

Call to Obedience #240
PO Box 299 Kokomo, IN 46903 USA
www.schultze.org

Too many prayers are spilled on the ground.

Take Ye Away the Stone!

By Reimar Schultze

“Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid” (John 11:38–41).

This is the greatest physical miracle that Jesus did while he was on the earth: the raising of a man from the dead; a man who had been in a state of decomposition for four days, bound hand and foot with grave clothes, with a napkin about his head. Further, this miracle was done in public to a man well known in his community. According to John’s record, this miracle was also the final miracle of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. It was the miracle that rapidly set the stage for the crucifixion of our Lord. Let us here consider the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection: what it tells us, what it teaches us, and how it was done.

The first thing that had to happen for the miracle to take place was for the stone to be removed. It says in verse 41, “Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid.” There often is a stone between us and a miracle. We can pray, and pray, and pray; we can even cry out loud and become very fervent in our prayers, we can add fasting to our prayers, and we can carry on praying about certain conditions for weeks and months and years, but many times, the miracle will not happen, simply because there is a stone in our heart that first must be removed.

There is the common saying that prayer solves everything. Well, let us not forget that prayer solves everything, provided there are no stones in our hearts, and provided that our prayers are for the glory of God, and are not selfish. So, until the stone was removed from the front of this tomb, the miracle of the resurrection could not take place!

Jesus was waiting for the stone to be removed. Could it be that there is within you a stone of criticism, and that is why your prayers have not been heard? Could it be a stone of resentment toward somebody who has hurt you badly? Could it be that there is a stone of selfishness somewhere hidden in the depth of your heart; or a stone of impatience; or a stone of personal plans that are not approved of God; or a stone of stinginess?

Listen, my friends, if you do not tithe your income and give an offering on top of that—because the Bible talks about tithes and offerings—how do you expect God to answer your prayers? You have a stone of stinginess and of disobedience in your heart. If we don’t tithe or give our offerings, we rob God (Mal. 3:8). How can we expect God to answer our prayers if we are robbers? Oh, what a stone! Or there could be a stone of pride in someone’s heart, or of jealousy, and yet in someone else’s, a stone of bitterness. And then there are stones of ungodly relationships. It could be a stone of “forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” to worship (Heb. 10:25), that hinders our prayers from ascending to the throne of God. Do you now see why so many prayers are not answered?

Concerning this event with Lazarus, what prevented the miracle from happening was a stone of unbelief. We read in verse 41, "Then they took away the stone." Who took away the stone? Did Jesus do it, or did they do it? My friend, Jesus would bring the dead body back to life, but they had to take away the stone. Which is easier, to take away a stone or to bring a dead body back to life again? We may at first say that it is easier to move a stone than to raise the dead. But, as I thought more about it in prayer and meditation, I concluded that it is harder for us to remove a stone than it is for Jesus to raise up a dead man unto life.

When you look at the history of Israel, of God's people, as it is portrayed in the Old Testament, you see that God had a relatively easy time in performing his miracles. Why is that so? Because he is omnipotent, his power is unlimited. The problem was not his ability to accomplish miracles. His problem, despite all of his urging Israel to obey, was that he could hardly find anyone who was willing to remove the stones from within their hearts, the stones of resentment, criticism, worldliness, prayerlessness, idolatry, and adultery. My friend, the record is clear: out of all the adult Israelites that left the land of Egypt, only two made it to the Promised Land, because all the rest of them had stones in their hearts. They refused to remove them!! And of the following generations who made it into the Promised Land, only a few stayed faithful to the Lord, and God had to send his nation, his people with whom he had a covenant, to a foreign country called Babylon to punish them there as prisoners for seventy years. Can you hear the cry of God from the Scriptures "O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always" (Deut. 5:29)? It seems that very, very few people have ever been willing to remove the stones from their hearts. This is because the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). The heart of man is hard. It is obstinate, and it is proud.

Oh, dear one, how many people were there in the days of Jesus who, like Peter, fell down at Jesus' feet, confessing their sins? Can you name ten? How about five? How many were there who came to Jesus not for healing but for the confession and forgiveness of their sins?

Do you have any stones in your life? Remove them! Confess your sins, repent of your sins, and then Jesus will do the miracle of a resurrection, a resurrection unto new life, a life of the Spirit. He will set you free, and prayers will begin to be answered.

After the stones have been removed, then prayer becomes effective; this is when prayer can, and will, work. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). But if the stones are not removed, our prayers will not reach God. Consider this illustration: if there is a stone in a fuel line of your automobile, you can connect your fuel tank to a refinery, but no matter how much gas you pump into that tank, it will just keep running over and over, and the automobile will not start. It is called over-fueling. And in a similar manner, there is over-praying with thousands of prayers being spilled wastefully on the ground, because we have not heeded the words of Jesus, "Take ye away the stone" (John 11:39). Are you with me? Are you going to do this?

Jesus never over-prayed, and Jesus never under-prayed. As we learn in this story, when he faced the dead man Lazarus, he did not call for a prayer meeting. He had begun praying for Lazarus' healing three days earlier when he first heard of his sickness and had prayed sufficiently by the time he had arrived where Lazarus was buried. Again, what was left to do was not more praying but the removing of the stone in order for the miracle to occur. Yes, dear friend, "Take ye away the stone" !

After the stone was removed, "Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me" (v. 41). A better translation from the oldest Greek manuscripts is, "Father I thank thee that thou heardest me," and the Amplified Bible puts it beautifully by saying,

“I thank thee, Father, that you have heard me.” In other words, the prayer for the resurrection of Lazarus had already been said, even before the stone was rolled away. But it could not be answered until the stone was rolled away.

What is also important about coming to God in prayer is that we come without any prejudice or personal preference, that we come truly seeking God’s will and glory, that we do not come to God trying to nudge him into thinking the way we think or into acting the way we want him to act. Such prayers will not honor God and will not be answered.

Let me give you a practical illustration of this from my 33 years of pastoring: I receive a phone call at the parsonage from a man we will call Alex. Alex says, “Pastor Schultze, I’m sorry but I cannot be in church today, nor will I be able to teach my Sunday school class. I believe God is telling me to stay home because my father is coming to see me, and I have not seen him for three months! I would like to be home with him, so I believe that the Lord would have me stay home...”

Now, let me ask you this question: In this particular case, who is telling whom what to do? Is God telling Alex to stay home, or is Alex telling Alex to stay home? And is Alex using the name of God in order to give his reasons credibility? I think that we realize that Alex is trying to do the thinking and the choosing for God. Alex is trying to put words into God’s mouth. By using the name of God for his excuse, Alex is able to hold off the preacher. When Alex got into his little prayer room (if he has one), my friend, he came in with a strong prejudice and preference to stay at home and not to teach Sunday school. Alex came out of that prayer room not speaking out of revelation from God but rather out of reason and natural preference. He did not go to prayer with a spirit of neutrality, being willing to go either way. George Mueller said that he didn’t even try to find God’s will or to ask for God’s will until he had come to complete neutrality about the matter on which he was to inquire. Over the course of his ministry, a pastor will have received many such calls. Those calls all start out by saying, “I believe the Lord would have me...because...” and they will give reasons one, two, three, or four.

My friends, do not come to God with prejudiced ideas or with personal preferences. Do not try to instruct the Lord as how he should choose for you. Rather, come to God with an open heart, and you will be surprised what he can and will do. He can reward you with a wonderful time with your father after church is over—the best time you’ve ever had. Or maybe God’s will is for you to just bring your father along because that is where he needs to be—as much as you do—in the house of the Lord.

If we want our prayers answered, we must, first of all, determine if we have any stones in our hearts. Second, we must pray without prejudice; we must come to the place of total neutrality so that we can pray sincerely, “Father, not my will but your will be done. Lord, not for my glory, but for your glory.” If you do not die out to your leanings, prejudices, or preferences toward a certain matter, my friend, what you will receive is not the voice of the Lord but an impression that you will believe to be the voice of God. Finding God’s will must begin by waiting upon God, by removing the stones in our hearts, and by allowing him to crucify our personal choices, until there is no choice left but the seeking of his glory. If we do all of this, we are going to have our prayers answered, and we shall see miracle after miracle. My friend, “Take ye away the stone” !