

# Prayer Guides

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## But I Have Prayed for You

### Praying Beyond Simple Fix-it Prayers

By Steve Hawthorne



Can you recall the last time someone told you that he or she was praying for you? No doubt

it was meant to reassure you. Telling people that you've prayed for them is a loving way of encouraging them or cheering them on.

Only once do we find Jesus telling someone that He had prayed for that person. And what He said about His prayer was not a reassuring platitude. Jesus was not offering up a simple fix-it prayer aimed to deal with obvious, right-now needs. Instead, His prayer focused on the precious value of God's purposes being accomplished, even in a maelstrom of evil.

## **Overriding Prayer**

You know the setting. It was the upper room. Jesus was wrapping up the final meal with His disciples. He'd already washed their feet and offered the broken bread and the cup of the new covenant. Jesus was trying to prepare them for the devastating things that would happen within hours. But His friends somehow didn't get it. They couldn't imagine the catastrophe that was coming.

Even though everyone was listening in, Jesus speaks directly to Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). This was not a warning or a threat. Jesus was not trying to coach Peter in ways to avoid tough circumstance or to evade opposition. It wasn't advance notice to help him prepare. There's no way to prepare to be threshed like grain by satanic evil powers. Jesus was showing the rationale and the hope of His prayer and God's mighty purpose in Peter's life.

Jesus uses some rather extreme language about Satan's intent that made it all but certain that disaster was about to befall them all. The word translated in English as "asked" is a forceful word that would better be translated as "demanded." It's clear that Satan had successfully obtained permission to wreak havoc. We shouldn't speculate on the details, but somehow Satan argued a case in the courts of heaven and came

away with an authorization to do some damage. The image of sifting means that whatever can be ransacked, dismantled, and torn to pieces will be. The “you” is plural. Satan was going to demolish the entire fledgling community. But one by one, he would also shred their very souls.

And then came the words, “But I have prayed for you.” This time the word for “you” is singular. Jesus narrowed His prayer just for Peter. Imagine Jesus looking you in the eye and saying those words, “But I have prayed for you.” What Jesus prayed shows that He was focused on what mattered to one person, but also the greater purposes of God. He prayed “that your faith may not fail.” This simple prayer was attached to a larger purpose: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Jesus’ prayer may surprise you. Because Satan was involved, some would expect Jesus to pray “against” the enemy. But instead of undoing Satan’s plans or canceling his assignment or binding the enemy or breaking off the curse, or . . . you name it, Jesus simply prayed for something greater that would override, overcome, and overwhelm whatever Satan had plotted. It was a counter-suit in the courts of heaven.

This isn’t the only way to pray, of course. But it may be the simplest way to pray. What matters most about Jesus’ praying was not that He knew the schemes of the enemy. What matters most was that He was praying toward the fulfillment of God’s purpose.

## **What Jesus Prayed**

Consider how Jesus’ prayer was focused beyond the crisis toward the fulfillment of God’s purpose. There are three parts to this prayer. Let’s consider them in reverse order to better see what Jesus was envisioning.

Life purpose in God’s greater purpose. The ultimate outcome

was that Peter could be told, with prophetic confidence, to “strengthen your brothers.” Much earlier, Jesus had told Peter that the name Peter, which means “rock,” had something to do with his role in what Jesus would do to build the church. Peter’s faith in Jesus would somehow anchor the entire church on the rock-solid reality of Jesus.

God had purposed that Peter would be a foundation man—a fixture, a stable, resilient strength for many others. Thus, Jesus telling Peter to strengthen his brothers wasn’t just a nice idea. Being a strength for others was Peter’s life purpose, which mattered tremendously in God’s global purpose.

Stepping into fullness of purpose. “And when you have turned . . .” What did Jesus mean by turning? “Turning” is a simple word that means several things. It’s a word that can refer to conversion. But an initial decision to follow Jesus is not what this is about. Turning describes Peter’s choice to pivot away from living for himself and to step into a costly way of following Jesus into the mission God had for Peter. It’s not something Jesus could do for Peter. He would have to choose.

I think this turning took place weeks later as recorded in John 21:15-22. To follow Jesus, to truly love Him, would mean Peter laying down his life for Jesus’ sheep. Stepping into God’s purpose means being changed. Faith relationship for purpose. The simple core of the prayer was “that your faith may not fail.” Within hours Peter would fail in remarkable ways. But his trust in God would not fail. Later Peter would write that faith could come out like gold, “even though refined by fire” (1 Peter 1:7). He knew that Satan could be resisted, but only if someone could stand “firm in the faith.” If faith held firm, then sufferings would not end up as a random acts of evil, but instead be transformed into acts of suffering with Christ, fulfilled along with “your brothers throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:9).

This is a clear reference to Jesus’ prayer. Peter, even though

unfaithful, would be sufficiently full of faith so that he would end up strengthening his brothers.

## **How We Can Pray Like Jesus**

During what was obviously a crisis moment in Peter's life, Jesus prayed a greater prayer that can teach us how to pray beyond crisis in our own friends' lives.

Pray for people instead of merely praying about problems. When we only pray for circumstances to change, we can overlook praying for people themselves to change. Of course, it's good to pray about obvious issues and needs. Focus your hope on what God is doing to make that person like Jesus.

I try to imagine God smiling as He looks on the person I'm praying for. And then I think about what God finds precious in his or her future. Invariably, in the light of God's love and the promises of God's Word, I can get a glimpse of who this person may become.

Pray for people instead of against the enemy. There's a time and place to directly contend with dark powers. But whatever you may pray for God to do against the enemy, do not fail to pray for people. Consider yourself to be a court-appointed attorney, arguing cases in God's court on behalf of others. Enter God's courtroom with confidence that whatever the accusations or plans of the enemy may be, God's purposes are greater. Ask God to do something that overrules by going beyond and above the schemes of evil powers.

Pray before and beyond crisis. You've got to pray before a crisis in order to pray beyond it. There may be no better way to love someone than to gaze into his or her destiny, to prize what he or she will become in God, and to cry out with jealousy for it all to come forth. Be vigilant. The Spirit of God loves to give you cues about what to pray, but there's a lot to be said for simply paying attention to the story that's

unfolding. Anticipate what good things are on the way.

Pray with confidence in the midst of contingency. By “contingency” I mean that things could go either way. God was not going to force Peter to love and obey Him. Peter would have to pass the test by choosing to step into the fullness of God’s purpose. Jesus said “when you have turned”; not “if you turn.” So Jesus was confident that Peter eventually would make that turn toward God’s purpose.

But how long would it be? Jesus had focused His vision on what God had purposed for Peter. And you can do the same, for family and friends, as well as cities and peoples. Envision what God desires by reading what He’s promised and accomplished in the Bible. Thanking God for what He’s already done will clear your vision to see the unique life story that’s unfolding for His glory.

May you soon say with faith and assurance to those around you: “But I have prayed for you.”

**STEVE HAWTHORNE** is the director of Waymakers in Austin, TX. He is the co-author of Prayerwalking and the author of the Seek God for the City prayer guides.

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# Partnering with a Miracle-working God

## In God’s Timing, in God’s Way

## By Sherrie Porterfield



Ema McKinley has real zeal for living. She was known for participating in downhill skiing, martial arts, and even skydiving—while holding down three jobs. But that was before April 1993, when a work accident changed Ema's life.

As an employee of a large retail store in Rochester, MN, Ema and other co-workers were scurrying around to get ready for a visit from a corporate headquarters representative. Alone in a storage loft, Ema was stacking boxes 33 feet up, when she fainted from the heat. She fell and hit her head, losing consciousness. As she fell, her foot caught in some shelving, and she hung upside-down for two-and-a-half hours before someone discovered her.

This trauma to her body caused severe long-lasting injuries. Immediately, Ema lost 60 percent of her hearing. She became wheelchair bound, her spine so twisted she could not even sit upright. Doctors at the Mayo Clinic said her spine would never straighten. And, they predicted, "She will never get out of that wheelchair."



## A Heart to Help and Pray

Ema had always had a heart for the disabled, even before she experienced her own traumatic disability. One of her jobs prior to her accident was with the Rochester Park and Rec department in their adaptive recreation program. She says, "The only thing of value when our life on this earth ends is how we helped other people." She believes that her life is about showing the love of Christ and modeling the life of Jesus, who said, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29).

She has also been a strong pray-er on behalf of others and her church. Ema has not been able to attend her home church (Autumn Ridge in Rochester) in recent years because of her heightened sensitivities and pain, but she is still faithful in prayer. This is one way God allows her to remain a part of the church.

She specifically prayed during the church's building project. "I used to come in a van and pray in the parking lot for Autumn Ridge as it was being built," she says. She sat in the driveway and prayed daily for the safety of the workers. She prayed, too, that it would be a place where members of the community would come to know Christ. "I prayed that each nail pounded represented a new soul for God."

Ema regularly prays for the staff as well as for members of the congregation. She prays over each event and person mentioned in the church's weekly publications. Ema listens online to worship services at the church website. She also lays hands on the name of each staff member listed there, praying for them individually, and as a group, for God's direction. When the mail brings greeting cards from the congregation, she prays for those who send them as she opens the envelopes one by one. "Every event, every card that comes to me, I pray over it. It is my honor and privilege to pray. It always has been."

## Years of Pain and Exhaustion

Yet the challenges have been great. Not only was Ema wheelchair bound, but she was unable to even lie in bed at night because of her twisted spine. Restorative sleep was rare. Ema would be awake in her wheelchair for 60 to 70 hours at a time, then fall exhausted into sleep for three to four hours, only to repeat the cycle again. But in the midst of her struggles, Ema says, "God [has been] my partner through it all. The bigger the problem, the more my faith grew."

In response to her injury she also developed reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD) with symptoms including intense burning pain, skin sensitivity, and swelling. For Ema, the pain was excruciating. Among the sea of drugs she took, Ema was prescribed a daily dose of 2000 mg of morphine in an attempt to manage the pain. Doctors said levels that high should have affected her mind and other organs years ago. Although there have been some side effects, thankfully her mind and organs have been spared.

Ema's only food intake has been liquids and protein drinks, due to problems with her digestive tract. Headaches have been constant. At one point she experienced a leg infection so severe that doctors wanted to amputate her leg. Ema refused. She knew God was in control, not the doctors. She committed the situation to Him, at peace that God would either take her to heaven or heal her leg. Gradually He healed her leg.

Several times Ema came close to death, but each time God brought her through. All of Ema's doctors and caregivers know that she loves God and has a deep faith. Remarkably, Ema has not experienced anger or bitterness. She praises God in spite of it all. "At the end of the day," she says, "my goal is that I put a smile on God's face."

Many times, throughout Ema's suffering, people prayed for her

complete healing. The board of elders from her church laid hands on Ema and prayed for her. People from churches in different states prayed for her healing. Ema continued to thank God for that healing, though she hadn't yet received it.

Ema recalls a specific time when God came to her and said, "Ema, it's going to be OK." In faith, Ema knew that her healing would come, whether it was here on earth, or when ushered into heaven. According to Ema, "If God said it, it was going to happen. Whether people prayed for weeks, months, [or] years, I knew that healing would be in God's own timing." So she persevered in faith and was not disappointed as she waited in her wheelchair.

## **Her Christmas Miracle**

On Christmas Eve 2011, around 1:00 a.m., Ema was alone in her festively decorated townhouse working at her computer. And she was anticipating with joy the next day when her two sons and their families would arrive to celebrate the birthday of the Savior.

Rolling herself across the room, Ema tried to maneuver her wheelchair to reach something. But her chair tipped over. Instantly, with the impact from the fall, searing pain overtook her highly sensitive body. It was almost more than she could bear. There she lay, alone and helpless. She cried out for help but knew it was unlikely anyone would hear her. Her neighbors who shared a wall with her were out of town for the holidays.

For more than eight hours Ema lay crumpled on the floor, screaming in excruciating pain and crying out to God. Though she had been through many difficult experiences in the previous 19 years, this time she thought she was going to die. "I felt that this was the way God was going to take me home," she said. Yet she continued to trust Him.

After hours of lying on her left side (which is the most affected by RSD), Ema couldn't see her left foot. But suddenly something amazing began to overtake her. "I felt God entering my body," she says. "I felt God straightening out my foot."

Her head was resting on her arm and she had a good view of her hand, which had been clenched for years. "I felt my hand open up. I could see the raw flesh being changed to healed flesh. I thought, God is in my house!" Then He began working on her neck and spine. Though her spine had been crooked for 19 years, suddenly Ema flipped over and lay flat on her back on the floor.

Ema watched in wonderment as a bright, white robe appeared. It was Jesus. "He knelt down on one knee and asked for my hand," she says. "I reached out to Him. Then He took both hands and pulled me up. I knew at that point that God wanted me to walk."

Shaking and crying uncontrollably, Ema stood up straight and began to slowly walk, stumbling with the use of muscles that had not functioned for nearly two decades. "I walked into my bedroom and lay straight down on my bed for the first time in 19 years!" She lay there stunned at what had just happened.

"God did some last testing during those eight hours on the floor," she says. "He saw that I was still deeply committed to Him, so He knew He could trust me with this big miracle. Sometimes God allows us to get to our worst point before He gives us His best."

## **Her Christmas Surprise**

Eager to share her excitement at this incredible evidence of God's healing hand, Ema walked her wheelchair out to the door where her family would enter to celebrate Christmas. She

wanted them to see the empty chair when they came in—a certain surprise!

When her family opened the door later that morning, sure enough, they saw the empty wheelchair and did not know what to think. Then Ema came walking down the hall toward them.

“It was surreal,” says her son Jason. “With just the Christmas lights on, I didn’t know if I was seeing a ghost, or dreaming, or what!”

Needless to say, the family was shocked and thrilled at the sight of their mom and grandma standing up straight and walking. Ema has shocked and delighted all her friends and family as she has met them face to face following her Christmas miracle.

Doctors are amazed. When Ema first saw her physician, Dr. Bell, she surprised him by pushing back the curtains.

“Tell me Ema has a twin!” Dr. Bell exclaimed. “This was not Mayo Clinic,” he says of the restored Ema. “This was an act of God.”

Doctors recommended that Ema receive physical therapy to regain strength and greater ability to make use of her restored body. She has lost weight now that she can be more active, and her strength in long-dormant muscles continues to increase.

## **God's Glory Spreads**

Once called “the crooked lady in the wheelchair with the broken body,” Ema is now known as “the lady with the Christmas miracle.”

Ema looks forward to seeing how God will use her story. Her story is spreading quickly in her hometown and beyond. She

gives all the glory to Him. “It’s all about Him and who He is, how much He loves His children, and what He can do for them,” she says.

“Why wouldn’t you want to partner up with this miracle-working God? There’s nothing too big for Him!”

**SHERRIE PORTERFIELD** is a member of Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN, and worked full time on staff in communications. She is now a freelance editor and graphic designer for the church’s monthly ARC Magazine, where a version of this article was first published.

**Photo caption:** Author Sherrie Porterfield remembers Ema as “the crooked lady in the wheelchair” in years past (left photo). Upon arriving at Ema’s home for an interview, Sherrie was delighted to see Ema open the door and greet her—“all 5’ 9” of her, standing straight and tall!” (right photo).

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