

Kneel Down or Get Going

The Tension Between Prayer and Action

By Dana Olson



Sally felt hurt by Molly's comment, even though she knew her friend meant nothing by it. Sally had to miss their monthly time slot volunteering at the women's shelter because of a schedule conflict. She had committed to lead the women's morning of prayer at her church that weekend.

"Oh sure, you just sit there and pray. I'll be the one getting my hands dirty!" Molly had said. "We do-ers have to make up for you pray-ers."

Sally isn't the only one to face such stinging remarks. It seems that the tension between "do-ers" and "pray-ers" has been around a long time—at least since the time of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42).

How can we reconcile the two?

A Pray-er and a Builder

The news couldn't have been much worse. "The city is a

shambles. You'd be shocked. All protections are destroyed, and access is wide open. The enemy is having a field day."

Nehemiah was disheartened to hear about his beloved city, Jerusalem. What to do? Intervention seemed an utter impossibility. There was nothing to do but fast and pray.

And what a prayer he prayed! It was an expansive prayer about God's astounding greatness and faithfulness to all His promises, confession of the sins of the people, the only hope being God's promises of renewal, and then, finally, a request for success "against all odds." (See Nehemiah 1:4-11.)

After fasting and prayer, what was next for Nehemiah? His to-do list might have looked something like this:

- Get a leave of absence from work.
- Ask the boss to pay for everything.
- Travel back home.
- Survey the job that needs to be done and make a plan.
- Inspire the "home folks" to overcome their fear and get working.
- Split everyone into teams to get the job done.
- Fend off doubters, skeptics, opponents, and detractors.
- Finish in record time.
- Celebrate.

And the miracle happened: every item on that list got done—in record time. A city was saved from its enemies.

Nehemiah's story has moved generations of Christians to pray and work, work and pray. So imagine Nehemiah, during his days of fasting and prayer—crying out to God on behalf of his people—yet being accused with, "All you do is pray. Get up off your face and do something!"

Or imagine Nehemiah checking the "wall work," dealing with problems, and reassigning workers for greatest effect, then being confronted with, "Work, work, work. You should pray

more. Why don't you stop what you're doing and call upon the Lord?"

The Myth of a Tension Between Praying and Doing

Both Scripture and church history are filled with examples of Nehemiah-like, godly people who both pray and “work, for the night is coming.”¹ On occasion, those who love to pray are accused of being so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. But is that valid?

Here's the truth: prayer and Kingdom-minded effort are both absolutely necessary and needed. Often the same people do both.

There are exceptions. I think of a grand “do-er”—or activist—named Dale, who was legendary in the movement of churches I grew up in. Dale and his wife and children served the Lord in Asia, devoted to the Great Commission. Later, Dale became a leader in the headquarters of our mission. Far too young (to our way of reckoning), a medical diagnosis of ALS (commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease) brought a premature end to Dale's days as a do-er. But Dale's Kingdom-minded determination kicked in, and he became legendary for his prayer life. He interceded across America and around the world from the wheelchair to which he was confined.

Jim is another example. From the time I met him in seminary, I felt deeply for his predicament of living with a permanent, debilitating disability. Yet Jim, like Dale, welcomed prayer requests and devoted himself to what he could do—intercessory prayer. Hundreds of missionaries, pastors, and faithful workers benefited from Jim's prayer life.

Disability is not the only exception. Some of God's people sense a special urgency to pray. They love to pray. They consider intercession their unique calling. Often some special circumstance has led them into a life of earnest, effectual

prayer. They may have a specific focus or passion—for lost loved ones, for missions (even a specific part of the world or people group), for those suffering from illness, or for revival and spiritual awakening. At times these intercessors feel misunderstood and underutilized by their church family.

Activists, Too, Meet with God

Few people have achieved such evident Kingdom success as Bill and Vonette Bright did. As founders of Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU), their passion for a Los Angeles campus student ministry in the 1950s led to one of the largest Christian ministries throughout the world today. What was the key to this growth? Both Bill and Vonette attributed it to a mighty prayer-hearing and prayer-answering God. Before her death in 2015, Vonette wrote:

Bill and I recruited everyone we could think of to serve as prayer partners. Dividing each day into 96 segments of 15 minutes each, we worked to fill every slot and have around-the-clock prayer. We wanted to know that someone, somewhere was uniting in prayer for this ministry.

We knew that Scripture said to pray without ceasing. We were depending on the Holy Spirit to guide every step we took and work in students' lives, in response to prayer. Campus Crusade was born in prayer, and prayer will always be our lifeline.²

George Mueller founded orphanages and ran them “by prayer.” Hudson Taylor had a “spiritual secret”—prayer—and founded the China Inland Mission. The Korean Church rises early in the morning for daily prayer and has sent thousands of workers around the world to plant churches.

Prayer and Kingdom work go together, which is no surprise

since the Bible is full of praying activists, including several apostles. Peter, John, and Paul come to mind. And Jesus Christ Himself was the ultimate praying activist. Jesus prayed through the night before choosing the twelve (Luke 6:12–13). And Jesus would heal multitudes and then withdraw to pray (Luke 5:15–16).

How do we manage this occasional tension between the do-ers and the pray-ers? By reminding ourselves of several biblical realities:

1. It is by God's Spirit. God is the One who moves His people to pray by His Spirit. And He is the One who moves the hands and feet of gifted people to get His work accomplished. Sometimes the two are the same group: those who pray, also do something. (Nehemiah is a great example.)

But not always. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow." Sometimes God uses prayer-watering saints to intercede for a situation where they will never, and could never, be hands and feet. I have prayed for many years for gospel outreach to the Fulani people of Africa. Once I even had the privilege to visit the work there and pray for God's hand to move. But I do not live there and likely never will. I don't speak the Fulfulde language, but I do speak the language of prayer.

2. God, use me! When we pray for God to work in a specific situation, we certainly want to be open to His leading us to be an answer to our prayers. Neither Dale nor Jim were able, literally, to lend a hand due to severe limitations, so they became focused intercessors. Yet most of us have the capability to enter into the work in one way or another.

Many are the missionaries and Christian workers who, growing in their hunger and thirst for God and desire to see God's Kingdom spread, began to pray in earnest "your kingdom come,

your will be done" (Matt. 6:10), only to sense God's call on their lives to go and make disciples of the nations.

3. Proceed with caution. A caution is due here, however. In our desire to "be the answer to our own prayers," we can try to "fix things" and fool ourselves into disobedience. Remember Abram and Sarai? In Genesis 15:4, the Lord told Abram that his very own son would be his heir. But instead of waiting patiently for the hand of God, Sarai pressed her servant Hagar upon Abram, and he foolishly submitted. Ishmael was the result, but Isaac was still to come.

In our haste to "get God's will done for Him," we can commit grave errors of judgment. This combination of prayer and action requires discernment, patience, and a commitment to wait upon the Lord.

4. Pray before, during, and after. God's Kingdom work will not be accomplished apart from prayer. The hands-on activists who want their lives to count will do well to remember that God's work done in God's way will always have a prayer component.

The well-worn illustration of the lumberjack who never bothered to stop and sharpen his axe is well worn for a reason—it hits home. Hard Kingdom work can result in little fruit when it's approached in a prayerless way.

Why not stop to pray first, then take a breather to pray during your work, and finally conclude the work with prayer as well? Why not recruit "those who love to pray" to cover your efforts before you even begin? This kind of dynamic teamwork between gospel activists and gospel intercessors yields tremendous fruit for the harvest.

Years ago I heard a quote that is attributed to the most aptly named missionary in all history, Jonathan Goforth (1859–1936). He said, concerning a time of harvest and revival in Asia, "When God came, he produced more fruit in half a day than we could have achieved in six months of hard labor."

Together—for His Kingdom

So, activists, remember that whatever we do for God is God's work and must be done in God's way, by prayer. Respect, appreciate, and love the pray-ers in your life. Put them to effective use in the accomplishments of the Kingdom.

Intercessors, be thankful for the hardworking activists who love to stake out new territories and reach the lost. Commit to supporting them "by prayer" so that their labor is not in vain.

In other words, Sally and Molly, you need each other! Appreciate what each of you brings to the Kingdom banquet table. Celebrate your opportunity. Kneel down and get going!

¹In the words of the Annie L. Coghill hymn, based on John 9:4.

²From the article "Born in Prayer" by Vonette Bright, pray2020.org.

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Prayer or Panic?



I enjoy Facebook. Over the years that I've had a personal page, I have reconnected with dozens of friends from my childhood and college days. It has been great. I also like the political and spiritual banter that takes place in my news feed, though I admit the posts often get out of line and people are hurt by the short, snide comments. It is difficult to talk about sensitive areas of disagreement when you are not conversing face to face.

I've also noticed that on Facebook people have a tendency to display their emotions without a filter. They often say things they might not say in a personal conversation. I am not sure why, but somehow people have fewer inhibitions on the Internet.

One recent disturbing trend relates to the alarming perspectives shared about current events—and people's attempts to relate them to the need for prayer. With both the ISIS situation and the Ebola scare last fall, I was stunned by how panicked many believers were—even some leaders who should know better—and how openly they displayed that panic on Facebook.

We are living in tough times, and I sense they could keep getting worse. But as people of prayer, how should we respond with a biblical perspective? Maybe I am an odd person spiritually, or maybe it is due to my upbringing in a denomination that focuses strongly on the second coming of Christ, but I look at what is going on with interest—and even awe. No one will convince me that we are not living in the last days before Christ's return. (Yes, I understand that others thought the same thing thousands of years ago as well.)

Personally I think we are fewer than 20 years away. That's not a prediction, just my gut feeling.

So I watch and pray with interest. What is Satan doing in various places? What is God doing to bring people to Himself? What is God doing to set up history for the final days? I watch with awe because we are seeing more and more clearly the battle is "not against flesh and blood" (Eph. 6:12). You only have to look at the absurd anti-Semitism that is rising around the world—even in our government—to realize that Satan is controlling the minds of many people.

No matter what rapture position you hold, the tribulation will not suddenly come upon us with an overnight change in tough situations in the world. Even if believers are raptured away prior to the tribulation, evil will be running amok well before it—perhaps as evil is doing now, and worse. I don't want to panic about any of it. Instead, I want to pray. Pray for what? Mercy, certainly. Peace and comfort for suffering believers, yes. But I plan to spend more time praying for Jesus Christ to be glorified in the midst of all this turmoil. As evil tries to take the upper hand, God is going to bring many souls into His Kingdom before His return.

Therefore, I am guarded in how much I try to "pray away" hard times. Many revivals came during times of economic and social desperation. In these last days imagine what God could do with a Church that rises up and prays, "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus," instead of, "Help, get us out of this, Lord."

Maybe we should pray for more trouble, not less!

—Jonathan Graf is the publisher of Prayer Connect.

A Month of Prayers for Your Church

Targeted Prayers for Your Church

By Sandra Higley



1. Pastor – Lord, I lift up my pastor to You. Thank You for his servant’s heart. Keep him from losing heart when ministry gets tough. Help him prove faithful with the things you have entrusted to him. Teach him Your ways so that he knows You and finds favor with You as He leads us. Keep him open and honest before You and help him to represent the truth plainly. (2 Cor. 4:1; 1 Cor. 4:1-3; Ex. 33:13)

2. Elders – Lord, I lift up my elders (church board) to You. Help us respect and honor them as they direct the affairs of our church. May they wholeheartedly give their attention to prayer and ministry of the Word. Keep them above reproach, devoted to their families, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable and able to teach. May they be gentle and honest as they deal with people. (1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7)

3. Deacons – Lord, I lift up my deacons to You. May they walk worthy of respect with sincere hearts. Keep them from indulgence and greed. Help them keep hold of truth. May they keep short accounts with You so that their conscience is clear. Bless their households with peace and respect. Fill them with Your Spirit and let them operate in wisdom as they carry out their responsibilities. (1 Tim. 3:8-9, 12; Acts 6:3)

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4. Adults – Lord, I lift up the adults in my congregation to You. May we live worthy of Your call on our lives. As we respond to that call, fulfill every purpose, every faith-filled act of service by Your power. May we be clothed in righteousness with hearts that sing for joy and delight greatly in You. We want to walk with You, Jesus, dressed in white, adorned with jewels. (Eph. 4:1; 2 Thes. 1:11; Ps. 132:9; Isa. 61:10; Rev. 3:4)

5. Children/Youth – Lord, I lift up the children and youth in my congregation to You. May the little ones remain humble examples of what we adults need to become in the kingdom. Let their conduct always be pure and right with reputations that show that they remember You, Creator God. Teach them to declare Your marvelous deeds. May they flee evil desires and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. (Matt. 18:3-4; Prov. 20:11; Eccl. 12:1; Ps. 71:17; 2 Tim. 2:22)



6. Seniors – Lord, I lift up the senior members of our congregation. Thank You for every gray hair attained by righteous living. We are blessed by their example and ability to train us. Help us to be humbly submissive as we benefit from their wisdom and understanding. Help them receive the strength and power You’ve promised to the weary and weak. May they put their hope in You and be renewed in the process. (Prov. 16:31; Titus 2:4; 1 Pet. 5:5; Job 12:12; Isa. 40:29, 31)

7. Lost Among Us – Lord, I lift up the lost members of our congregation. Let the gospel be presented to them not only through the sermon but also with power, the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. Teach us to make the most of every opportunity to share Your salvation. Help us to be the fragrance of Christ to them. We stand against the enemy and his attempts to keep them blinded to Your truth. (1 Thes. 1:5; Col. 4:5; 2 Cor. 2:15; 2 Cor. 4:4)

8. Worship Leaders – Lord, I lift up our worship leaders. Appoint people to this position who understand the splendor of Your holiness and praise You out of that understanding. Help them lead us faithfully in thanks for Your enduring love. Use their praise to defeat the enemy. May they be the true worshipers You are looking for who worship in spirit and in truth. Let them glory only in You, Jesus, so that they put no confidence in their own flesh. (2 Chron. 20:21-22; Jn.

4:23-24; Phil. 3:3)

9. Speakers/Teachers – Lord, I lift up the speakers and teachers in our church. May everyone who holds that position—pastors, Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, guest speakers—rightly divide Your word of truth. Let them admonish and teach with wisdom. Reveal the mysteries of Your word to them and encourage them to speak those mysteries courageously and fearlessly. Let them speak with a spirit of faith that springs from their relationship with You. (2 Tim. 2:15; Col. 1:28; Dan. 2:47; Phil. 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:13)

10. Women's Ministry – Lord, I lift up our Women's Ministry. Encourage our older women to train the younger in family issues. Teach our women to be virtuous—women with gentle and quiet spirits who put their hope in You. Let this ministry produce women who feel Your passion for them and who choose to spend time at Your feet. Train them to contend for the gospel side by side with the men. (Titus 2:4, 5; Prov. 31:10; 1 Pet. 3:4, 5; Ps. 45:11; Lk. 10:38-42; Phil. 4:3)

11. Men's Ministry – Lord, I lift up our Men's Ministry to You. Use this ministry to build our men in their faith. Teach them to be in right relationship to You and each other, to love their wives sacrificially and to instruct their children with patience. Encourage them to hold each other accountable as they carry each other's burdens. May they speak the truth in love to each other even when it's hard. (Jude 1:20; Titus 2:2; 1 Tim. 5:1; Eph. 5:25, 6:4; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 4:15; Prov. 27:6)

12. Youth Workers – Lord, I lift up our Youth Workers. Let these young men and women set an example in their speech, life, love, faith and purity. Cause them to be strong, alive-in-the-Word overcomers. Help them to have discernment as they deal with the young people in our church. Help them to notice any youth who lack judgment so they can teach them to value Your life-giving principles. Pour out Your Spirit on them. (1

Tim. 4:12; 1 Jn. 2:14; Prov. 3:21, 7:7, 7:2; Joel 2:28).

13. Behind-the-Scenes Workers – Lord, I lift up the people who work behind the scenes at our church. Thank You for every nursery worker, parking lot attendant, office volunteer, building janitor, etc. who have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. Bless them for the obedience and generosity they have displayed—may You receive praise as a result! Keep them in an attitude of humility that comes from wisdom and wholehearted service to You rather than to be noticed by others. (1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Cor. 9:12-13; Jas. 3:13; Eph. 6:7)

14. Children's Ministries – Lord, I lift up our children's ministries to You. Create an atmosphere here that encourages our children to find You. Let the teachers be careful to remind each child of the marvelous things You have done. Cause everything they learn about You to become a part of them forever. May they consistently choose life and blessing each day because of the training they receive in our church. Keep them walking in the truth. (Mk. 10:14; Dt. 4:9; 29:29; 30:19; Prov. 22:6; 3 Jn. 1:4)

15. Prayer Focus – Lord, I lift up the prayer focus in my church. Make us into a house of prayer. We desire to be clear-minded and self-controlled so that we can pray first, always, continually and thankfully. May everyone recognize that this is Your desire for all and not just a few. Use us to stand in the gap for others. Let there be prayer ministry among us that is powerful and effective. (Mk. 11:17; 1 Pet. 4:7; 1 Tim. 2:1; Eph. 6:18; 1 Thes. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Ps. 32:6; Ezk. 22:30; Jas. 5:16)

16. Spiritual Level – Lord, I lift up the spiritual temperature of my church. Revive us! Refine us so that we burn hot for You. Give us singleness of heart and action so that we always fear You and follow Your precepts. Pour out a spirit of Josiah on us so that we turn to You heart, soul and

strength. Open our minds to understand Your Word so that our hearts burn within us. (Ps. 85:6; Rev. 3:14-18; Jer. 32:39; Ps. 111:10; 2 Ki. 23:25; Lk. 24:45, 32)

17. Spirit-Led – Lord, I lift up the issue of our willingness to be led by Your Spirit. Holy Spirit, show us any way we are grieving, quenching or resisting You. Convict us and lead us to level ground. Help us keep in step with You as we live by You. Reign in us so that we experience Your freedom. Lead us into grace, life and peace. (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thes. 5:19; Acts 7:51; Jn. 16:8; Ps. 143:10; Gal. 5:25; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:18; Ro. 8:6)

18. Spiritual Gifts – Lord, I lift up the use of spiritual gifts in our church. We eagerly desire spiritual gifts that You've given for our common good. Help us understand the various gifts and how they work. Teach us to use what we've received to serve others and faithfully administer Your grace—whatever form that takes. Help us exercise our gifts in love. Remind us to keep fanning into flame the gifts You've entrusted to us. (1 Cor. 14:1, 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:6)

19. Love/Unity – Lord, I lift up our love for one another as a body. Help us purify ourselves by obeying the truth so that our love for each other will be sincere, deep and from the heart. May our love for one another prove that we are Your disciples. Give us a spirit of unity so that we may glorify You with one heart and voice. Help us accept one another as we clothe ourselves in love. (1 Pet. 1:22; Jn. 13:34-35; Ro. 15:5-7; Col. 3:14)

20. Finances – Lord, I lift up our church finances. May we sow generously into our church without reluctance or compulsion. Make all grace abound so we have all we need for every good work You've assigned us. Make us rich in ways that result in generosity on our part so You will be praised. Keep reminding us of your promise to throw open the floodgates of heaven and

pour out blessing on all who bring the whole tithe into Your house. (2 Cor. 9:6-11; Mal. 3:10)

21. Outreach/Missions Projects – Lord, I lift up our outreach programs. Remind us to do good and share with others as a pleasing sacrifice to You. Keep us outwardly focused so we don't become self-absorbed. Help us teach one another to be faithful ministers of Your Son. Enable us to meet people wherever they have a need. Help us minister faithfully as we proclaim the gospel so that the ones we reach might become an acceptable offering to You. (Heb. 13:16; Phil. 2:4; Col. 1:7; Jude 1:23)

22. Single Parents – Lord, I lift up the single parents in our church. May they know You as father to the fatherless and defender of widows! Let us be a real family to them when they are lonely. Show us ways to include them and minister grace to them. Stir up practical ideas in us that show Your love and care. Help them relax in Your grace and provision which is more than enough for every weakness and need. (Ps. 68:5-6, 25:16; Matt. 25:35-40; 2 Cor. 12:9; Phil. 4:19)

23. Help for the Hurting – Lord, I lift up those who are hurting right now. May they come to know You as El Roi, the God who sees them. For every situation of rejection, help them feel sonship. Bind up the brokenhearted! In every area of bondage, set the captives free; in every case of mourning, replace it with Your oil of gladness. Comfort them so that they will have a ministry of comfort to others. (Gen. 16:13; Ro. 8:15; Isa. 61:1-3; 2 Cor. 1:3-4)

24. Freedom from Besetting Sins – Lord, I lift up every one of us who struggle with sin issues. Keep us from the enemy's scheme of condemnation. Grant us repentance so that we can escape the trap of the evil one. Thank You that sin was done away with on the cross and that we are no longer slaves to it. Help us to throw off everything that entangles—help us run the race with perseverance. (Ro. 8:1; 2 Tim. 2:25, 26; Ro. 6:6;

Heb. 12:1)

25. Kingdom Focus/Priorities – Lord, I lift up our priorities as a congregation. Give us ears to hear what Your Spirit is saying to our church. Open our eyes to see things as You see them. Help us move beyond issues of immediate need to pursuing Kingdom issues. Bring us to a place where “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is more than just words we say. (Rev. 3:22; 2 Ki. 6:17; Matt. 6:25, 33, 10)

26. Growth through Evangelism – Lord, I lift up our church growth to You. Add to our number daily through new converts. Birth spiritual children through us. Let our actions win people over without words. Use us as Your agents to rescue people from darkness and bring them into Your Son’s kingdom. We long to be worthy ambassadors in this ministry You have entrusted to us: that of proclaiming Your message of reconciliation to a lost world. (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Pet. 3:1-2; Col. 1:13; 2 Cor. 5:20)

27. Our Neighborhood – Lord, I lift up our community, especially the surrounding neighborhood. Let us love these people as we love ourselves. May our concern for their needs override other things that take our time and focus. Rebuild and restore areas that have been devastated. Renew our community—send Your peace and prosperity into this place where You’ve planted us. Bless each individual home and family. Build each house from the inside out; watch over our city. (Gal. 5:14; Prov. 3:28; Isa. 61:4; Jer. 29:7; Lk. 10:5-6; Ps. 127:1)

28. Connectivity with the Church in Our City – Lord, I lift up the Church in our city. Thank You for creating the body as one unit made up of many parts. Help us understand the value of each part as You have arranged them. We confess that we’ve minimized other parts. Forgive us, for we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body. Help us to work at being one: concerned about one another—suffering with and rejoicing with

other congregations as appropriate. (1 Cor. 12:12-26)

29. Connectivity with the Church in Our Nation – Lord, I lift up the Church in our nation. We humbly unite and confess as one people—one Church called by Your name—that we have sinned. We’ve operated out of acquired wealth thinking we could do it on our own—but we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. We seek Your face, O God! Thank You for hearing and forgiving us. We wait on You for the healing of our land! (2 Chron. 7:14; Rev. 3:17)

30. Connectivity with the Church around the World – Lord, I lift up the Church universal. Father, we claim the power of Your name over us so that we will be one, as You and Your Son are one. We want Your joy in full measure just as Your Son, Jesus, prayed for us. Help us live as though we are not of this world; sanctify us by Your word. May we be brought to complete unity so that the world will know the truth of the gospel. (Jn. 17:11-23)

31. Protection from the Enemy – Lord, I lift up our need for protection. Protect and deliver us from the evil one. Help us be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves as we deal with the wolves around us. Show us how to test every spirit to see if they are from You. Help us recognize the enemy’s disguises and schemes so that he won’t outwit us. (Jn. 17:15; Matt. 6:13, 10:14; 1 Jn. 4:1; 2 Cor. 11:14, 2:11)

–Written by Sandra Higley when she was the director of member relations for the Church Prayer Leaders Network. Sandra is currently the editor of Real Life Downloads from David C. Cook Publishers.

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But I Have Prayed for You

Praying Beyond Simple Fix-it Prayers

By Steve Hawthorne



Can you recall the last time someone told you that he or she was praying for you? No doubt it was meant to reassure you. Telling people that you've prayed for them is a loving way of encouraging them or cheering them on.

Only once do we find Jesus telling someone that He had prayed for that person. And what He said about His prayer was not a reassuring platitude. Jesus was not offering up a simple fix-it prayer aimed to deal with obvious, right-now needs. Instead, His prayer focused on the precious value of God's purposes being accomplished, even in a maelstrom of evil.

Overriding Prayer

You know the setting. It was the upper room. Jesus was wrapping up the final meal with His disciples. He'd already washed their feet and offered the broken bread and the cup of the new covenant. Jesus was trying to prepare them for the devastating things that would happen within hours. But His friends somehow didn't get it. They couldn't imagine the catastrophe that was coming.

Even though everyone was listening in, Jesus speaks directly to Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). This was not a warning or a threat. Jesus was not trying to coach Peter in ways to avoid tough circumstance or to evade opposition. It wasn't advance notice to help him prepare. There's no way to prepare to be threshed like grain by satanic evil powers. Jesus was showing the rationale and the hope of His prayer and God's mighty purpose in Peter's

life.

Jesus uses some rather extreme language about Satan's intent that made it all but certain that disaster was about to befall them all. The word translated in English as "asked" is a forceful word that would better be translated as "demanded." It's clear that Satan had successfully obtained permission to wreak havoc. We shouldn't speculate on the details, but somehow Satan argued a case in the courts of heaven and came away with an authorization to do some damage. The image of sifting means that whatever can be ransacked, dismantled, and torn to pieces will be. The "you" is plural. Satan was going to demolish the entire fledgling community. But one by one, he would also shred their very souls.

And then came the words, "But I have prayed for you." This time the word for "you" is singular. Jesus narrowed His prayer just for Peter. Imagine Jesus looking you in the eye and saying those words, "But I have prayed for you." What Jesus prayed shows that He was focused on what mattered to one person, but also the greater purposes of God. He prayed "that your faith may not fail." This simple prayer was attached to a larger purpose: "And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Jesus' prayer may surprise you. Because Satan was involved, some would expect Jesus to pray "against" the enemy. But instead of undoing Satan's plans or canceling his assignment or binding the enemy or breaking off the curse, or . . . you name it, Jesus simply prayed for something greater that would override, overcome, and overwhelm whatever Satan had plotted. It was a counter-suit in the courts of heaven.

This isn't the only way to pray, of course. But it may be the simplest way to pray. What matters most about Jesus' praying was not that He knew the schemes of the enemy. What matters most was that He was praying toward the fulfillment of God's purpose.

What Jesus Prayed

Consider how Jesus' prayer was focused beyond the crisis toward the fulfillment of God's purpose. There are three parts to this prayer. Let's consider them in reverse order to better see what Jesus was envisioning.

Life purpose in God's greater purpose. The ultimate outcome was that Peter could be told, with prophetic confidence, to "strengthen your brothers." Much earlier, Jesus had told Peter that the name Peter, which means "rock," had something to do with his role in what Jesus would do to build the church. Peter's faith in Jesus would somehow anchor the entire church on the rock-solid reality of Jesus.

God had purposed that Peter would be a foundation man—a fixture, a stable, resilient strength for many others. Thus, Jesus telling Peter to strengthen his brothers wasn't just a nice idea. Being a strength for others was Peter's life purpose, which mattered tremendously in God's global purpose.

Stepping into fullness of purpose. "And when you have turned . . ." What did Jesus mean by turning? "Turning" is a simple word that means several things. It's a word that can refer to conversion. But an initial decision to follow Jesus is not what this is about. Turning describes Peter's choice to pivot away from living for himself and to step into a costly way of following Jesus into the mission God had for Peter. It's not something Jesus could do for Peter. He would have to choose.

I think this turning took place weeks later as recorded in John 21:15-22. To follow Jesus, to truly love Him, would mean Peter laying down his life for Jesus' sheep. Stepping into God's purpose means being changed. Faith relationship for purpose. The simple core of the prayer was "that your faith may not fail." Within hours Peter would fail in remarkable ways. But his trust in God would not fail. Later Peter would write that faith could come out like gold, "even though

refined by fire" (1 Peter 1:7). He knew that Satan could be resisted, but only if someone could stand "firm in the faith." If faith held firm, then sufferings would not end up as a random acts of evil, but instead be transformed into acts of suffering with Christ, fulfilled along with "your brothers throughout the world" (1 Peter 5:9).

This is a clear reference to Jesus' prayer. Peter, even though unfaithful, would be sufficiently full of faith so that he would end up strengthening his brothers.

How We Can Pray Like Jesus

During what was obviously a crisis moment in Peter's life, Jesus prayed a greater prayer that can teach us how to pray beyond crisis in our own friends' lives.

Pray for people instead of merely praying about problems. When we only pray for circumstances to change, we can overlook praying for people themselves to change. Of course, it's good to pray about obvious issues and needs. Focus your hope on what God is doing to make that person like Jesus.

I try to imagine God smiling as He looks on the person I'm praying for. And then I think about what God finds precious in his or her future. Invariably, in the light of God's love and the promises of God's Word, I can get a glimpse of who this person may become.

Pray for people instead of against the enemy. There's a time and place to directly contend with dark powers. But whatever you may pray for God to do against the enemy, do not fail to pray for people. Consider yourself to be a court-appointed attorney, arguing cases in God's court on behalf of others. Enter God's courtroom with confidence that whatever the accusations or plans of the enemy may be, God's purposes are greater. Ask God to do something that overrules by going beyond and above the schemes of evil powers.

Pray before and beyond crisis. You've got to pray before a crisis in order to pray beyond it. There may be no better way to love someone than to gaze into his or her destiny, to prize what he or she will become in God, and to cry out with jealousy for it all to come forth. Be vigilant. The Spirit of God loves to give you cues about what to pray, but there's a lot to be said for simply paying attention to the story that's unfolding. Anticipate what good things are on the way.

Pray with confidence in the midst of contingency. By "contingency" I mean that things could go either way. God was not going to force Peter to love and obey Him. Peter would have to pass the test by choosing to step into the fullness of God's purpose. Jesus said "when you have turned"; not "if you turn." So Jesus was confident that Peter eventually would make that turn toward God's purpose.

But how long would it be? Jesus had focused His vision on what God had purposed for Peter. And you can do the same, for family and friends, as well as cities and peoples. Envision what God desires by reading what He's promised and accomplished in the Bible. Thanking God for what He's already done will clear your vision to see the unique life story that's unfolding for His glory.

May you soon say with faith and assurance to those around you: "But I have prayed for you."

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