

How to Argue Your Case With God

Rich Nathan

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Prayer: Hungry For God Series

Genesis 18:16-33; Exodus 32:7-14

The Presidential Campaign is now in the homestretch. There are three scheduled debates between President Bush and Senator Kerry, as well as one Vice-Presidential debate scheduled over the next month. How many of you expect the presidential debates to be filled with thoughtful, illuminating comments that will assist you in deciding which candidate to vote for? How many of you expect the participants to confine their remarks to the questions asked? How many of you expect the candidates to be brutally honest and admit that they were wrong in the past about a statement they made, or a policy they pursued?

Televised debates have a very brief history in America. The first televised debates were between Vice President Richard Nixon and Senator John F. Kennedy, who were competing in the 1960 Presidential elections. What people remember about those televised debates was that John Kennedy looked tan, fit, full of youthful energy and Richard Nixon looked like he had a 5:00 shadow. He didn't wear enough TV makeup and his eyes kept shifting as he spoke. There are a few trivia buffs that can remember some of the issues they argued about. But in the main, the televised debate was decided on the grounds of who looked better on TV.

Presidential contenders stopped debating until the 1980 election when President Carter debated with Ronald Reagan. What do you remember from that debate? The only thing that anyone remembers is Reagan's famous line, "There you go again..."

About the only thing anyone remembers in the last 20 years about Vice Presidential debates was the famous put-down of Dan Quayle in 1988 when Dan Quayle made the mistake of saying, "I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency," and Lloyd Bentsen, who was running along side of Michael Dukakis responded and said, "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy."

But other than a couple of quips, a few one-liners, almost no one can remember anything about the Presidential or Vice Presidential debates over the past 24 years.

Things weren't always like this in American political life. If you go back to the most famous debates in our history, the Abraham Lincoln-Stephen Douglas debates that took place right before the Civil War, they bear almost no resemblance to contemporary political debates. Today, virtually everything is said in 15-second sound bytes. The candidate has a slogan, a phrase that he

keeps pounding into your head. You can expect this in these debates. Senator Kerry is flip-flopping again. George W. Bush—W stands for wrong; I guarantee you that there will be a phrase that each candidate will use a dozen times over the course of an hour.

Unlike today's debates, where candidates are almost entirely lost without their speech writers, and candidates are told by their handlers to not make any literary references, or quote too much history because they will sound too elitist, Lincoln and Douglas did not dumb-down their remarks for the audience. So when you read the debates, they were carried on at such a high level. And over against the 15-second sound bytes, Lincoln and Douglas spoke in long complex paragraphs where the reasoning and arguments were really tight. They didn't use Teleprompters. They spoke extemporaneously. And they actually responded logically to the points that their opponents made.

Their audiences were farmers, shopkeepers, ordinary men and women. But back then people had an attention span that lasted more than a minute. And they loved the debates. The debates would be interrupted by people shouting from the crowd, "Hit him again." They came on foot; they came by barge; they came by horse; they came by train. And they would stand for 3½ hours in the sweltering heat thoroughly enjoying watching these two intellectual giants, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, battle it out.

Lincoln and Douglas couldn't have been more different in appearance and presentation. Douglas was all of 5'4". He had a really large head and barrel chest. His voice was loud and self-confident. His gestures were eloquent and aristocratic. Lincoln was over a foot taller than Douglas. He was more than 6'4". He was really lanky. He was kind of ungainly, awkward, really long-limbed. And his voice was high pitched. It was almost shrill. He had a Kentucky twang. He used to move his head up and down in an awkward manner, side to side; he shook his head as he spoke. But his logic was impeccable; he had a fantastic memory and he had a razor-sharp wit. Lincoln was just unbelievably funny.

But one of the things they clashed on was the meaning of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln insisted that the "equality of man" phrase applied to every person, black or white. Douglas, on the other hand, said that Lincoln's interpretation was a monstrous heresy. And that when the Declaration of Independence declared all men to be created equal, that our Founding Fathers only meant white men of European birth and European descent.

In their last debate, they got down to the core issue of the rightness or wrongness of slavery. Here is what Lincoln said: *That is the real issue. An issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Douglas and myself shall be silent. These are the two principles that are the eternal struggle between right and wrong. They are the two principles that have stood face-to-face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle, one of them asserting the*

divine right of kings that says you work, you toil, you earn bread, and I will eat it. It is the same old serpent, whether it comes from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his nation, and to live upon the fat of his neighbor, or whether it comes from one race of men as an apology for the enslaving of another race of men.

How about this statement by Lincoln: *We are now far into the fifth year since the policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation has not only not ceased, but has constantly been augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South.*

Can you imagine anyone today being that eloquent or having that kind of a reasoned argument? I've been doing a series on prayer and one of the most amazing things we discover about God in the Bible is that God invites us to argue

with him, to set forth our case, to debate with him. God, in his infinite condescension, tells us to reason together with him in achieving his purpose in the world. We're going to look at this in a talk that I've titled, "How to Argue Your Case With God." Let's pray.

It seems to me that the biggest problem we have with prayer is believing that our prayers make any difference. I don't know about you, but I struggle regularly with the thought: Is this really helping? Is this prayer going to change anything at all? We often say to ourselves: Why bother praying, if God's going to do what God's going to do anyway? I could do a million things more productive with my time. I could work harder. I could consult about the problem with a friend or a counselor, or a financial advisor. If prayer doesn't make any difference, then no matter how much I pray, things remain the same. Then many of us say: I'll spend the next hour in good old fashioned worrying. I'll just fret and fret and worry myself to death.

Let me ask you a question. Friend, do you think you would pray more if you believed that prayer actually made a difference? Do you think that you would feel less depressed, less defeated, less overwhelmed if a thought came to you: I could work on this by myself; I could exhaust myself with strategizing and planning; or I could ask God to work on this and he will. There is an old saying: When we work, we work! But when we pray, God works!

Is this true? Does God really work when we pray?

Well, let's think about this for a moment. Why do we pray? If you go back in history, you can break prayer up into five different types of prayer. There is a great study of this by a man named Friedrich Heiler in a book titled *Prayer: History and Psychology*. There is, first of all, what Heiler would call "primitive prayer." A person seeks to control the power of the gods for their own end, to gain some earthly good, to prosper. God becomes a "genie in a bottle" who will give us whatever we ask for.

You see some of this primitive prayer in what's been called "name it and claim it" theology, or what I would call "the blab it and grab it" churches. It is like in the old song, "Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" This kind of prayer, where you seek to harness God's power for your own ends, is condemned in James 4:3,

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When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your own pleasures.

A second type of prayer might be what one would call "ritual or magical prayer." A person prays a certain set prayer over and over again. You learn a certain formula and then you get a certain result. You just have to say the right words to

get the incantation. You learn the secret: “Open sesame...” and then heaven’s door is opened. You can see this kind of ritual, almost magical, type of prayer with children in the Roman Catholic Church. We’re going to race through ten “our Fathers” or five “hail Marys” right before we take a test, or in order to obtain forgiveness from God.

I saw this kind of ritual, magical prayer as I grew up in a Jewish family and attended synagogue. Some of the men would race through their morning prayers so quickly that all you would hear is just a buzz as they repeated the liturgy at warp speed.

This kind of prayer is also condemned in the Bible. Jesus said in Matt. 6:7

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And when you pray do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.

Some translations talk about vain repetitions. It is a magical view that says if I just get the words right, I’ve got the key that will unlock heaven’s door.

A third type of prayer that you find through the ages is “mystical prayer.” The goal of mystical prayer is to become one with the Divine Essence. Typically,

mystics look down on people who are asking for things from God. Going to God with petitions, or requests, is seen as a lower, carnal kind of prayer.

But the Bible does not say that the goal of prayer is to become merged with the Divine. In fact, over and over through example and command, the Bible tells us to present our petitions to God. Jesus taught us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread. James 4 tells us:

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You do not have because you do not ask God.

We see Jesus himself presenting petitions to God. The apostle Paul prayed and asked God for things. And all through the Bible the great men and women of faith did not seek simply to merge with God's essence, but they petitioned him as people in need. You are not being carnal or worldly by asking God for things.

And then there is what I call "psychological or therapeutic prayer." The idea here is that prayer doesn't have any real impact in the world out there external to your mind. But it does help to relieve stress. It is good to pray because it will lower your blood pressure. It may help you immune system. Some people meditate. Some people do yoga. Some people have a couple of stiff drinks every evening. But you, Christians, you pray. Hey, whatever works for you; if it floats your boat, great!

I think that this psychological or therapeutic approach to prayer is probably the most popular approach to prayer in the 21st century. It is psychologically beneficial. It is the sort of thing that Psychology Today would write an article about. You may argue and say: It may be that prayer is psychologically beneficial, but it is more than that. Prayer actually changes things external to our minds because we were speaking to a real God who actually responds to prayer.

Cynics would say: Well, any so-called responses to your prayers are just coincidences. A rooster's crowing doesn't make the sun come up. And your prayers have no affect whatsoever on the world outside of you. All of your so-called answers to prayer are just coincidences.

I love an old English Bishop's response to this charge of mere coincidence. He said, "When I pray, coincidences happen. And when I don't, they don't."

That's my experience. That's the experience of all of God's children who pray. When we pray, we see these extraordinary coincidences. Amazing! I just prayed about that. And when we don't pray, we don't see these coincidences.

Well, a final kind of prayer is what Heiler would call "biblical prayer." It is a request made of God out of love or need for the purpose of better fulfilling God's will in the world. It is not the case that God going to do what he's going to do with

or without us. That's some people's view of God's sovereignty. God is working. He is cranking out his will. And his will is going to be done with us, without us, around us, in spite of us.

But that's not a biblical view of God's sovereignty, friend. Here is the amazing truth found throughout the Bible. God invites you and me into relationship with him. God invites us into a dialogue. God tells us to pray in order to fulfill his ultimate purposes with your life, or in the lives of people around us. John Wesley, the great founder of the Methodist Church, said, "God does nothing in this world except in response to the prayers of his people."

I don't think I would go that far. But it is very clear that there is a great deal that God won't do unless you and I pray. See, it is in the intention of God to partner together with you and me in bringing about his will in the world. The apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 3:9 says,

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For we are God's fellow workers.

The main way we work together with God is prayer. Think about this. Sovereign God, who could do everything apart from us, chooses to collaborate with us in the working out of his plans through our prayers. This is awesome! All knowing, all wise God, who knows our needs before we pray, desires that we discuss them

with him so that he can work together with us toward their solution. God wants to use us as conduits for bringing his kingdom into the world. He doesn't want to work around us, or in spite of us, or apart from us. God wants to work through us, through you and me. And the main means that God uses to bring the power of his kingdom into this world is our prayers.

I want you to see this in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 18, God has determined that he is going to destroy the city of Sodom because of the sin found in that city. We read in Gen. 18:17,

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Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Now, why did God disclose his plans to destroy Sodom to Abraham? It has to do with this whole mystery of God working out his will in the world through our

prayers. See, Abraham is called “the friend of God.” In Isaiah 41:8, the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says,

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But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend.

Abraham is God’s friend. And Jesus uses that title of friend and applies it to us, who are children of Abraham, by faith in Christ. In John 15:13 Jesus says:

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Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus tells us that the difference between a servant and a friend is that a servant is not let in on his master’s secrets. Servants are just given orders: Do this; do that. Pick up that. Clean up there. Servants are people that you order around and they have to obey. But friends are people you share your secrets with. Friends are folks you open up to. Friends are people that you are transparent with. And the reason God is opening up his heart to Abraham, his friend, is

because he wants Abraham, his friend, to participate in the outworking of God's will in the world.

But shouldn't we pray: God's will be done? Well, that brings us squarely back to the problem we have with prayer. If God is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah anyway, why pray? Again, if God is God, and God is going to do what God is going to do, I'm glad that he tells me, but I can't affect that at all. Who are we to argue with God? Is it possible that God's plans can be altered, or are we living in a Muslim fatalism? It is the will of Allah. We can't do anything about it. Or in the words of the old 1950's song, I think by Doris Day, "Que sera sera! Whatever will be will be."

Friend, here is a secret regarding God's announced will. Almost all of God's announced intentions carry with them a secret "if." God says, "I'm going to judge. I'm going to overthrow. I'm going to discipline." But every time God announces judgment, there is an implicit if...If you repent...If you change...If you turn back to me...If you pray...I will change. And you can look at Jeremiah 18:5-10 for that principle.

I will not change my character. I am reliable. I am consistent. I am faithful. But I will change my activity in the world, if you pray. We must believe this if we are ever going to pray that God allows himself to be affected by us. God allows himself to be persuaded by our arguments. God invites you and me to debate

with him, to wrestle with him, to strive with him, to change his announced intentions.

And most Christian people don't get this. We are afraid to argue with God. Most Christian people are afraid to argue with God. Most Christians begin their prayers with Jesus' words in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Thy will be done."

- God, I'd like this to happen, but your will be done.
- If it be your will, heal so-and-so, but if not, thy will be done.
- If it be thy will, save so-and-so, but nevertheless, thy will be done.
- If it be thy will, forgive this person's sin, rescue this church, nevertheless, thy will be done.

You know, "thy will be done" is often a pious mask for our unbelief. We don't think that our prayers will make a difference to God. Some of us would fall over dead if God actually healed, if he actually intervened to save, or if he redeemed a marriage, or totally changed someone, or delivered someone from a demon. So we cover our unbelief with "thy will be done."

There is a time, friends, to submit yourself to God's will. There is a time to give up. There is a time to resign yourself to God's designs even if you don't understand them. But the time to pray: "thy will be done," is never at the beginning of a prayer. It is always at the end, after a season of striving and arguing your case, and wrestling. Jesus first, wrestled with the Father in the

Garden of Gethsemane. And only after wrestling, only after striving, only after agonizing in prayer to the point of sweating drops from his head that were like drops of blood, then he said: “Thy will be done.”

So what, if your prayer request wasn’t granted yesterday or the day before, or a thousand times before? Jesus tells us in Luke 18:1 to always pray and never give up. Again, there is a time to say: Father, it appears to me that you are saying “no” to my request. It appears to me that for your own reasons, you are denying my petition. I accept that. You are God and I am not.

But we say that always after wrestling with God, after arguing with God, after debating with God, never at the front end of our prayers. Don’t assume that there is anything unalterable in this world—that a doctor’s pronouncement of the inevitable outcome of your child’s disability: Well, your child will never be able to succeed in school; well, your child will never play sports with that handicap; this disease will take such-and-such a course; this treatment will make you ill to this degree. Do not accept anything as unalterable. As Yogi Berra, the great Yankee catcher once said: “It ain’t over till it’s over.” Until God says to you: No, my answer is no, it doesn’t matter how many experts tell you otherwise, it ain’t over till it’s over, you argue your case with God.

Listening to Abraham, it is a little reminiscent of haggling in a Middle Eastern marketplace where the seller says: You like that robe? It’ll cost you 50.

The buyer says: No, it is too expensive.

Seller: 45 then.

Buyer: No, it is a nice robe, but still way too expensive. I'll live without it.

Seller: 40, but I can't go any lower. I'm practically giving it away.

Buyer: You know, I'm wasting your time. 40 is out of the question.

Seller: OK, 30 and I'm wrapping it up. That's it.

Buyer: Well, maybe I'll look at some other stores.

Seller: You won't buy it for 30? I'm losing money! OK, 20. I'm giving it away.

I'm losing money on the deal. 20.

Buyer: Look, all I have is 10.

Seller: You expect me to sell it to you for 10? That's crazy. That's insane. Here you go, for 10.

I love this dialogue.

There is a word that is used several dozen times in the New Testament. The Greek word is "parresia." It is sometimes translated "boldness," or "confident." Sometimes it is translated "outspokenness," or "speaking plainly." The word was borrowed from Greek politics. It describes the right of a free citizen to express his opinion when the city assembly got together. It had to do with the right of a free citizen to say everything that was on his mind, to speak plainly. And it also had to do with the courage to speak one's conviction.

The word “parresia” also was borrowed from the world of friendship, where one friend didn’t hold anything back from another friend. They didn’t have to butter up or flatter a friend before speaking plainly.

This word, parresia, is used regarding our prayers to God on a number of occasions. For example, in Hebrews 4:16 we read this:

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Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Now, the NIV translates the word “with confidence.” The old King James Version reads this way:

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Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

But the one that I think comes closest to capturing the meaning of the word, parresia, is the Message version of the Bible. Listen to this paraphrase:

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We don't have a high priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he's so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

Let's walk right up to him. There is a frankness, a boldness, an outspokenness that you find with people in the Bible regarding their dialogue with God. For example, listen to what Jeremiah says to God in Jeremiah 12:1,

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You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I will speak with you about your justice: why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit. You are always on their lips, but far from their hearts...Drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of the slaughter!

God, I don't get it. Listen to the frankness of the psalmist as he speaks to God in Psalm 44:9,

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But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies. You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us. You gave us to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale...All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you, nor been false to your covenant. Our hearts had not turned back; our feet have not strayed from your path...But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness...Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?

People in the Bible speak so freely to God. Now, I need to immediately say that this outspokenness, this frankness, this going right up to God and asking him for things, this confidence and boldness, doesn't mean losing a sense of reverence. Intimacy does not mean over-familiarity. Jesus is our friend, but he is not our bud. I hate listening to people speak to God as if they are spoiled brats throwing a temper tantrum in a grocery store. It is as if the person we are speaking to is not awesomely terrifying. We are not only approaching our friend, we are approaching our judge and our Creator.

So Abraham argues with God and he is deferential, even as he argues. Genesis 18:27,

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Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes”...(v.30) Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak”...(v.31) Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if...” (v.32) Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more.”

There is a frankness, there is a freedom of speech, but it is a freedom of speech of standing before an awesome God. So, how then do we argue our case with God? What's the basis of Abraham's appeal to God? Abraham basis his appeal for the city of Sodom upon the character of God in vv. 23-25,

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Then Abraham approached and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Abraham pleads his case based on the justice and the righteousness of God. Father, it could not possibly be the case that you would ever do wrong. You are absolutely just. Your standards are perfect. You certainly cannot violate justice in

sweeping away the innocent with the guilty. When you are arguing your case with God, remind God of his character. Remind God of his attributes that he reveals in the Bible.

Father, it is unthinkable that I would be more merciful than you. You are infinitely kind. Your heart is so much more tender than mine. How then can you allow this child to continue to live without a father?

- How then can you continue to allow this wife to be abused?
- How then can you continue to let so-and-so suffer from such mental torment because of his depression, or his schizophrenia? Father, because of your mercy, act on their behalf. Father, intervene.
- Father, it is unimaginable that I would want starving people in the Sudan or Sub-Saharan Africa fed more than you would. My heart is so selfish. I'm so easily distracted from meeting the needs of others. I can only handle so much pain. But God you are infinite in your compassion. Rouse yourself on their behalf. Do not remain silent. Relieve their suffering.

When you pray for a loved one, remind God that he loves that person more than you do.

How then do you argue your case with God? In Exodus 32 God tells Moses that he is going to destroy the nation of Israel because of their idolatry. While Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel were down below building a golden calf and bowing before it, worshipping this idol instead of worshipping God. God in anger says: I'm going to destroy the nation of Israel, much like God told Abraham: I'm going to destroy Sodom. How does Moses argue God out of this? Exodus 32:11

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But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. "O Lord," he said, "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?"

Abraham reminded God of his character. Moses reminded God that the people he was going to destroy were the Lord's own people. Remind God of his relationship to the person you are praying for.

- Lord Jesus, this is one you called your bride, your beloved. How can you possibly allow your bride to slide into sin without rescuing her, or him? You didn't marry a prostitute, you want a holy bride. Save her. Save him.

- Father, these are your children. Your children are crying out to you day and night for food. Listen to the cries of your children. Have mercy on your own kids.
- Father, this is your chosen one. This is the one you say is the apple of your eye.
- Father, this is your elect. These are your people. These are your sons and daughters. These are the sheep of your pasture. You say that you are the shepherd that you provide and care for your sheep. That you will provide leadership, protection and provision for your sheep. But your sheep are not being protected. Your sheep are not being provided for. Your sheep are not being led. Rouse yourself and lead your sheep. Cover them. Protect them.

Remind God of his relationship with his people.

How else can we argue our case with God? Remind God that his reputation is at stake. V. 12,

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Why should the Egyptians say, “it was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.

Moses is saying: God, if you do this, if you destroy your people, you are going to look bad. Why should the Egyptians think poorly of you? Your reputation is at stake in the world. It is in your best interests, God, in the best interest of your reputation to preserve your people. Remind God about his reputation.

This is a frequent cause of appeal for the people of God. Dozens of times the Bible tells us that God does things for the sake of his name. The first prayer that we pray in the so-called Lord’s Prayer is “Hallowed be thy name.” We pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” What are we praying when we pray: Father, cause your name to be hallowed? We’re saying: Father, cause people in this world to respect, to esteem, to honor, to admire, to reverence your name. All that God does in the Bible he does for the sake of gaining for himself a reputation. Why did he choose the Jewish people? Jeremiah 13:11,

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For as a belt is bound around a man’s waist, so I bound the whole of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me, declares the Lord, to be my people for my renown and praise and honor.

Jews were chosen to bring God renown and honor on the earth. Why did God not destroy the Egyptians in a single stroke? Why didn't he bring about some catastrophic earthquake and destroy the nation of evil instead of sending ten judgments upon them? Romans 9:17 gives us the answer:

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For the scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."

God wanted people around the face of the earth to fear him, that he wasn't just some local deity, some Jewish God, that he was the God over all. That he was the God over all the Egyptian gods. And he gained that reputation because hundreds of miles away in the walled city of Jericho, a pagan prostitute heard the news about what the Lord God of Israel had done to the Egyptians and this pagan prostitute named Rehab was converted to the Lord and saved her life and the lives of her family. We read this in Joshua 2:10,

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Rehab said, "We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When

we heard of it, our hearts sank and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

How should we pray? Let's say a Christian is doing something that could injure the gospel or the cause of Christ. Let's say a Christian who is known to be a Christian in a community is contemplating getting a divorce. Let's say a Christian who is known to be a Christian in a community is doing something unethical in business. Let's say a church is on the verge of splitting, or a pastor is slipping into immorality, how should we pray when we watch people who are associated with God dragging God's name through the mud?

It is still the case, friend, that the best advertisement for the truth of Christianity are genuine Christians, who live consistently with their profession of faith. And it is still the case that the best evidence that Christianity is false are inconsistent, hypocritical, all-talk and no-walk Christians. So when you pray and you say:

- God, intervene in that Christian's life who is thinking about walking away from their marriage.
- God, intervene in that Christian's life who is caught up in sexual sin.
- God, break in to that church that's splitting and dividing.
- Rescue that pastor who's gotten himself trapped.

We make our case on the basis of the name of God. We want your reputation to be esteemed. We want your name to be hallowed. We want you to be respected. We want you to be honored.

Let me tell you a story. In 1941 two women were walking in a village in Northwestern China. One was barely five feet tall. The other was over six feet tall with long blonde curls. As they reached the town's entrance, the people were carrying wooden idols and beating drums praying to these idols. A drought had ravaged this mountain village for weeks. The soil was so dry that if rain didn't come in the next few days the whole year's crops were going to be destroyed.

As they entered the village, some of the men began screaming at them saying, "You must take off your hats." The tall, blonde woman from Norway, named Sister Annie, said, "Why? Why should we take off our hats?"

The Chinese people said, "Because our gods cannot bear seeing dry grass on someone's head when there is a drought in the village. When they do, they get even more furious and they send even more drought over our poor fields. Take off your hats at once, otherwise, we'll tear them off and burn them."

Sister Annie, the tall woman, said: "Listen, you idol worshippers, I cannot take off my hat as a salute to your idols."

The men turned towards her and said, "Then we will kill you." And a dozen men lifted up heavy sticks to beat the women with.

So Sister Annie said: "Wait! My God can give you rain; your idols cannot."

"Your God? We don't know any other gods but our own."

And so Sister Annie said: "Just wait. He will turn this drought to rain. I promise you that by midnight tonight it will rain."

The men said: "This giant white woman is promising rain. Let her show what this God of hers can do. Let her show us that she has a God better than our gods. But if the giant woman cannot provide rain before midnight, we will kill her."

As the two women began walking out of the village, the shorter one said to Sister Annie: You shouldn't have done that. If it doesn't rain before midnight, they are going to kill us.

Sister Annie said: I believe that it is God's will that I shall continue to live and preach the gospel in this country. I believe that God cares about his reputation. He's going to show these people that he is the one and only God.

They were held captive in a hut. They spent the evening praying. Half an hour before midnight, a very old person from the village threw the door open and said: The rain is coming! The rain is coming! Your God has brought rain. He has saved your lives.

Sister Annie became one of the most famous missionaries in the whole of Northwest China.

Of course, we don't declare things out of our own mind. Sister Annie had a close walk with God and spoke this out of her relationship with God. But she prayed this out of God's name.

And then Moses made an appeal reminding God of God's promises. V. 13,

SLIDE

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give you descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever."

Friends, go through the Bible and pray the Word of God back to God. God makes so many promises to us. Pray to him reminding him of his own word.

- You promised to bless, God, those who love and fear you.

- You promised to deliver them.
- You promised to show favor.
- You promised that you were going to give understanding.
- You promised protection and guidance. Psalm 25:12

SLIDE

Who then is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.

Say to God: Lord, I am a man who takes you seriously. I am a woman who takes you seriously. Psalm 25 promises me that you will reveal your mind to me. You make so many promises, Lord, to those who seek you. You promise God-seekers that:

- They will find you.
- They will be blessed.
- They will be given moral sensitivity.
- They will receive rewards.

I am seeking you, God.

In Matthew 7, you tell me, Lord:

SLIDE

Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Lord, I'm asking, I'm seeking and I'm knocking. I'm going to take you at your word. Remind God of his promises.

And last of all, remind God of the name of Jesus. We read in John 14 this extraordinary promise. Vv. 12-14

SLIDE

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus? To pray in the name of Jesus means to pray on the basis of the great work Christ accomplished in his life and death, and resurrection, and ascension where he reigns as Lord. To pray in the name of Jesus means that we realize that our prayers have no worthiness, no impact unless we go through Jesus our mediator. To pray in the name of Jesus means we understand we cannot penetrate into the holy of holies, our prayers

cannot come into God's holy awesome presence unless they're carried by the hands of Jesus.

When I pray in the name of Jesus, I imagine Jesus, my mediator, my redeemer, my bridegroom, my lover, personally carrying a note from me and hand delivering it to God the Father. My prayer gets God my Father's attention because of Jesus' work and Jesus' person. And when I pray in the name of Jesus, what I'm asking the Father to do is to honor the work of Christ in this world by applying it to this specific situation, or this specific person.

We make our argument before God and it sounds like this: Father, it can't possibly be the case that you want the blood of your Son to go in vain in Jim's life; in Abby's life. Father, have regard for the sacrifice of your only begotten Son. Call to your remembrance your Son's suffering in the Garden, your Son's betrayal, your Son's trial, your Son's beating and mocking. Call to your remembrance your Son's agony on the cross and the horror done to your son physically and mentally and spiritually. Father, your son lost you on the cross and Father you lost your precious Son and the world went dark. Father, have regard for the sacrifice of your Son. Do not let your Son's suffering and your own sacrifice to be allowed to have no impact in my father's life, in my mother's life, in my sister's life, in my brother's life, in my children's lives, in such-and-such a situation. Apply your power that's been brought into this world through your Son's death, resurrection, and ascension to this situation. I bring before you the

Son of God to remind you, Father, about what your Son has accomplished. Now release your power.

Friend, argue your case with God. Grab hold of God. Wrestle with God. Strive with him. He invites you into that kind of relationship. Your prayers do make a difference. Let's pray.

How to Argue Your Case With God

Rich Nathan

September 25-26, 2004

Prayer: Hungry For God Series

Genesis 18:16-33; Exodus 32:7-14

- I. Does Prayer Make a Difference?
 - A. What Does Prayer Mean?
 - 1. Primitive Prayer
 - 2. Ritual Prayer
 - 3. Mystical Prayer
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 - 5. Biblical Prayer
 - B. Isn't God Going To Do What He's Going To Do With or Without Us?
 - C. But Shouldn't We Pray "Thy Will Be Done?"
 - D. Is It Really All Right to Argue With God?
- II. How to Argue Your Case With God
 - A. Remind God of His Character (Gen. 18:23-25)
 - B. Remind God of His People (Ex. 32:11)
 - C. Remind God of His Reputation (Ex. 32:12)
 - D. Remind God of His Promises (Ex. 32:13)
 - E. Remind God of the Name of Jesus (Jn. 14:13, 14)