-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

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Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26/VP-SK/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Awakening to the Words of Jesus

Over a decade ago I was sitting in my comfy Bible-reading chair immersed in the Gospel of John. I have a large family and I get up earlier than everyone else, so I normally get a bit of solitude in the morning to read the Bible and pray. This particular morning I was in chapter 15 reading something I must have read a few dozen times before. For some reason, this time one of the verses came alive to me, but not in the typical way people report having a Bible verse speak to them. Oh, it spoke to me all right. But the message that came to me was: “You don’t really believe this.”

The verse in question was John 15:7. It is a challenging statement that Jesus uttered in the middle of a talk to his

disciples often called the vine and the branches discourse. The verse says this: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

I think the monologue in my mind that morning was not very profound. It went something like,

*Huh, I wonder what that's all about?
That doesn't seem to be a real thing.
I don't treat it like it's real.
And I don't think I know anybody
who treats it like it's real.
If some do treat it like it's real, they're probably
part of that “name it and claim it” movement.
Maybe this is meant for the apostles themselves
or spiritual superstars like Billy Graham.
I'll bet you that people who do take it too
seriously are a little spiritually weird.
Hmm, it says we have to “remain.”
We're probably not doing that, whatever that is.*

Looking back on it, this important verse was, in my mind, dying the death of a thousand qualifications. I simply wasn't going to take it seriously at that point—even though these were words spoken by Jesus himself and recorded in the Bible that I deeply believe is the Word of God. My

functional approach was, “Hey, there is plenty in the Bible that makes more sense than this. So I’ll just stick with that stuff. Movin’ on!”

Well, the Holy Spirit had some different plans for me. He kept the issue about the true meaning of this verse alive in me to the point where I had to investigate it. And I couldn’t be more grateful for his intervention. I really had no idea how committed God is to answering our prayers and how thrilled he is when we ask. Studying this verse, and many more like it, has been a tremendously rewarding and enlightening time for me. And I am eager to share some of my findings with you.

TO REKINDLE A SUPERNATURAL MINDSET

My hope for this book is that it might help to rekindle a supernatural mindset in believers of every stripe so that we can put this amazing promise to work in our lives for the kingdom’s sake. Here is a truism: Life is difficult. Here is another truism: Life is doubly difficult when we seek to do important kingdom work. We need this promise to be fulfilled or we will be spinning our wheels far more than we should be. In verse 5 of the same passage, Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Of course *that we can* believe.

But I want to see if we can't come to terms with the flip side of verse 5, that is, with him we can do anything—which is a solid biblical teaching.

So, let's take the plunge and find out what the rest of God's Word, thoughtful scholars, and solid spiritual understanding say about the true meaning of John 15:7. Let's see if we can't sort out what gives us such deep hesitation in embracing this amazing promise. Let's see if we can't set aside the ideas, interpretations, and behaviors that keep us from fearless prayer and realizing the Lord's astonishing promise to us.

Does This Stuff Really Happen?

I had the rare opportunity to study some of the great world religious traditions in some depth when I did a PhD in religious studies at the University of California. Comparing my Christianity to the other major religions was an eye-opening experience. Some features of Christianity set it apart in rather dramatic fashion from other faiths.

One feature that made Christianity unique was the sheer volume of legitimate, documentable testimonies and traditions of answered prayer. In fact, I'm sure that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you can add to the unending collection of firsthand accounts.

I start off with four examples of answered prayer that all have something very important in common. As you read

them, I don't know that you will see the common thread immediately—good job if you do. But what these accounts have in common has the potential to revolutionize not just your prayer life, but also your ministry and your relationship with God as well.

The Lord himself encourages us to offer up fearless prayers. We worship and pray to a God who loves us very much and longs for us to bear wonderful spiritual fruit through him. In order to do that, he has promised to meet us and to provide for us in remarkable ways. And he has promised that if we abide in him and his words abide in us, that we can ask for anything and we shall have it.

CRYPTIC CONNECTION

I was finished giving my guest lectures at a university in the Midwest. They really kept me busy morning, noon, and night with speaking, meetings, and meals. I gave my final talk at noon and then headed for a small airport. I needed everything on the trip home to go well because I had a lecture scheduled for that night in Southern California, and then very important ministry meetings the next morning. A serious delay would really wreak havoc.

My first flight was to Atlanta on a small commuter jet. I

was going to connect in Atlanta and then on to Los Angeles. It was going to be a long day of travel. But it looked like it was going to be even longer because my first flight was late. We weren't going to board until over an hour beyond our scheduled departure time, which could cause me to miss my second, longer flight. (None of this is news to those of you who travel frequently.)

So we finally boarded the small jet. It was full and the seats were small and it was going to be a couple of hours of less-than-comfortable travel. I distinctly remember settling into my seat and praying that I would make the connection. Sometimes in prayer I make my case with God—as if he needs to hear my reasoning on the matter. But hey, that's what some of the key players in the Bible did too, so I'm in good company. I never pray with a lot of words, so my entire petition was something like, "God I really think you were instrumental in setting up what is happening in LA tonight and tomorrow. And I think it has potential to bear fruit for the kingdom. Hear this humble request: Get me there on time. Oh, and I also pray for a more comfortable seat for the next flight. Amen." I don't hesitate to throw in those extras because I know God loves me and likes to give me encouraging gifts once in a while.

My hope was that the small plane would make up some

time in the air so that I could make my connection. But as we approached a rainy Atlanta, I was constantly looking at my watch. It was going to be so close. The moment I could, I opened the airline app on my phone and discovered my next gate was way across the airport. It would take me fifteen minutes just to get from gate to gate. I was almost certainly not going to make it. Long-shot alternative plans were already starting to race through my mind.

When I got to the exit door of the plane, a woman wearing a dark suit was standing just outside the door. She had an electronic sign in her hand that said HAZEN on it. I said to her, "I'm Craig Hazen," and she immediately grabbed the suitcase out of my hand and said only, "Follow me." She then walked through a forbidden door right out of the boarding ramp. I hesitated for a moment because I didn't have a badge or a code or whatever is necessary to walk out onto an active tarmac at the busiest airport in the world.

Another woman in a dark suit met me on the platform just outside the door and opened an umbrella to hold over me as she escorted me down the stairs following the woman with my suitcase. I had no idea who they were. FBI? Secret Service? Very serious librarians looking for a book I hadn't returned? What? At the bottom of the stairs was a beautiful black Porsche Cayenne SUV. The woman with

my suitcase opened the back hatch and put my suitcase in. The other woman opened the door to the backseat for me, and I got in and buckled up. Both of them got in the front seats. Strangely I remember thinking that was a positive sign because they didn't feel the need to guard me in the backseat. The driver then tore out onto active airline taxiways heading across the airport. We even got a little air on one of the whoop-dee-dooos as we raced through highly restricted areas.

They finally pulled up alongside some stairs connected to the boarding ramp of a Boeing 757 parked at a gate. They leaped out of the SUV onto the tarmac. One grabbed my suitcase and the other opened an umbrella to cover me as they led me up the stairs. They walked me right through the outside door of the boarding ramp and into the 757. Once in, they turned left at the aisle right into the first-class cabin, put my suitcase in an awaiting space in the overhead bin, pointed to an aisle seat—the only seat left in first class, and maybe the only one left on the airplane. They then rushed off the plane, exiting just seconds before the aircraft doors were closed and secured.

Then I heard the first words since the initial “Follow me.” “Mr. Hazen, can I get you anything to drink before we depart?”

What just happened?

VAN TO HAND WARMTH

It can turn cold at night in Phoenix in the winter, and sometimes the homeless people are caught unprepared—no warm clothes, no warm blankets. James Taylor was a pastor at a small church in Phoenix that organized a simple service project to deliver blankets to people living on the street. They were able to purchase thirty-five new blankets to distribute. They prayed for blessing on their work and that the people who needed the blankets most would receive them. Pastor James was going to make the delivery.

James knew just where to go to find those in need and drove up to find a dozen or so people warming themselves by a trash-can fire. He offered them blankets right out of the window of his van. The first couple of new blanket owners seemed surprised and very grateful. James reached for another armful of blankets as several more hands quickly appeared through his open window. James was now handing out blankets as fast as he could grab them, and he was glad he had locked all the doors.

But then panic struck Pastor James. Not because he was afraid of the mob, but because he was afraid he did not have enough blankets for everyone who wanted one.

A small woman squeezed her way through to James's

window, but she wasn't reaching out to grab a blanket. Her arms were wrapped tightly around her torso trying to keep herself warm with only the paper-thin jacket she had on. James gave her a blanket, but it was the last one. Standing behind the woman was a tall man with a scraggly beard and desperation in his eyes. He asked, "May I have a blanket too?" James was brokenhearted to tell the man, "Brother, that was the last new blanket. But wait..." James thought he had a couple of older blankets, used and worn, hiding behind the seat. He looked back to see if he could grab one and saw two new blankets in their packaging.

James remembers, "As I picked them up, it dawned on me that those new ones hadn't been there before. I'd given them all out—I was sure of it." Another couple of hands appeared at his window, and again he turned to rummage for an old blanket, only to discover two more new ones. This happened several more times. He finally put a new blanket into the very last hand at his window.

"I started with thirty-five blankets and I gave out at least fifty," James said. As he pulled his van away from the scene, he heard people say, "God bless you, mister." And in awe at the love and power of God, he replied, "He already did!"¹

PRAYER LANGUAGE

In 1888 a courageous missionary couple, Rosalind and Jonathan Goforth, was appointed by the Canadian Presbyterian Church to open a new mission field in Henan Province, China. It was known at the time to be the part of China with the most intolerance toward foreigners.

Most of the Goforths' language learning was going to take place in the country. It was a huge challenge to learn a difficult language well enough to get by day to day. It was an even bigger challenge to learn it well enough to be an effective evangelist. Even though Jonathan Goforth gave the language his full attention for many hours every day, according to his wife's account, the language acquisition was going painfully slow.

Jonathan and a missionary colleague regularly went to a street chapel they had set up to practice preaching in Chinese to the people. Rosalind wrote, "But though Mr. Goforth had come to China almost a year before the other missionary, the people would ask the latter to speak instead of Mr. Goforth, saying they understood him better." It was a monumental struggle, and Jonathan seemed to be losing.

Not long after this, he admitted to his wife that he might not be cut out for this. "If the Lord does not give me some

very special help in this language, I fear I shall be a failure as a missionary.”

Only hours later Jonathan returned home from the chapel with sheer delight on his face. When his time had come to speak, words and phrases flowed like never before. Not only had he made himself understood, but many also appeared deeply moved by what he had to say. Some even came up to him afterward to talk about his message. This sudden and unexpected upturn in his language abilities was something he featured prominently in his diary entry for that day.

About two and a half months later, Jonathan received a letter from a student at Knox College, a Presbyterian school in Illinois. The letter focused on a prayer meeting some students had recently attended. At this meeting the students specifically prayed for the Goforths, and while they were praying, they felt God’s presence in unique and palpable ways, and their prayers seemed especially powerful. It had such an impact on the students that one of them decided to write Jonathan to see if he had noticed any special move of God in his life at that time. When Jonathan consulted his diary and compared it with the students’ time of prayer, it was an exact match. The quantum leap in language ability had been God’s response to some faithful prayer supporters on the home front.²

JAIL BREAK

An ancient historian named Luke recorded the following remarkable event.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Festival of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen.”

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying (Acts 12:1-12).