



BECOMING A PEOPLE OF HOPE
IN A DISCOURAGING WORLD

PAUL E. MILLER

FOREWORD BY DANE C. ORTLUND

“Reading Paul Miller’s *A Praying Church* fresh filled my heart with the power of Oswald Chambers’s insight: ‘Prayer does not equip us for greater works—prayer is the greater work.’ I was challenged and inspired to reconsider the centrality of prayer for my personal prayer life and for the corporate ministry of my church so that the Spirit of Jesus would pervade and empower all.”

Bryan Chapell, pastor; author, *Christ-Centered Preaching* and *Christ-Centered Worship*

“Paul Miller’s *J-Curve* is the best resource I know on spiritual formation. Now I’ll be recommending *A Praying Church* as the best resource I know on praying in Christian community. It is biblical, practical, and honest. Because it is rooted in the gospel, it invites us to real change without making us feel discouraged that the change is needed. Invite others to read this book with you and respond together to the Spirit’s leading; I believe the church will experience deep renewal as a result.”

Jimmy Agan, Senior Pastor, Intown Community Church,
Atlanta, Georgia

“Paul Miller’s book reached me. I was changed. Having been a pastor for thirty-six years, I say without overstatement: it is the most important book on Christian ministry I have ever read.”

Steve Estes, author, *A Better December*; coauthor, *When God Weeps*

“For the past several years, our church has pursued becoming a ‘praying church,’ and Paul Miller’s *A Praying Life* has been our staple text. The focus of that book, however, was on our personal prayer lives, so I’m excited to see Miller take those insights and show us how to integrate them into the corporate body. Jesus commanded his church to be a house of prayer. Miller’s book helps us to fulfill that! This is at the top of our church’s agenda for the next decade, and I pray it will be at the top of yours as well!”

J. D. Greear, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; author, *Just Ask*

“This book presents a strong challenge to the contemporary church to rethink her attitudes toward and practices of community prayer. I thought I knew a thing or two about praying together. But I found myself being challenged and learning more about the practice of prayer in my own life and ministry team.”

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka;
author, *Discipling in a Multicultural World*

“*A Praying Church* is a ‘page turner’—richly biblical, wonderfully practical, and chock-full of engaging testimonies and helpful illustrations. It is convicting but filled with pastoral love and concern. Paul Miller writes brother to brother, leader to leader. Without boasting, Miller clearly practices what he preaches. Several chapters are worth the price of the book. My favorite is the chapter on fasting and prayer.”

John F. Smed, Director, Prayer Current; author, *Prayer Revolution: Rebuilding Church and City through Prayer*

“Churches that are true change agents in their communities are congregations for whom prayer is a way of life. My good friend Paul Miller has written a thoughtful and challenging appeal in *A Praying Church*. Read this wonderful book, and you’ll discover how to partner with the Spirit of Jesus in transforming your community for the kingdom of Christ!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder, Joni and Friends International
Disability Center

“Paul Miller is on a quest to return prayer to its rightful central place in everyday life and ministry. Read this book to be challenged to pray. Study it for tips on how to make prayer second nature. Ponder it for a refresher on the Bible’s testimony to prayer, on prayer in countless settings today, and on myriad impediments to prayer. Most of all, rediscover how Christ and the Spirit equip the saints for the work of the ministry—through prayer. This is an enormously informative and encouraging book.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant
Theological Seminary

A Praying Church

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A Praying Church

Becoming a People of Hope in a Discouraging World

Paul E. Miller

Foreword by Dane C. Ortlund

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*To Bob Allums,
a Barnabas, whose gentle leadership and kind laughter
have been catalysts for a million prayer stories*

and

*To faithful friends in Polk County, Florida,
whose generosity made this book possible*

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Foreword

THE BATTLE TO PRAY IS not mainly a battle against prayerlessness but a battle against discouragement, cynicism, and unbelief.

If this is true of our individual lives—and it is, including mine—how much more of the life of our local churches. This magnificent book is a winsome and utterly compelling rallying cry to step out of the smiling unbelief infecting and dampening our churches, where prayer is one dutiful activity among many. The wondrous alternative that Paul Miller gives us, according to Scripture, is to move prayer into the nuclear core of all we do—which is to say, to do church *as if God is there*.

This book defies neat categorization. On the one hand, it takes us deep into the inner workings of Pauline theology and how the New Testament speaks of the Spirit and the dawning of the new age in Christ's resurrection. On the other hand, this book is supremely earthy and practical, using real-life examples and stories of how prayer has worked (and hasn't) in the author's own life and ministry.

A Praying Church is chock-full of deeply probing insights into what prayer is and how it sets aglow an entire church community. For example:

What I pray over lasts, and what I don't pray over doesn't last.

I've seen what happens when the Spirit of Jesus inhabits a community—everything starts to sparkle.

Paul never mentions “the gift of prayer.” Why? Because there is no gift of breathing.

If you grasp the simplicity of *prayer* → *Spirit* → *Jesus* → *wonder*, then praying together won't be just another burden; it will be the activity that transforms all your burdens.

Insights like these abound. Taking the book as a whole, however, here's the real genius of it: Paul Miller brings prayer into the messy reality of our actual lives. Not the cleaned-up lives we're all walking around presenting to others, but the lives we're really living, with all their failures and discouragements and tears and numbness and fatigue. In other words, Paul understands prayer in a gospel way—just as the gospel is power for us at the precise place of our need, so too prayer is deep power and help at the very place where we have need and weakness. It's the whole point.

And what this book has managed to do is to take that gospel reality of prayer—the way prayer is for us *now* in our *need*, not later once we've got it together—and make prayer actionable for a church body. Paul coaches us into praying our way forward together. Noting that the early church leaders insisted that “we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4), Paul Miller wants us to do church by prayer.

In other words, *A Praying Church* is not a book telling us to scurry faster on our hamster wheel of prayer. It is an invitation to

step off of that hamster wheel by looking to the Spirit of Jesus and letting him lead us forward as we commune with him. Wonderfully simple, widely neglected, deeply liberating.

A church with rich history, flawless music, powerful preaching, amazing childcare, a paid-off mortgage, and stellar attendance but sleepily operating out of the resources of the flesh instead of prayer is headed toward tragic inconsequentiality.

A church riddled with dysfunctions, embattled and beleaguered, unimpressive in preaching, off-tune musically, small in numbers, and without resources but quietly collapsing into the freefall of faith-fueled praying that this book outlines is a church that will bless this world in a thousand surprising ways and leave a mark that reverberates through eternity.

This book may be the wardrobe door into Narnia your church has been needing and longing for. For it is not, finally, a book about prayer. It is a book about God, and how we move through life as a church as if he is actually there. I commend it wholeheartedly, and I thank Paul Miller for giving it to us.

Dane C. Ortlund

SENIOR PASTOR

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PART 1

WHY PRAY TOGETHER?

A Glimpse of a Praying Community

FOR MOST OF US, PRAYER IS SOLITARY, which means that when it comes to corporate prayer, we aren't exactly sure what it even feels and looks like. So I begin this book by letting you peek in on my three prayer meetings this morning. Before we lament the loss of praying together, we need to know what we've lost!

My first prayer time in the morning is with my wife, Jill. Beginning at 5:45, we take forty-five minutes together to read the Bible and pray together. Jill punctuates our time with fervent prayers for our family, friends, and world. It's also interrupted by job duties for me: "Oh, Paul, would you move all the boxes off your office floor before you leave for work? The carpet cleaner is coming today." (Technically this is a question, but relationally it's an order!) Then back to more fervent prayer for our family, which is interrupted by Jill asking if she can call our handyman to hang pictures, since I'm so backed up with other projects. "Yes, that's fine." Then back to more prayer for our grandchildren.

Jill freely admits she has ADD. Recently, I suggested she hold off on the job ideas for me until we'd finished praying. In her defense,

I've been painting the house, and we've redone the kitchen, so not only is she managing lots of loose ends, but I'm behind in my to-do list, and it's just easier to tell me stuff as it comes to her mind.

This is my most disorganized prayer time of the day, and yet it is the most powerful. Jill usually leads. It took me about ten years to realize that if I wanted to pray with her, I couldn't organize her. Not only that: she prays better than I do. By that I mean, her prayers are almost on the verge of lamenting—she talks to God like she's talking to me when I've promised to paint a room and keep postponing it. She feels the growing evil of our day and prays passionately against it. She's a fighter. Jesus's repeated command to *ask anything* gives us freedom to ask for even seemingly impossible things. Because of the loss of our beloved daughter Ashley to cancer, we especially pray for people battling cancer. We do have one systematic stretch of ten to fifteen minutes when we pray for our more than twenty-five children, spouses, and grandchildren.

Next I pray with our adult daughter Kim, who is affected by disabilities. We pray together barely five minutes, but I love hearing her "voice." Using her speech computer's icon language, she thanks God for multiple things. This morning she thanked God for our Thanksgiving dinner four days ago. (Dinner with our extended family was canceled due to the pandemic, so we went to a restaurant similar to the one in *Lady and the Tramp*, which absolutely charmed her.) Usually she slips in a prayer for our very bad golden retriever, Tully, who's always stealing her things. If I'm biking to work, she prays that I won't crash. If I'm skiing at night, she prays I won't hit a tree. She prays for her ninety-seven-year-old grandmother in London. I usually encourage her to pick one niece or nephew to pray for. She often picks one she feels is too noisy or bad. Kim looks at her nieces and nephews like wine—they get

better with age. Kim struggles with anger—it’s a symptom of her disability—but we try not to let her “diagnosis” define her, so she prays regularly for God to help her with anger. Lately, we’ve been visualizing her day together and praying for the parts where she might be tempted to get angry. That has helped. And then, as often happens, I notice my struggle with impatience, so Kim and I close by praying for each other’s struggle with impatience.

My third prayer meeting is mid-morning with the ministry I direct, seeJesus. About thirty of us gather on Zoom for about an hour. We spend the first half hearing reports from around the world on our seminar and training ministry. It’s an open mic, so we also hear updates on personal and family needs.

As we pray together, it feels like we are weaving a tapestry: We begin by praying for Felicia, who, the day before Thanksgiving, lost her sister to COVID. Our prayers wander through Felicia’s life with her sister, enjoying the good things that God had done, and lamenting the hard things. Then we pray for Mafdi’s work in the Arab world. Someone circles back to praying for Felicia; then we pray for Mafdi’s online Arabic *The Person of Jesus* study. We pray for Miguel, our Spanish-speaking trainer in Chile, who has been sick. With only five minutes left, prayers pick up their pace slightly, a bit like the fourth quarter of an American football game. We don’t want to forget anything, so the conversation style of the prayer meeting disappears, and short, quick prayers emerge to cover what we’ve not yet covered. I close our prayer time by inviting the Spirit of Jesus into our work to shape and lead us.

Our prayer time is the high point of the day. You can tell because hardly anyone misses and people start gathering early. The feel of the prayer time is *resurrection*. We pray boldly and expectantly, not

just because that's what resurrection people do but because we've seen God work in so many amazing ways. Prayer fuels prayer.

The hopeful, resurrection *feel* of each of these three prayer meetings does not happen automatically. It has taken time to cultivate. With Jill, I'm attentive to her and her world. With Kim, I prompt her with ideas—her limit is about five promptings. Any more and she gets irritated because *SpongeBob* awaits! With seeJesus, I try to be attentive to each person in the prayer meeting and to his or her story. For example, I talked with Felicia ahead of time to hear more of the story of her sister, so in our “open-mic” time, I prompt Felicia with questions to plumb the depths of suffering that her family has been through, but also to highlight some amazing ways that God worked through Felicia in her sister's life. Attentiveness to resurrection keeps us from getting stuck in sadness.

These three prayer meetings are completely ordinary. Jill's language to God is no different from her language to me when I've forgotten to take out the trash. I say this because we tend to think of prayer as somehow a *higher life*, when it's actually *real life*. Each of these three prayer times is strikingly different from the others, based on the focus and who is involved, but that's true of all our conversations. We shape our dialogue based on who we are talking to.

Why Pray Together?

You likely agree that prayer is important, but let's be realistic; not many of us have the luxury of praying for an hour and a half in the morning. Life comes at us too fast.

Actually, I slow down to pray with other believers *because* life is coming at me so fast. Instinctively, I respond to life's speed with my own speed. That creates a ten-car pileup not only in my outward life but also in my soul. I can't imagine leading my family or community

without corporate prayer. I do these morning prayer times not from discipline but from *learned desperation*. I am constant in corporate prayer because the Jesus communities I'm in are *constant in need*. I have no interest in doing anything that hasn't been prayed for and prayed over. What I pray over lasts, and what I don't pray over doesn't last. But there's more: A Jesus community is characterized by wonder, and the conduit to that is prayer. I've seen what happens when the Spirit of Jesus inhabits a community—everything starts to sparkle.

Praying together is not a luxury, nor is it something just for “spiritual” Christians; it's the very *breath of the church*. Most of us don't have the faintest idea of what that means. That's what I hope to show in this book: how integral prayer is to a Jesus community.

God has used my earlier book and seminar *A Praying Life* to help many *individuals* pray, but without a supportive, praying *community*, it's easy to lose hope, to wear out in the work of prayer. Unless entire churches learn to pray together, individual prayer can lose steam. And that isn't just in official prayer meetings but in our families and small groups too, and even in that random phone conversation. That's the passion of this book—to foster praying communities.

Creating Praying Communities

Here's an overview of what we'll cover in the pages ahead:

- In part 1, we answer the question Why pray together? We'll discover why prayer is critical to the church's life. My template is Luke and Acts. I hope to capture your imagination with a new vision of how prayer ignites the Spirit of Jesus in his church.

- In part 2, we examine what the church is. This book isn't just about praying together; it's about how a Jesus community works. Using Ephesians, we'll discover who runs the church (the Spirit of Jesus) and exactly what the church is made of (saints), which helps us see why prayer is fundamental to how we *do* church. If I can fill you with wonder, with a new, richer way of looking at the church, you'll find your heart enlarged—and that will do its own work.
- In part 3, we explore the interface between the Spirit of Jesus and a community at prayer. We turn our eyes outward and discover where the church is going and how it gets there. If you miss the journey and the goal, then prayer becomes either merely therapeutic or a power trip.
- In part 4, we focus on *how* to pray in community, and the multiple subcommunities that make up a family, mission, or church, and how to cultivate prayer in them.
- In part 5, we look at how integral prayer can be to the subcommunities of the church.

I opened this chapter with three morning prayer meetings to give you a feel for what a praying community looks like; then I briefly shared *how* I lead those prayer meetings; and finally, I paused to share my heart as to *why* praying together is so vital. Once you grasp *why we pray* (part 1), *what the church is* (part 2), and *how the Spirit works* (part 3), then *how we pray* (parts 4–5) will come alive in fresh ways. But no matter what, you must begin to pray together—even if just with a good friend. Some things are understood only from the inside. For example, you can study love all you want, but until you've endured in love, you won't understand love.

When I say “a praying church,” I mean the local church, but also the multiple layers of friendship we have with other believers. Some of my examples of a praying community come from the mission I lead, see Jesus, but the principles of praying together are the same in any Jesus community, whether it’s the local church, your family, or a friendship.

My Hope for This Book

I’ve written this book for the whole church, because it’s the whole church that prays. When Luke gives us a sermon in the book of Acts, we get a preacher: “But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them” (Acts 2:14). But when Luke describes a prayer meeting, we get the whole church: “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14). This book is for everyone. Anyone can ask a friend in the middle of a conversation, “Could we stop and pray about that?”

That’s what five Williams College students did in 1806 while taking shelter from a thunderstorm in a haystack: they started to pray for world missions. The five students were relatively wealthy, busy, and faced with a society that was increasingly cold of heart. Because of the impact of Enlightenment secularism, American church attendance was at an all-time low. And yet the haystack prayer meeting ignited a groundswell of prayer that led to the greatest period of growth the church has ever seen. Over the next hundred years, professing Christians went from 10 percent to 30 percent of the world’s population.¹ And it all began with five college students praying together.

I had a front-row seat in watching and participating in the development of two praying churches over a period of twenty years

where I was a deacon and then an elder—Mechanicsville Chapel and New Life Church, north of Philadelphia. But the heart of this book is my experience in cultivating communities of prayer within my family and in my ministry, see Jesus. I've worked in over two hundred churches encouraging them to become praying communities. I've mentored hundreds of pastors in cohorts, in counseling, and just in friendships. I know the slowness of cultural change, but I also know, as many of you do, the power of the Spirit of Jesus to do beyond all that we can ask or imagine!

As in all my writing, I write only about what has become a part of my life. I'm not a spiritual guru; I'm a discipler. When I was a young man, I noticed that Christians *dabbled*—bouncing from book to book, trying to stay current with the latest idea. In a world saturated with Christian values, you might get away with dabbling, but in a post-Christian and increasingly anti-Christian world, we need discipleship that produces change into the image of Jesus. That only happens when we concentrate on some aspect of Jesus long enough that we begin to look like him. My desire is to help the church look like Jesus, to have his heart, his cadences—in short, to have his prayer life. We are now his praying body.

A church hosted a gathering of artists to talk about their work: a musician, a painter, and a writer. I was the writer. When it came my turn, I explained that I was more of a craftsman than an artist, like the unnamed architects who created the soaring Gothic cathedrals. These architects weren't trying to create art for art's sake; they designed something that transported people into the heavenlies. That's my hope for this book, that the Spirit will use it to help create "virtual spaces" that draw the church into the heavenlies.

In order to craft this cathedral, I share stories from my own life. My desire is not to boast of my successes or glory in my failures

but to put shoes on the ideas I'm sharing. Ideas need to connect with reality. We aren't "brains on sticks."²² We need to see things enfolded in the nitty-gritty of real life so we can imagine what they might look like in our own communities. I hope this makes praying together easier, as natural as asking a friend to meet for coffee. When praying together becomes perfectly normal, frequent, and filled with love, the Spirit will have given us a praying church.