

“The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 5)

Acts 12.1-17; Daniel 6.3-23; Psalm 91.9-12

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A couple weeks ago I said that *prayer is an attempt to influence what is happening in the spiritual realm*. There's a situation, and you want the situation to be *different*, and so you pray. You invoke the name of God. You ask God to change the situation. You ask God to *act*. You're trying to influence what's happening in the *spiritual* realm, in order to effect a change in the *physical* realm.

Case in point: the apostle Peter has been arrested and thrown in prison. King Herod is going to put him on trial. He's already killed James, the brother of John. If Peter is found guilty, he's likely to end up dead too. So the church was “earnestly praying” for him. Praying that God would *act, do something, change the situation*. And it would seem that their prayers were *wildly* successful. Peter, under heavy guard and bound with two chains, has a vision – that is, he *thinks* it's a vision –of an angel appearing in his cell, the chains falling off his wrists, him walking out of his cell, the iron gate to the city opening of its own accord, Peter escaping from Herod's clutches – and then Peter realizes, it wasn't just a vision, it *really happened*, an angel came to his rescue. He shows up at the house where his friends have gathered, and the woman who answers the door is so surprised to see him that she leaves him standing on the doorstep! What, did she think that their prayers weren't *really* going to do any good? Maybe even some of those early Christians didn't realize what a powerful effect their prayers could have....

Or, take this example: the young Jewish man named Daniel has become the most trusted advisor to the Persian King. All the other administrators in the kingdom are jealous of Daniel, and cunningly devise a trap: a law, signed by the king's own hand, forbidding the worship of any being other than Darius himself. Daniel – faithful, loyal, and true to his god – continues his private practice of praying three times every day, giving thanks to God and asking for God's help. He is caught in the act of prayer and the king is forced to abide by his own decree. Daniel is thrown into a den of lions. The king frets all night, and is overjoyed in the morning to discover Daniel is alive and unharmed. Daniel explains: God sent an angel, and the angel shut the mouths of the lions, saving Daniel from certain death.

So the Christians prayed for Peter ... and an angel came to his rescue. Daniel had prayed for himself ... and an angel came to rescue him. Can our prayers – yours or mine – result in *angels*?!?

“Well, those are just *stories*,” some people might say. Okay, so what are they doing in the *Bible*? What is *God* trying to *tell us* in these stories? “Oh,” others might say, “those kind of things happened

back then, but they don't happen *now*." Says who? Where does it say in scripture that the prayers of the faithful are not as powerful *now* as they were *then*? That God won't act *now* the way he did *then*?

"If you say, 'The Lord is my refuge,'" says Psalm 91, "and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." Were those words just for the people *back then*? Could they be for *us too*? Would God actually send angels *here*, to protect *us*? Would he do that in response to *prayer*?

Now, we are rational Christians. We value the life of the mind. And when we come to something like angels, sometimes, some of us stumble. "Oh, there has to be some kind of *rational* explanation for things like *angels*." Which implies that the existence of angels is not *rational*. There was a famous German theologian in the middle of the 20th century, Rudolf Bultmann by name, who wrote a very influential book called *The New Testament and Mythology*. In the book, he argued that we need to interpret all the mythological elements in the New Testament existentially. That is to say, every reference to angels, demons, miracles, spirits, the pre-existence of Christ, even the resurrection of Christ, needs to be interpreted in terms of what it *signifies about God*. He said, "We cannot use electric lights and radios and ... avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament." He said the New Testament contained a "mythical world picture," and the only way modern people could accept it would be if all those "mythical" elements were stripped away. No angels, no demons, no miracles, nothing that offends our "rational" mind. His intentions were good – he was trying to make the Christian faith more accessible to people who had trouble accepting the angels or demons or miracles. And he had an *enormous* impact, both in Germany and here in the United States; he influenced several generations of biblical scholars and pastors. He made it possible – rightly or wrongly – for people to believe in Jesus without believing in supernatural events like the virgin birth, or supernatural beings like angels. But was he *right*?

And if he *was* ... why is it that so many *millions* of people in the generations since Bultmann's book was published have *gravitated* to stories involving what might be called *supernatural* elements?

1955: *The Lord of the Rings*. Powerful wizards; magical rings that give their users supernatural abilities; in the background, a whole mythology involving a god and angels and a creation gone awry. An enormously popular set of books that gave birth to a fantasy industry that continues to this day.

1977: *Star Wars*. Huge box-office sensation; massive impact on the film industry, the science fiction genre, and our entire culture. At its core it's a simple story about good vs. evil, but with a twist – there's an "energy field" called "the Force" that "creates us and sustains us, and binds the galaxy together," and that gives people like Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader tremendous supernatural powers.

1997: *Harry Potter*. Wizards and witches, *for real*; pre-teens who develop special powers; a whole *school* dedicated to raising and training these young students, who learn how to cast spells like *accio* (which fetches things) and *lumos* (which gives light) and *expelliarmus* (which disarms your opponent) ... and learn about terrible curses like *avada kedavra* (which kills people), and evil wizards like Lord Voldemort. Another huge fan favorite, capturing the imagination of millions; the series has been

translated into 80 languages and is *the* most best-selling book series in history.

So I want to know: is it true that “modern people” can’t accept a “mythical world picture”? If we love stories involving *magical items* and *mystical forces* and *powerful wizards* – and all the evidence says that we *do* – why do some of us have such a hard time believing in *angels*? If we pretend to *cast spells* and *use the Force* with great passion and vigor, why do we have such a hard time with *prayer*?

There’s a trading card game, extremely popular among teenage boys and young men, called *Magic: The Gathering*. You have a stack of cards; your opponent has a stack of cards; the idea is that you are two powerful spellcasters having a duel, and you each have a set of spells at your disposal. You can hit your opponent directly with things like lightning bolts, or you can summon angels, demons, mermaids, or even *gods* to fight on your behalf. Here is one of the gods – this is one of three that *when it dies, it comes back from the dead*. You play it, your opponent kills it; on your next turn, *it comes back to life again*. Does *that* sound familiar?!? Millions of people play this game around the world, anywhere from their kitchen table with some friends to the annual Magic World Championship, where the winner walks away with a hundred thousand dollars in prize money – and what’s the appeal of the game? Is it just the strategy? Does some of it have to do with the *flavor*? *Angels* and *gods* and *casting spells*?

Timmy recently introduced me to a series of books written by Brandon Sanderson, a *New York Times* bestselling fantasy writer. There are magical items, a young man who starts to develop supernatural powers, legends about great beings from long ago called the “Knights Radiant” who seem to me to bear a lot of similarities to *angels* ...

... do you see what I’m getting at? Our society is *saturated* with books, movies, and games that involve supernatural elements, like angels. These are *tremendously* popular, and *huge* money-makers. We *thrive* on this stuff. It’s as if, at some level, we *want to believe* in a world where *such things exist*.

What if we live in a world where such things *do* exist? What if God is using people like J.R.R. Tolkien and George Lucas and J. K. Rowling and Richard Garfield and Brandon Sanderson to help us to *wake up to the possibility* that our imaginations don’t have to be *limited* by modernistic thinking that tries to *reduce* the supernatural to something that can be explained by *reason*? What if there really is such a thing as *angels*? What if there is a power to *prayer* that is like *casting a spell* or *using the Force*?

You remember that moment, in the original *Star Wars* movie, near the end; Luke Skywalker is flying his X-Wing fighter down that trench, trying to fire a shot that will destroy the Death Star and save the galaxy ... and he hears the voice of his mentor Obi-Wan: “Use the Force, Luke ... Let go, Luke.” He hesitates. Should he rely on his training, his technology? Or ... something *else*? He hears Obi-Wan’s voice again: “Luke, trust me.” Luke turns off his targeting computer – and blasts the Death Star to smithereens. We clap and cheer. Why? Because the good guys won? Because we believe in the Force? Because ... *because we want to believe that there really are supernatural forces in the universe*?

What if there are? What if *prayer* is like *casting a spell* or *using the Force*? What if there really are supernatural powers at our disposal? What if ... what if God really *can* send *angels* to our defense?

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