

PRAY BIG THINGS

*The Surprising Life God Has for You
When You're **BOLD ENOUGH TO ASK***

JULIA JEFFRESS SADLER



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To Ryan, Blair, Barrett, and Blake,
who are immeasurably more than anything
I could have hoped or imagined!
God put you in my heart, dreams, and prayers
long before He put you in my life.

May this book help you to forever remember our story,
remember our God, and remember to pray big things!

Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe.

Psalm 107:2 NIV

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I probably shouldn't give any spoilers, so I'll just leave it at this: a first-time mom of triplets cannot write a book while taking care of three babies without a ton of help! *Pray Big Things* is the culmination of a lot of prayer, people, support, and God's power. It's a story and charge that I believe God wants told and applied, and because of that, He called me and at times carried me through the process to get His promises to you!

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Introduction

Pray Big Things

No one prays for triplets,” a mom posted in my newly joined Facebook support group for parents of triplets, which has a screening process equivalent to being rushed for a sorority, followed by membership instructions that rival *Mission Impossible*. No use searching for us on Facebook; our group cannot be found unless someone adds you to the secret society.

“We prayed for triplets!” I remember proudly, humbly, and excitedly typing back. Why do I say *proudly*? Doesn’t that contradict *humbly*? Nope. My husband, Ryan, and I are so proud of God and of what He has done to redeem our losses and give us more than we could ever imagine that we want to shout it from the rooftops. God sustained us through multiple miscarriages, losses, jealousy, bitterness, discouragement, suffering, and exhaustion, and He has blessed us now beyond our wildest imagination.

That’s all good for you, you may be thinking, but what does your story have to do with me? I’ve prayed before and

haven't received what I've asked. And sometimes I don't even know what I would ask God if I could.

What if I told you God wants to do more than you can possibly imagine in your life? First Corinthians 2:9 declares, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him” (NLT). Your dream may not be to have triplets, but if you are honest with yourself, it is likely you have a dream deep down that

*What if I told you
God wants to do more
than you can possibly
imagine in your life?*

you would give anything in order to make happen. My challenge to you is to start imagining what would happen if God fulfilled that dream!

After we miscarried three babies in one year, Ryan and I came to a point of desperation and made a decision that changed our lives forever: we committed to start praying for big things. As I will describe in more detail in the chapters to come, we prayed fervently for three biological children, prayed for multiples, prayed for miracles, prayed for a TV show, prayed for book deals, and prayed to have children of both genders. Nearly one year to the day of our last miscarriage, God answered our big prayers in a big way: by giving us triplets, a television show, and the opportunity to share our story through books.

These may not be your specific dreams, goals, or prayers, but they show that God is an active God who listens to our requests. The Bible says, “You don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it” (James 4:2 NLT). This verse has been the theme of our prayer journey. While God is not a genie in the sky granting whatever we wish for, the

truth is that the majority of Christians today are not asking too much of God; they are asking too little of God.

So, what are you waiting for? Are you wondering why God isn't answering your prayers? Do you want more in your life? Do you want God to act? Do you have dreams that seem impossible? Are you tired of living in the future or the past? Do you wonder how to keep moving, keep loving, and keep acting in the midst of suffering, in the midst of questions, and in the midst of knowing and believing God is good while trying to come to terms with the place you find yourself in life? If you are tired of "wishing your life away" by wishing for things without actually taking any action and are ready to see God move in your life like never before, then this book is for you.

This is the story of our waiting, infertility, ceaseless praying, struggles, and ultimately receiving more than we could imagine. This is the story of pain, loss, hope, and dreams fulfilled. This story is for you, so that you do not lose heart, so that you will refuse to give up, and so that you will choose to believe God to be the powerful dream creator and prayer answerer He is. This is not a seminary-level book about the spiritual discipline of prayer. This is a book for ordinary people about the experiences of one ordinary family who decided to start taking God at His Word and seeing what would happen. Also, by looking at the life of the biblical character Joseph, we will see that God often gives us our dreams long before they come to fruition.

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Introduction

My prayer, as you read this book, is that you will leave encouraged, believing God can do immeasurably more than anything you can hope or imagine. May you begin with new excitement, courage, and determination to pray big things!

1

More Than We Can Imagine

Never measure God’s unlimited power by your limited expectations.

David C. McCasland

I think we should get married,” I said to my boyfriend, Ryan, when we were both fourteen years old and in junior high. “Our personalities seem really compatible.”

This was a few months prior to the inevitable breakup that began a long romantic saga to rival every great teen drama and before my mom called Ryan to get him and me back together (every teenage boy’s dream, right?). This was also before we got married at ages twenty and twenty-one, when everyone thought we were too young and too immature, and before we were both called to full-time student ministry. This was before we were the first to get married and the last to have kids in our friend group, before our

three miscarriages—and before the miraculous birth of our triplets.

This was also before the journey that would test our faith, before Ryan and I truly believed God, and before we made a decision one rainy New Year’s Eve night in London to pray big things.

This one decision to start praying intentionally—to ask God regularly for very specific requests—has changed the course of our lives forever. And it has the potential to change your life as well.

Living on Borrowed Prayers

For most of my life, I was never really interested in prayer. Prayer seemed boring, honestly.

I understand if reading that makes you decide I seem unspiritual. Maybe you think perhaps I was new to the Christian faith, and the reason I wasn’t interested in prayer was that I hadn’t been exposed to the spiritual discipline. But the truth is that I have been in church my entire life. As the daughter of a pastor, I was praying before bed and at the dinner table ever since I could talk. I have had a front-row seat to witnessing God’s miraculous answers to the incredible prayers of His people since an early age. And now, as a full-time student minister married to another student minister, I have had the opportunity to watch God move in the lives of young people in astounding ways in response to their fervent prayers.

So why was prayer not exciting to me? Why did I secretly think it was boring and nod off while listening to sermons about it?

The answer is *I was living on borrowed prayers.*

I had benefited from other people's knee work. I had been encouraged by other people's testimonies. I had gotten chill bumps while listening to other people pray. But none of my experiences with prayer had been direct, personal encounters with God. My lack of enthusiasm about prayer was not a theological issue; it was an ownership issue. I lived and benefited from borrowed prayers for most of my life.

Let me stop and say that others interceding on our behalf is incredible, biblical, and very important to the Christian life. But it cannot be our only experience with prayer. If we want to see God move and do big things in our lives, then we must have a direct line to Him.

While the term "borrowed prayers" is not in the Bible, the theme of borrowing versus ownership can be found throughout Scripture. Ryan and I have worked in student ministry for the past ten years. A few years into our ministry, the Barna Group released a landmark study, based on a five-year project headed by David Kinnaman, which found that "nearly three out of every five young Christians (59%) disconnect either permanently or for an extended period of time from church life after age 15."¹ This was a knife to the hearts of Christian parents and student ministers who devote their lives to helping adolescents develop and maintain a strong Christian faith.

What needs to happen in order to keep our teenagers in church? How do we make sure that, after sending our students off to college, we are not also sending them off forever

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from the church? Ryan and I, along with many other student ministers, have realized that one of the reasons teenagers are leaving church is they have not developed authentic ownership over their faith. They may have a faith background, and they may be familiar with the things of God, but they haven't developed a personal faith of their own by seeking and believing in Him for themselves. Since their faith has been fueled only by the faith of their parents or church community, and not by God Himself, they are susceptible to burnout.

I think the same principle can be found with Christians of all ages. A lack of ownership equals a lack of enthusiasm, resulting in a susceptibility to abandoning our faith. When we don't take ownership of our faith, we are not excited about it, resulting many times in the temporary, practical, or permanent abandonment of our faith.

Maybe we don't abandon it altogether. Maybe we just decide to stop doing certain spiritual disciplines, like prayer, that do not seem to be working for us anymore. We slowly let other people do our knee work, and before we know it, we end up massively out of spiritual shape.

The Bible repeatedly refers to God's people taking ownership of the blessings God has promised to His children. For example, Deuteronomy 15:6 says, "The LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you." Or consider Deuteronomy 28:12, which says, "The LORD will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not

borrow.” While some things in these chapters are specific to the historic time period and to the Israelites, the idea that we are to own what God has promised and not be in a state of borrowing is a truth applicable to Christians today.

This does not mean it is always wrong to borrow things. For example, you can borrow sugar, a lawn mower, or another household need from your neighbor. Rather, these passages are saying that it is a complete contradiction for us to live as if we have no tangible way to get what we need, want, or desire while having full access to the God of all creation.

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Your Greatest Adventure

This is not a theology book, and I am not a theologian. I do sometimes say I have an honorary degree from Pastor’s Daughter Seminary, after years of having my bedtime story be my dad telling me the points of his upcoming sermon or a detailed explanation of the differences between various world religions. But you do not have to be a theologian to understand the Bible. You don’t even need to have grown up in church. Faith is so simple that the Bible says even a child can understand (Matt. 18:3).

While there are countries in the world today where reading the Bible is illegal and punishable by the government, chances are, since you are reading this book, you probably don’t live in one of these places. This means you are more

than likely allowed limitless access to the Bible. The Bible—which defines, details, and declares supernatural truth and reveals secrets to unleashing incredible power over our lives—remains for many of us a dusty book, doubling as a coaster on a bad day and as bookshelf decor on the best day. Why do many Christians go days, weeks, months, or even years without reading the text that defines their professed faith?

Someone has wisely said, “A person who won’t read has no advantage over one who can’t read.” The same principle

Many of God’s children are not asking for much more than a blessed meal, resulting in a less-than-blessed life.

applies when it comes to the practice of prayer. The person who won’t pray has no advantage over the person who can’t pray.

Wait a minute, you may be thinking. *What do you mean “the person who can’t pray”?* *Can’t everyone pray?* Well, of course they can pray. But as Christians, we have a special relation-

ship to the Father. The apostle Peter tells us that “the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer” (1 Pet. 3:12). However, many of God’s children are not asking for much more than a blessed meal, resulting in a less-than-blessed life.

Why Don’t We Receive Answers to Our Prayers?

Contrary to popular social media posts and bumper stickers, we are not all children of God. The Bible says in John 1:12, “To all who did receive [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (NIV). Anyone who receives Christ as personal Lord and Savior is a

child of God and has unlimited access to ask whatever they wish of their heavenly Father.

We Are Not Children of God

Some of us are not receiving what we ask because we are not really children of God. If you have never received Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, then I urge you not to read another word of this book without asking God to forgive you and save you, and asking for Jesus's sacrifice on the cross to count for you. Romans 10:9–10 says, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." If you are not yet a Christian (or not sure if you are), then I encourage you to stop right now and pray something like this:

Dear God,

Thank You for loving me. I realize that I have failed You in many ways, and I'm truly sorry for the sin in my life. I believe that You loved me so much that You sent Your Son Jesus to die on the cross for me. I believe that Jesus took the punishment from You that I deserve for my sins. So right now I'm trusting in what Jesus did for me—not my own good works—to save me from my sins. Thank You for forgiving me and helping me to spend the rest of my life serving You. In Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

If you prayed and just became a child of God, then welcome to the family! You have made the most important

decision of your life. You can rest assured that you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven. As the apostle John wrote, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

You also now have unlimited access to ask whatever you want, need, or desire of your heavenly Father, who loves, hears, and answers His children. In John 15:16, Jesus encourages believers, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give to you.” If you have accepted Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, then Jesus’s Father is now your heavenly Father, of whom you can ask anything and everything.

We Are Not Living like Children of God

Some of us are not receiving what we ask in prayer because we are living as if we are not children of God. We are not asking anything of God, even though we can ask everything of Him!

UNCONFESSED SIN

We may not be interested in praying because of unconfessed sin in our lives. Sin creates a sense of estrangement from God. Isaiah 59:2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden *His* face from you so that He does not hear.” When we are living in sin, we tend to pull away from God and stop coming to Him in prayer.

King David knew what it was like for his sin to create a barrier between him and God. In Psalm 40:12–13, he wrote,

“Evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; they are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me. Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; make haste, O LORD, to help me.”

DISAPPOINTMENT WITH UNANSWERED PRAYERS

We also may not be interested in praying because of prayers that were not answered in the past and resulted in disappointment and hurt. I remember trying to help a young woman in our eleventh-grade Sunday school class become excited about prayer during student ministry. She replied, “Julia, I want to pray, but it is hard to believe God will answer. You see, when I was a little girl, I begged God every night to take my mom’s cancer away. But He did not heal her, and she died.”

I cannot explain away heartbreaking circumstances in life. Some things that happen in our lives are too horrible, too sad, too discouraging, or too traumatic to try to understand this side of heaven. I firmly believe nothing happens to us that God has not ordained, and that He will sustain us through anything if we let Him. I do not fully understand why some prayer requests in my life and your life have not been answered in ways we wanted them to be answered. However, I do have faith in God’s ability to sustain and encourage us through even the most terrible events in our lives and to use them to bring us closer to Him.

Romans 8:28 tells us, “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” We can rest assured that when difficult circumstances come into our lives, God is still in control, and He has a purpose.

I remember clinging to this truth during all three of our miscarriages. I could not explain why they had happened. I could not find any nice pretty bow of purpose to put on the most devastating losses of our lives. All I could do was follow the wisdom of a former client who was trying to make sense of her father abandoning her family. She told me, “Julia, I decided either God is who He says He is, or He isn’t. There really is no other decision to be made.” I decided to believe God was in control and knew what He was doing with every lost pregnancy, every lost dream, and every temptation Satan put in my mind to doubt God’s power and goodness.

We can rest assured that when difficult circumstances come into our lives, God is still in control, and He has a purpose.

Someday We Will See God’s Purpose

Probably the number-one thing I am most looking forward to about heaven is finally seeing behind the curtain. I am excited to see God’s full purpose for all I experienced on earth—the good, the bad, the happy, and the painful. I can picture myself dying. (This is the morbid perspective you develop when you grow up having to plan your weekend activities around all the funerals your dad officiates on Saturdays; you end up thinking about death and funerals more than the average person.) And I imagine that when I get to heaven, God will pull out a massive map that connects all the dots of the events, people, choices, circumstances, prayer requests He said yes to, and prayer requests He said no to. I will look at God, smile, and say, “I get it now! Thank You.”

Sometimes we get a sneak peek at how the dots are all connected, but I'm convinced the majority of our life maps will not be revealed this side of heaven. Our comfort does not depend on decoding our life map but on the knowledge, acceptance, and trust that there is, in fact, a carefully designed, colored, and marked map lovingly planned by our Creator. We are not the victims of random circumstances.

We want peace; we want understanding; we want to make sense of our lives. But, as C. S. Lewis said, "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."²

We are adventurers who, though we encounter obstacles on our journeys, have been invited on a tailor-made quest to discover our unique purposes. This quest is marked with mountains, valleys, rivers, and giants, and it will be the adventure of our lifetime. This great adventure is reserved for the people who pray for big things.

The Night That Changed Everything

Our journey of praying big things began a few years ago on the New Year's Eve we spent in London, England. After attending an evening church service, Ryan and I went back to our hotel inspired but also skeptical. During the service, the pastor had led a guided prayer time and said, "Who in here wants God to bless their family?" People around us started yelling, clapping, and raising their hands. Ryan and I looked sheepishly at one another and exchanged an approving nod before raising our hands as well. Something about being on another continent made it easier for us to participate in the worship service of another Christian denomination

that was very different from how we traditionally prayed and worshiped.

Ryan and I were not in a particularly desperate time in our lives. Neither of us was dying from a fatal illness or in need of miraculous physical healing. We weren't going bankrupt or in a financial crisis. We were just dreading another year of making wholehearted New Year's resolutions followed by little to no actual change. We were tired of promising, planning, and praying to live differently in the coming year, but by January 15—or maybe February if we *really* tried—ending up being the same people with the same marriage and the same circumstances and the same relationship with God.

So we got to planning and dreaming (as only two millennial Americans who find themselves in Europe inspired by a New Year's Eve prayer service can do). We started asking, What if? What if we really started taking God at His Word? What if we really believed God could and would answer our prayers? What if, instead of just saying, singing, and teaching that God answers prayers and is faithful, we actually started living like it? What if, by actually praying and pleading with God consistently, we allowed Him to work in our lives like never before?

That night, we decided, committed, promised, and planned to pray big things.

If We Only Knew . . .

I love everything about movies: going to the theater, the Academy Awards, seeing the newest hit film, imagining myself in the role of leading lady, and later trying to manufacture romantic moments with Ryan that are legendary Best Picture-worthy.

In these moments, Ryan usually is looking at me like I'm crazy and wondering what camera I'm talking to (think *The Truman Show*). You know when you are watching the scene that is going to change the course of the entire character's life, but the character doesn't know this yet. The audience winks at one another and bumps elbows as if to say, "Oh man, if these characters only knew what was about to happen, they would know that this night is about to change everything."

This is how I picture God, the angels, and my late grandmother, Judy Jeffress, talking among themselves as they watched Ryan and me this fateful night. I picture them smiling and nudging one another as they say something to the effect of, "Oh man, if Ryan and Julia only knew what was about to happen, they would know their decision to pray big things was going to change their lives forever!" I get a lot of joy out of thinking about the heavenly audience that cheers on Christians in their endeavors and cheers on non-Christians toward faith in Jesus Christ.

Ryan and I knew we wanted more out of life, but we needed to know how to actually get more. I'm not going to overspiritualize or hide our intention—we definitely wanted more out of life. We wanted more opportunities, more blessings, more purpose, more influence, more of a story. We just wanted *more*. And because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we were able to call the God of all the universe "Abba, Father" and ask Him for our heart's desires (Rom. 8:15).

Dream Big

That night, Ryan and I decided to write a list of twenty things we wanted. We have no shame in openly saying that

was our goal: to get things we wanted. Yes, they ultimately turned into prayer requests, but first they were dreams and desires we had for our lives.

If this process seems unspiritual to you, then I would ask you to consider 1 John 5:14–15, which says, “This is the

The Bible dares us to pray for anything and everything, and it says God will give us what we ask when our requests are according to His will.

confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.” We will get into the theological ins and outs of this concept later, but here is the bottom line: the Bible dares us to pray for anything and everything, and

it says God will give us what we ask when our requests are according to His will. The ball is in our court.

The Plan

How did Ryan and I come up with our list, you may ask? We started with the question my dad encourages his congregation to use in order to discover their purpose: If money were no issue and you knew you could not fail, what would you want to have happen in your career, relationships, and life? We then came up with twenty dreams for our lives.

We turned these twenty dreams into twenty prayer requests and then committed to praying for each request on the list both together and separately multiple times a day until God answered. These were not vague prayers. They were as specific as, “Please give us multiples” and “Please give us

three biological children.” These were two separate prayer requests that I never imagined God would put together to result in triplets.

Two principles guided our twenty-item prayer list plan: we were going to pray specifically, and we were going to pray persistently. The idea to pray specifically was spurred on by my favorite prayer quote. In his forty-day prayer challenge, entitled *Draw the Circle*, author Mark Batterson says, “The greatest tragedy in life is the prayers that go unanswered simply because they go unasked.”³

The idea to pray persistently came from my favorite character in the Bible—the persistent widow. I love the persistent widow because she makes being super annoying a spiritual personality trait deemed appropriate and worthy of a chapter in the Bible. If you are unfamiliar with the story or need a refresher, allow me the honor of sharing her remarkable story with you.

In Luke 18, Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to the disciples “to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart” (v. 1).

In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, “Give me legal protection from my opponent.” For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for

them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (vv. 2–8)

My favorite verse in this parable is verse 4: “Because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection.” The persistent widow inspires me because she did not give up. She went after her heart’s desire. This woman knew what she needed and went after it continually with all she had. She persistently bothered the one person who could grant her request until he answered her. How much more will the God who tells us to ask Him for our heart’s desires listen and happily, readily, boldly answer the requests of His children?

I Dare You, and So Does God

I’ve often heard it said, “Aim for nothing, and you will hit it every time.” This familiar saying haunts me every time I hear it. If I aim for nothing, then my experiences, relationships, and life will result in nothing. And that would be a shame, because God promises to give us everything we need, if only we will ask.

I want to be able to say at the end of my life that I did not give up. I want to be able to say that, to the best of my ability, I was persistent, relentless, and fearless in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to be able to say that, regardless of what did or did not happen in my life, I kept praying, I kept believing, and I kept telling as many people as possible about Jesus until the moment I went home to meet my Savior face-to-face. I do not want anyone to turn to me on Judgment Day and say, “Why didn’t you tell me about Jesus?” I want to pray and live in a way that allows God to

pour out His blessings, opportunities, protection, and favor on me and my family.

I want to make the absolute most out of every opportunity I am given. I want to pray big things that result in seeing God do big things, more than anything I can hope or imagine. I want more out of this life, and I'm guessing you do too!

I do not want to miss out on anything in life because I simply did not take the time to ask God for what I need, dream, or want. James 4:2 says, "You do not have because you do not ask." It really does not get more straightforward, challenging, and daring than that!

Yes, God dares us to ask big things of Him. Instead of explaining Scriptures away, let's start claiming the promises of God for our lives, families, children, and dreams. This is a fun, practical, and hopefully inspiring book to get you excited to pray, to dream, and to want more for your life. My prayer is that through reading our story of God's faithfulness and creativity, you are challenged and encouraged to ask God to do immeasurably more in your life.

*God dares us to ask
big things of Him.*

This is a dare book. I dare you to do the things the Bible actually says and see what will happen in your life. I dare you to ask God fervently to make your late-night prayers and heartfelt dreams a reality.

I dare you to pray big things!