



Dr. Lutzer helps us see God's love and guidance even when He seems silent. This biblical guide thoughtfully considers:

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- When the worst happens.
- When evil feels like it's winning.
- When promises are unfulfilled . . . and more.

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Claiming Promises God Did Not Make

You can name it, but you can't claim it!

“God has forsaken me!” That is a direct quote from a woman I knew who claimed healing for her husband, but when God did not grant the healing, she felt abandoned by Him. She had been listening to a so-called faith healer who insisted that physical healing could be *demand*ed from God based on His promises.

This dear woman eventually came to realize that she had been deceived by a TV preacher who lived in luxury even as he told his followers that if they only had faith, they too could be healthy and wealthy. Because physical suffering is so debilitating, such teaching is attractive and gains a wide audience.

I once received a letter from a man I shall call Ted, who was incarcerated. He was trying to draw closer to God and had been given resources by various clergy that helped him grow in his walk

as a Christian. However, some of the material he read preached “health and wealth.” He explained:

I received a letter . . . that said there was power in my confession, and if I were to take authority over my situation and shout, “I am rich,” blessings would come to me. I did this for several months, but I have not received any extra money. In fact, now the money from my commissary account is not arriving on time. I began confessing that I walk in divine health like their ministry instructs me to do, but then I discovered that my liver enzymes were off and other lab results were not encouraging.

Fortunately, this man saw through the ruse and had the spiritual insight to pray differently. He continued:

I have since changed my prayers, and I now confess that I am only healed if God wants me to be. I struggle with whether these other ministries are of God. Please give me your advice on this. I am afraid of making false accusations about ministries that talk about Jesus and say they are anointed of God. I just know that their teaching does not work for me.

These prayers did not work for Ted, and they quite likely do not work for millions of others. God did not intend them to work. We dare not insist God give us what He did not promise. To put it differently, we cannot claim promises that are not ours. Too many teachers, including some with television and internet followings, propound false doctrine. Of course we can pray for healing; we can pray for a miracle. And sometimes God grants our request. But God has not promised that we can simply “name it and claim it,” insisting that it is always His will.

Where shall we look to find similar ideas? This particular false teaching has been around for a long time. A man by the name of William Kenyon (1867–1948) drew ideas from the Christian Science religion.¹ Christian Science was originally started by Mary Baker Eddy in 1800s.² This movement is not Christian as it denies that Jesus is the eternal God in flesh. It is also not scientific, believing that physical healing is a matter of the mind and prayer, mostly to the exclusion of medicine. William Kenyon and others accepted similar ideas in their understanding of Christianity in the twentieth century, influencing primarily Pentecostalism but also many other Christian traditions. Thus, the Word of Faith movement began in the 1960s, and its heresy lives on today through numerous Christian leaders around the world.³

Regrettably, the prosperity gospel rallies are often filled with poor people. Why? They believe in this false law of attraction, thinking that by being around these wealthy leaders, they too will become wealthy. They want what their guru has. They suppose, “If I have enough faith, I can drive the kind of car he does. I can live in the kind of home in which he lives. I can be as healthy as they appear to be.”

Of course, members of the Word of Faith movement do not always agree with one another, but some extremists actually believe we can “speak” ourselves into becoming rich. I was watching television when one of these preachers said, “Just say, ‘I am a millionaire.’” He wasn’t satisfied with that and continued, “You need to proclaim, ‘I am a billionaire,’ and you can speak things into existence that aren’t yet in existence.” The power, according to him, was in your confession.

Throughout history, people have always attempted to manipulate “gods” to get what they want. The prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 cried out to their god, and when Baal appeared reluctant to

respond, they cut themselves until their blood flowed, and “after their custom” (v. 28). They even used this show of self-harm to demand an answer from their false god. But when Elijah prayed with a submissive disposition before the sovereign God Yahweh, he appealed to God’s covenantal relationship with His people. God then answered according to His purposes. But we do not have the right to “put God to the test,” insisting that He respond to our requests according to *our* will.

The God of Abraham, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, cannot be manipulated. When Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6, He began with worship and submission. Prayer is not about getting what we want, though God may graciously give it to us.

*Prayer is not
about getting
what we want. . . .
Prayer is when
we align with
God’s agenda.*

Prayer is when we align with God’s agenda, saying “Your kingdom come. Your will be done.” Of course, we present requests for provision, forgiveness, guidance, and daily bread. But we do not pray as the world does, heaping up “empty phrases” (Matthew 6:7). If we try to use the name of Jesus as a tool for getting whatever we want, we are not much better than the non-Christian exorcists in Ephesus who

unsuccessfully used the names of Jesus and Paul to perform the miracles they had no right to perform (see Acts 19).

When we try to manipulate God, we often demand much from Him but nothing of ourselves. We pray, “God help me,” but not “God forgive me.” We might ask God for money but not the wisdom to spend our funds wisely. Prayer is more than asking—it is also obeying and thanking; it is committing and submitting. God is not a slot machine to get our needs met; He is a heavenly Father who seeks a relationship of submission and worship on our part.

However, there are some promises that can always be claimed! When Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16), such universal promises are given throughout the New Testament. If you are reading this and have never come to saving faith in Christ, do so right now! Jesus promised, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25). Such promises of salvation apply to everyone!

And for us as believers, we can always claim promises such as 1 John 1:9, that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” And we can always count on promises such as, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). The list of such available promises is long and trustworthy.

God did not promise that we would be wealthy and healthy in this life. Forgiveness, *yes*; reconciliation with God, *yes*; the assurance of eternal life, *yes*! All that and more is available to all who are given the grace to accept it. But He never said we’d be rich and that we’d never suffer pain or illness.

This is a good time to pause and ask, what are some of the errors of the Word of Faith movement? Sometimes they use passages of Scripture, but do they use them correctly, in context, and in a way that is balanced? Let’s discuss this in more detail.

Errors of the Word of Faith Movement

Here is a quick survey of a few of the errors in this movement.

Confusion Between the Old Testament and the New

It is easy to confuse the promises of prosperity in the Old Testament with the era of the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God dealt with Israel as a theocratic kingdom. As a theocracy, God had a covenant with the whole nation and ruled it directly by His Law given at Sinai and the revelation given to the prophets. So, promises and curses were given to the people as a group, as a nation. In effect God said, "I am going to bless or curse you based upon your faithfulness to the Law. If you follow me, I am going to give you riches and good crops. If you do not follow me, I am going to send you drought and grasshoppers." In other words, blessing was frequently defined in material terms. Possessions were often a sign of blessing (see Deuteronomy 28:2, 11).

So, the promises of earthly blessings were tied directly to the weather, to crops, and to livestock. But today we are under the new covenant based on "better promises" (Hebrews 8:6). Now the emphasis changes from material blessings to spiritual blessings; from obedience that produces wealth, to an obedience that almost always guarantees persecution. We are no longer a nation bound by physical boundaries, but a holy nation scattered around the globe, even among the poorest countries of the world.

Today, we are under a different arrangement. We do not have blessings and curses regarding crops based on whether we are faithful in keeping the Mosaic law. Under the new covenantal arrangement, faithful believers might be called on to suffer in many ways; some go hungry and are deprived of even the most basic necessities, like the apostle Paul experienced.

The new covenant that Jesus inaugurated before His crucifixion is now between God and all of us who believe in Him. We are far wealthier, spiritually speaking, than the saints of the Old Testament could have even imagined. We do not offer sacrifices

because the perfect sacrifice has come. We do not just have a high priest who represents us; we are all priests and priestesses before God. And the list of blessings goes on and on.

We can ask for wealth and health in our era, but we cannot insist on it because we have no such guarantee or promise from God. And to all those preachers and teachers who tell us that we can claim health and wealth, I would rather that they look directly at their audiences and say, “It is more important for you to be holy than for you to be healed.”

Ignoring the Necessary Conditions

Many of these Word of Faith preachers ignore some of the necessary conditions for answered prayer. If we read the New Testament uncritically, some of Jesus’ statements seem as if they were blank checks, wherein we can simply fill in whatever we want. For example, Jesus gives some instructions to His disciples in the upper room, and His statement is often quoted: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:13–14).

Whatever we ask?

In context, Jesus is contrasting the old order with the changes that will take place after His ascension. He speaks of His followers doing greater works because “I go to the Father.” The poured out Holy Spirit will give to the church an ability to proclaim the gospel with greater clarity after the resurrection and ascension. And of course, the worldwide church has proclaimed this gospel to multiplied millions.

Clearly, the name of Jesus is not a good luck charm that can be used to get whatever we want; this promise has to do with aligning ourselves with the glory of the Father and the will of His Son.

In the very next chapter, Jesus adds more clarification: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish” (John 15:7). In sum, we must be on His team and ask according to His game plan. There is nothing here to suggest that we can speak anything we want into existence.

Nowhere in the letters of Paul do such promises occur. Paul, for example, spoke about making our requests to God, but his specific promise is that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7; read vv. 4-7). He himself performed only one recorded miracle of healing and left his seven-year companion, Trophimus, sick (2 Timothy 4:20).

Yes, but Not Yet

There are many blessings Christ already purchased for us, but they are not available to us just now. Misled teachers tell us that a little more faith, a bigger declaration, and a heartfelt prayer are all that stands between us and the fulfillment of a promise of healing and wealth today.

Was physical healing in the atonement Christ purchased for us? Absolutely. Jesus died for us in entirety, including our bodies. The Bible says Jesus died to put away all sin. Sin is entangled with sickness, since sickness did not exist until after sin.

Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” While the text is predominantly about sin, it is also about physical healing. Jesus came and forgave sin, but He also performed healings to prove that the body was important. We are not just souls trapped in a body; in fact, the body is so important that someday it will be raised.

Since healing is secured and promised in the atonement, can we insist on healing whenever we want? Can we *demand* it from God because it is a part of our inheritance? Some people try! One time I heard a Word of Faith preacher say that words control the body. He preached that regardless of what's happening in a person's physical body, the person should actually speak to their major organs because the tongue controls the physical body. This preacher taught that we don't have to tolerate sickness and disease but instead speak the Word of God against them.

I heard another one say that if Jesus had not stopped talking on the cross, He would not have died; there is so much power in His words that the reason He died was because He quit speaking. (Sometimes, I fear that God's sheep cannot tell the difference between grass and AstroTurf!)

My parents knew a family who were wonderful Christians, but they believed healing was in the atonement, and because Jesus had provided it, we could have it all *now*. They said that they intended to not die but live until Christ returned. Moment by moment, they would claim the healing they believed was theirs, "by His stripes they would be continually healed." As they became sick, they aimed to constantly appropriate the work that Jesus did through the cross and the resurrection. A few years later, we received the news of their deaths. They could not reverse the inevitable effects of aging brought upon all of us because of sin. They would receive their healing when they arrived in heaven, but the day of resurrection is still future.

The good news is that our bodies will be healed—permanently. Our resurrection body was included in the work of the cross and the resurrection of Christ, but we do not inherit that today. We pray for the sick, but we cannot demand it and say, "You *must* heal me now," or "God is my healer, *today*."

No, God has not forsaken you! I understand that the challenges of life are overwhelming. But if you are hearing these false promises, please, my friend, recognize that these so-called Christian leaders are lying to you. The Bible says we are subject to the will of God, and that sometimes the will of God involves suffering just as it did with Jesus. Will you remember that Jesus' suffering led to glory? Your endurance today ultimately leads to great reward in the future. Do not give up! In fact, we must persist in prayer, seeking God for the strength to endure. We have all the resources we need to fight against Satan who wants us defeated. Let us, as Paul says, pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance" (Ephesians 6:18). Prayer frequently does not remove our trials but gives us grace to prevail in them.

A member of our church said his knee surgery was so painful "I will never have the other knee repaired until I am in the presence of Jesus." The good news is that in the presence of Jesus, he will get two brand new knees, hips that work, a perfect body, and a sharp mind. More than that, we shall receive a body, "like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). When we see Jesus, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. Until that time, sickness, heartache, and bad knees are unfortunately the norm. The waiting can seem cruel some days, when your body groans to rise from bed in the morning. But your perfect body is coming!

Should we stop asking for healing? No! Not at all. In the Old Testament, the promises of God showed that He was interested in healing. Jesus, of course, spent a good deal of His ministry healing all who came to Him, primarily to reveal Himself as the Messiah and Savior.

Yes, by all means, pray for healing!

I regard it as a travesty that so many Christians think immediately of their doctor more readily than they do of Christ when

it comes to physical ailments. Certainly, God may use doctors, but why don't we seek God for wisdom when we encounter an illness? You can be sure that if I were told I had a terminal disease and under a doctor's care, I would still enlist others to pray for me. And, there are instances in which God graciously does heal the sick.

James 5:14–15 says,

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

The very next verse speaks of confessing our sins one to another. In other words, we must always ask if there is sin in our lives blocking the answer to our prayers. At The Moody Church, we have anointed many people with oil when they came for healing, but we always met to counsel them first. I have even had a few instances where people testified that “a healing definitely took place.” Praise God! Yet, James should not be misunderstood. The text does not say that everyone will be healed, regardless of the will of God.

In some instances, we anointed and prayed over a person with the elders, and God chose not to heal. Collectively, God did not grant us the “prayer of faith.” Even though we were disappointed, we still praised God, because God also has a purpose in a lack of physical healing. In such instances, God wants to use our prayers to draw us closer to Himself and renew our faith.

Years ago, I encountered a very challenging situation. There was a wonderful group of students who belonged to a Christian organization committed to revival ministry. When their leader was diagnosed with cancer, I visited him and had an encouraging

discussion about how he was approaching the end. I remember he said, "I want to believe in the dark what I have learned to trust in the light." Beautiful!

But there is more to the story. There was a godly revivalist who prayed much for this leader and concluded that God was going to heal him. This revivalist had such a sense of peace that he inspired others to expect healing. Well, to the surprise and disappointment of many, the leader died, but they didn't take his body away immediately in order to give God time for a resurrection. But, alas, that didn't happen.

How do we interpret this? I believe this revivalist interpreted the peace of God as the will of God as he understood it. As we seek God, He gives us peace, but that peace doesn't necessarily tell us what God is going to do; it does, however, prepare us for *whatever* God does.

To repeat my point: Let's be quick to ask for healing and even to hope for it, but we cannot *demand* answers in this life. Nor should we condemn those who pray for healing and God doesn't heal them. Imagine what happens when a person goes into a hospital room and tells the patient that he was sick because he didn't have enough faith. If he had more faith, God would heal him. Uttering words like this only lays a mountain of guilt on the patient. Another person told me about how people brought him books when he was in the hospital. But instead of encouraging him, the books were about healing, and the pages were highlighted with lines telling him that if he had faith he could walk out of the hospital. This "help" was no help at all.

The godliest people have all suffered physically and died. The martyrs of old who were killed for their faith come to mind—Stephen, Polycarp, and Perpetua. But, my friend, let not your heart be troubled, for death is not the end. Your inheritance—the *full* inheritance promised to you—is coming.

Later in this book, I will refer to Abraham, who saw only a glimpse of God's promises fulfilled. He received the fulfillment of the promise regarding a child—Isaac. But he didn't see the land of promise. And in a sense, Abraham is still waiting. The promises God made to Abraham have not been completely fulfilled to him and to his offspring. He died in faith believing in a city built by God (Hebrews 11:13). And we must do the same.

Our Limited Authority

Finally, many of these ministries fail to understand that our authority as believers is a limited, delegated authority. We do not have the same authority as Jesus. By faith, we are united *with* Jesus and we are *in* Jesus. But we are *not* Jesus. We cannot speak to storms and hurricanes like Jesus spoke to the raging Sea of Galilee and expect them to obey.

But again, some of the teachers of our time think we have almost unlimited authority. Kris Vallotton, one of the Bethel Church prophets of Redding, California, stated that “prayer is an act of leadership as it authorizes God to do His will on the earth.”⁴ Apparently, we are the gatekeepers, the authorizers of God's work in the world. He looks to us to see how He should act.

Years ago, a group of Word of Faith followers met in Washington, DC to ban Satan from the city. They prayed to send him packing, barring him and his minions from entering the city again. They supposedly had that authority! But what do you think? Do you think God answered their prayer? I suspect that Satan is still active in our nation's capital.

If we could simply speak and pray with authority to banish Satan, we would banish him from the whole planet! If we ask why

God has Satan (or some other demons) in Washington, DC, the answer is “Because the Lord has need of him.” God uses Satan for His own purposes. And in the Scriptures, you won’t find anything saying we have the authority to override or change God’s decrees. God has given His people limited authority over the devil; we do have the authority to wage in victorious warfare against him. In fact, we should. But only God has *ultimate* authority.

When my co-writer Scott MacDonald moved to a new area, he was looking for a church to attend. One pastor he spoke with didn’t hide anything and confessed that certain churches were preaching the prosperity gospel. “They make promises and people get disappointed when the promises do not come true.” So, Scott asked him if some of those people had subsequently joined his church. He responded, “No. Once people are burned by the prosperity gospel churches, they want nothing to do with Christ.” How easy it is to become disillusioned with Christ when the promises are misapplied!

One day I preached in a city where a Word of Faith preacher had promised that if people sent him money, their mortgage would be miraculously paid. I asked a pastor in the area what happened. He responded, “Hundreds of people sent that preacher money; no mortgages were miraculously paid. People are angry, turned off to Christianity.” And though it’s tragic, their response is understandable.

I’ve noticed that often the faith healer always comes out on top when his followers don’t get what he promised them. If there’s a miracle, he takes the credit; if there is no miracle, it’s your fault because if only you had the faith, it would have happened. “Heads I win, tails you lose.” That’s gross abuse of power and influence.

These false teachers speak about blessings from God but not about brokenness before God; they speak of a crown without

a cross and a vague belief in Christ without repentance. I have never seen or heard one lean into the camera and say, “It’s better to be holy than healed!” Or, “It’s better to seek righteousness rather than riches.”

Of course, God is interested in all aspects of our lives—our present and our future. But we always have to remember that we are not in charge; all final decisions are His.

And yet He invites us to come and ask.

The Complexity of Prayer

Nothing I have said in the preceding pages should be interpreted to say that we should not bring all of our requests to the Lord and we should not bother to pursue Him. I must emphasize that we are invited to give Him no rest until we are satisfied that His will is done. Let me encourage you to seek God and His purposes.

Jesus told a parable about a widow who “kept coming to him” (a judge) and saying, “Give me justice against my adversary” (Luke 18:3); eventually, the judge became weary of her persistence and gave her what she requested. Then Jesus said, “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily” (vv. 7–8).

Yes, Jesus began the parable by saying to His disciples, they “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1). Clearly, Jesus was saying that if we are not persistent in prayer, we will indeed lose heart. Let us determine that we will persist in our prayers especially where spiritual issues are at stake. My point in this chapter is that there are certain requests we cannot *demand* God to answer based on His promises. We must always be subject to His will and His purposes.

God does promise special blessings to those who will not give up on prayer, those who seek Him with their whole heart, whether they get all they ask for or not. If a worldly judge will respond to the prayer of a persistent widow, will not God hear the cry of His children?

Must we always end our prayer saying, "If it be Your will"? Later in this book, I will refer to some biblical prayers, which are exactly according to God's will. But when it comes to prayers that request a change of circumstances or to change other people to our liking, we must acknowledge that yes, God is the final arbiter. As we shall explain later, Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane requested not have to drink the cup given to Him, but then added, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Let us take comfort in the fact that God always hears us. Our prayers have reached His ears even if we do not get the response we desire. But in this book, we hope to give hope to those who ask and apparently do not receive, for those who are asked to go through some dark times without any improvement in their situation be it ill health, poverty, loss, and their own death.

We pray that, through reading the pages that follow, your faith will be strengthened despite the unpredictability of God's purposes and the questions that inevitably arise because of seemingly unanswered prayers. Even as we are reminded that God honors persistence in our prayers, let us also resolve to keep trusting God even when we do not understand His ways.

Prayers You Can Be Sure God Will Answer!

The Bible makes it clear that God always responds to those who know they are sinners and come to Him in humility, seeking

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forgiveness and acceptance. God is willing and able to rescue us from the eternal consequences of our sins. Yes, there are some prayers God *always* answers!

Here are a few promises assuring us that everyone is invited to believe on Jesus for forgiveness and the gift of eternal life—a journey with God in this life and then forever in the life to come. If you have doubts bring those doubts to Jesus.

Hear this good news directly from Jesus:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him [God the Father] who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24)

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” (Romans 10:9–10)

Do you wish to pray right now? The words are not as important as the desire of your heart, but here is a sample prayer:

“God, I know that I’m a sinner and stand in the need of Your forgiveness and grace. Right now, I am turning away from my sin to receive remission of my sins through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who died for me and was raised from the dead. I bring nothing to You except my great need, admitting my sinfulness and depending solely on Your undeserved grace toward me. Thank You for Your love for me. Amen!”

A Prayer of Worship When We Want to Complain

Father,

*We worship You today, even in our anger,
frustration, and discouragement.*

*We confess that we have complained against
You because life is often so difficult.*

*We have questioned Your ways, believing that if
we had Your power, we could have done a better
job of running this universe than You have.*

Father,

*We pray that we will not rebel
against Your sovereignty.*

*When we see injustice in the world,
may we not ascribe it to You.*

*May we remember that You, O Lord,
are God, and we are not.*

*Help us to believe that Your way is perfect,
even when we do not understand.*

*May our admission of this truth lead us to
submission, repentance, and thanksgiving.*

In Jesus' name, Amen.

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