

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, January 27, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 10:17

“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the
message is heard through the word of Christ.”

PRAYER CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE (4) HOW TO PRAY ABOUT YOUR PROBLEMS

In our series entitled “Prayer Can Change Your Life” we discovered, first of all, the four purposes of prayer. Then we devoted two messages to outlining the five conditions of answered prayer. Now one of the conditions we considered last week was that you have to have faith; you must believe that God will answer your prayers. Faith is the key that unlocks the door for God to bless you. But, you know, sometimes a situation is so ominous, and the problem so overwhelming, that it’s hard to have faith. So, the question is: How do you get faith in a seemingly hopeless situation?

Well, Romans 10:17 tells us where faith comes from. It says, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Now the word translated “word” there is “rema” in Greek. And it says that we get faith by listening to the word of Christ. If you want to build your faith, simply soak yourself in the Bible. The more Bible knowledge you have, the more faith you’re going to have; the less you know about the Bible, the less faith you’re going to have. So, we’re going to think today about “the word of Christ” -- the “rema” of Christ; and we’re going to consider how to pray about your problems and the difficult decisions you are often called upon to make.

Let me begin by saying this: the keys to prayer in the Bible are the promises of God. Did you know that there are more than 7,000 promises in the Bible? They are like blank checks, gifts waiting to be received. And if you want to have a dynamic prayer life, what you do is, you get a promise you can grab onto and claim, and you will have your answer to prayer. There is a verse for every need and every problem. And the more promises you know, the more powerful your prayer will become.

Well, the question then is -- Why don’t the promises always work? I heard recently about a man who was a diabetic, and he read the verse, “You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it” (John 14:14). So, he said, “Lord, I’m asking You to cure me of my diabetes”; and he threw away his insulin, and within a few days he had died. What happened? God promised. Why didn’t it work?

Let me tell you something very important. You cannot automatically claim a promise that has been given to someone else in the Bible unless the Holy Spirit gives it to you. To understand what we’re talking about today, you must understand that God speaks to people in two different

ways: (1) He speaks universally to everybody; and (2) He speaks personally to individual people, giving them a specific message for a specific situation at a specific time.

Let's have a 90-second Greek lesson. In the Greek New Testament, there are two words that translate our English word "word": (1) Logos, and (2) Rema. Whenever you hear the phrase "the Word of God," sometimes it is "the Logos of God," and sometimes it's "the Rema Of God." The "Logos" is the Word of God to everybody -- everything from Genesis to Revelation. And it is the foundation for the second meaning of "the Word of God" - the "Rema." The "Rema of God" is the Word of God to you personally. It is a specific word or promise to a specific person at a specific time, and for that only. And we can only claim a promise when it is a "rema" to us — when it is a specific word to us.

Let me give you a beautiful example of this. Sarah was Abraham's wife, and for many a year poor Sarah had wanted a son; and one day God came to Sarah and made her a promise. God said, "Sarah, you're going to have a baby!" Now there's nothing unusual about that except that Sarah was 90 years old, and her husband was 99! And you say, "That's incredible. That ought to be the headline in The National Enquirer -- '90-year-old lady has baby fathered by 99-year-old man.'" Now, that was a specific word and promise to Sarah. God didn't say, "Every woman, when she reaches the age of 90, is going to have a baby." So, ladies, you can relax! No, it was a "rema" to Sarah, not to anyone else. And getting a personal promise from God like that is the key to miracles. It's the key to answered prayer. When God speaks to you personally, get ready for an answer to your prayers!

In John 15:7 Jesus says, "If you remain in Me and My words (My "remas") remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." That is to say, "If you remain in My specific words to you, then you're going to have answered prayer." Don't expect answers to a "rema" given to someone else.

For instance, I've talked to people who read a verse in the Bible about healing; and they'll say, "God healed So-and-So; therefore, if God healed him, He must heal me." And so, they pray, and they believe, and they have tremendous faith, but nothing happens. And then they get angry and say, "God, why didn't You heal me?" The fact was, they didn't have a personal word from God concerning that particular thing.

Satan tempted Jesus one day. Our Lord was out in the desert; and Satan, who knows the Bible very well, said, "Jesus, why don't You jump off the top of the Temple in Jerusalem, because the Bible says in Psalm 91:11 and 12 that God will take care of You?" But Jesus knew that that was not a personal promise to Him at that moment. He knew that if He followed Satan's advice, it would not be faith on His part, but sinful presumption. Now I can read those verses in Psalm 91 and I could go home and get some arsenic and drink it. Well, God hasn't promised to take care of me if I drink arsenic. That was a general promise.

"Well," you say, "how does God speak to me personally?"

The principle I'm trying to share with you today is the key to miracles in life. It is the key

to understanding God's will. It is the key to having faith in a seemingly hopeless situation. How does God speak to us personally? Well, the Bible says that it is the duty and function of the Holy Spirit to take the Bible and make it apply to us personally -- to make it come alive. He takes the "logos" and turns it into the "rema." It is called "illumination."

Now there's nothing mystical about this. It happens all the time. It happens to you. Have you ever been in a church service, and as the pastor was preaching, all of a sudden you knew that God was speaking directly to you? You felt that no one else was present, and you said, "How does the pastor know that I've got this problem? How does he know that I needed that very word from the Lord, that 'rema,' right now?" I love it when people say to me at the close of a service, "How did you know that's what I needed?" Well, of course, I didn't know! The fact is, I get up and deliver the "logos" to you, and the Holy Spirit takes it and says, "That's what it means to your life!" God takes the general word that I say to everybody, and He makes it specifically apply to you. What happens? God gives you a "rema." The Holy Spirit illuminated the word to enlighten your understanding as to what God wants you to do.

Have you ever been worrying about a major problem, or a major decision you have to make, and you're really struggling with the issue, and all of a sudden you remember something that was said in a sermon three months ago, or a word of counsel that a Christian friend gave you two weeks ago? And it fits your present perplexity perfectly, and you say, "That's it! That's the answer!" Now what happened? God took a "logos" and gave you a "rema." He spoke to you personally! And that's how God works in our lives. The Holy Spirit takes the general Word of God and He makes it come alive.

But how do you know when it is God Who is giving you these messages?

1. It will always agree with the Bible. God never contradicts what He has already said. So, if you think God is giving you a message, but it doesn't square with what's in the Bible, be assured it is not from God.

For example, supposing one of our teenagers were to come to me and say, "I believe it is God's will for me that I should have premarital sex. I've come to the conclusion that there's nothing wrong with that." I would say, "I can guarantee that it is not God Who is telling you that. It is Satan; because God never contradicts His Word, and that kind of behavior is totally contrary to what the Scripture teaches." What you're being told to do must always square with biblical principles.

2. All of a sudden, the Scripture becomes alive. It takes on new meaning. It becomes dynamic and exciting.

Let me give you a simple illustration. Let's say I were to stand before you and say, "Folks, I love you!" Now that is the truth. I love our church and our people. But that is a general word to a large group of people. And my wife is sitting down there, and she's part of the group, and when I say, "I love you," that includes my wife also. But that doesn't do anything for her. She says, "Big deal! My husband says he loves us!" That's a "logos." It's a general word to everybody.

However, if I were to walk down the aisle and lean down and put my arms around her and whisper in her ear, “I love you,” all of a sudden, I’d get a different reaction! Her eyes would light up, her heart would start pounding (I hope!), and she would certainly blush.

What happened? All of a sudden, a “logos” became a “rema.” I didn’t say anything different. But it became personal, and at once it took on a new meaning. It became a word to her specifically.

You see, that’s what happens when we’re converted. How many times did you hear it said before you became a Christian -- “God loves you” -- maybe 1,000 times? And it just rolled off you like water off a duck’s back. But one day, you see Him hanging on a Cross between two thieves, and all of a sudden, the truth was burned into your heart, and you realized, “God loves me that much!” Graham Smith, with all his faults and sins and weaknesses and fears and problems -- God loves me! And it changes your life, and you are born again. What happened? All of a sudden, God’s Word to everybody in general becomes very personal through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You see, one of the results of getting a “word” from God, a personal “promise” from God, a personal “rema” is that it produces tremendous faith in your life. As our text says, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the ‘rema’ of Christ” — not the “logos” of Christ, but the “rema” of Christ. Faith comes by hearing the Lord speak to me personally; and all of a sudden, I’ve got confidence. I know that God is at work in my life.

Now let me apply this this morning in a very practical way. Let me give you the steps on how to pray about a problem -- how to pray about a difficult decision. What do you do when you’re in a situation, and you don’t know what to do? Should I take that job that’s offered to me in St. Louis? Should I go after that postgraduate degree? Should I get married, or should I stay single? As a young person, what career does God have in store for me?” How do you know the will of God? You’ve got to get a “rema”! And how do you get it? That’s what we’re going to look at. When you’re praying about a difficult decision:

- 1. Confess any known sin in your life.** You say, “Lord, is there any bad attitude I’ve got? Is there anything I’m doing that You want me to stop doing? Is there something You’ve been telling me to start doing that I haven’t been doing?” And you stop, and you get your life de-carbonized. You confess any failure, and make sure the channel is open for God to communicate His will to you.
- 2. Commit the decision to Christ.** Proverbs 3:5 and 6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know. Remember the Lord in everything you do, and He will show you the right way” (Good News Bible). You don’t try to figure it all out by yourself, but you just commit the problem to the Lord; you trust in Him with all your heart; you never rely on what you think you know.

You put yourself in neutral gear, as it were. And that may take some time. You say, “Lord, about this problem I’m facing, this decision, whatever You want is what I want.” And you keep

praying until you get to the point of absolute submission to the will of the Lord. “Lord, whatever You want is fine with me. If You want it, I want it. If You don’t want it, I don’t want it. ‘Not my will but Thine be done.’”

3. Ask God to reveal His will by giving you a desire. “Lord, help me to know what You want by giving me a desire one way or the other.” Now some people think, “I couldn’t do that, because if I desire something, God must be against it!” But that’s not true. Indeed, He can and does direct us into desires that will honor Him. Remember Psalm 37:4, “Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.” If you desire to do what’s right, and to please God, then your desires are going to be in line with God’s will for you. Mark 11:24 says, “When you pray, whatever you desire, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

James 1:5 tells us that if we lack wisdom, we are to ask God, and He will give it to us generously. So you say, “God, please give me the right kind of desires. Give me the desire to do the right thing.”

Now one good test of a desire is time. One way to know if a desire is from God is to sit on it for a while and say, “Lord, if this desire is from You, make it stronger; and if it is not from You, take it away.”

4. Compare your desires with Scripture. Now that you have a clear desire, you go to the Bible and soak yourself in it to see if what you desire is in tune with what the Bible says. Remember, the Holy Spirit never leads us contrary to God’s Word. That’s why it’s so important to know the Scripture. And if you have a problem with Scripture that you can’t solve, we, as your pastors, are here to help you; and if you are in a Bible study group, it is often helpful to receive the counsel of other Christians concerning a difficult passage of Scripture.

Now there are eight tests you can apply if you want to know if a desire is from God or not. They are found in James 3:17. Listen: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive (to God’s will); it is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy.” Those eight tests will tell you if your desire is right or not.

5. Listen for God to give you a personal promise — a “rema.” You just don’t go to the Bible and pick out a verse at random. You remember the fellow who said, “God, what is Your will for me today?” So, he opened his Bible and put his finger on the verse, “Judas went out and hanged himself.” Well, that couldn’t be right, so he tried again, and it said, “Go and do thou likewise!” That, of course, was no better, so he tried another page, and his finger went to this verse, “What thou doest, do quickly.” That’s the kind of result you get when you dip and skip through Scripture, and you try to force a verse to apply to your situation.

Now, the “rema,” the personal word God gives you about your situation, will come in a variety of ways. It might come through Bible reading. All of a sudden, a verse applies to you in a new way. It may come to you in a church service -- a word in a prayer or hymn or sermon hits you, and God says, “That’s for you; that’s your answer!” It may be in a Bible study group. It may

be a radio preacher as you drive to work. It may be a friend who gives you a Scripture verse, and you know it's straight from the Lord to you. Your prayer life is never stronger than your understanding of Scripture.

Do you know why 95% of Christians never hear God speak to them personally? They're too busy. They're always in a frantic hurry. We want God to give us an answer in 60 seconds! But God usually takes longer, because He wants to prepare us and change us. God speaks to the person who is willing to take the time to listen. Now after you've got that personal promise --

6. Claim that promise with confidence. You know it's going to happen. So, you begin thanking God in prayer because the promise is the answer. Do you remember when you were in school those math books that used to have the answers at the end of the book? And you would work out the equation and get the answer, and then you would go to the back to see if you were right. Well, hear my humble confession -- that's not what I did! I went to the back, found the answer, and then tried to work out the problem! I knew where I was going to end up; I knew the problem, but I also had the answer, so I simply had to go from A to B. Now that's the way prayer works. God gives you a promise, and He says He's going to answer you, so then you wait and give thanks while He's working it all out.

When our children send us Christmas presents through the mail, they sometimes phone to see if they have arrived. And sometimes they haven't yet arrived, but we thank them because we know the gift is on the way. And that's how it is with prayer. God gives you a specific promise to claim, and you say, "Thanks, Lord, I haven't got it yet, but I know it's on the way because You said it. You've given me a 'rema.'" And sometimes in the waiting period, God will give you little confirmations to assure you that He's at work.

When we bought our new home two years ago we really felt we were in the will of the Lord. He gave us a wonderful promise from the Book of Joshua, and then we received the most amazing confirmations. Everything seemed to fall into place. We sold our former home in six days, for cash! Extra furniture we had to buy, we got on sale. Bookcases which I wanted for my new study were much too expensive; and then, just when we were in a position to install them, the company had a sale and I got them for half price! It was amazing.

When God gives you a personal promise, a "rema," and you claim that promise by faith, then, when God says "Go," you move into action, and then you see things fall into place.

Some of you are facing some big problems, and you've got some difficult decisions to make. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:7 (King James Version), "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." You don't need to be anxious. God wants to work in every one of our lives. That's a "logos." But He wants to work in your life with a "rema."

Does God still perform miracles today? Indeed He does. And He wants to fill you with power and love!

AMEN.