

Lifting up Those Who Are Suffering

By Sandra Higley and Danielle Schofield



Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes: chronic illness, persecution, relational heartaches, loss of a loved one, senseless tragedy, stresses of many kinds. We all face suffering at one time or another. In addition to praying for specifics centered on individual circumstances, here are a few ways to pray, based on what Scripture says about suffering.

Kingdom Warfare

Father, this child of Yours has gone through unspeakable distress. Help those who are suffering to worship You in the midst of circumstances they don't understand. Lift them out of the hurtful details of what is happening so they get the bigger picture of its Kingdom impact. Help them trust You and hold on to the end, knowing You have a plan in mind for them. May they know You in a deeper, more meaningful way as a result of this circumstance (Job 1–2; 42:1–6, 10–16; Ps. 71:20).

God's Glory

Father, if this suffering is intended to bring You glory, let

it be so! Give Your suffering children the strength and joy to honor You during this difficult time. Deepen their understanding of the inheritance issues at stake when they share in Christ's sufferings. Help them to recognize that what they are going through is no comparison to the glory that will be revealed in them; help them wait for it with eager expectation. As they run the race through this trial, help them resist confusion and instead manifest the fruit of the Spirit (John 11:4; Rom. 8:17–19; Gal. 5:7–8, 22–23).

God's Grace

Lord God, help Your servants embrace Your no as well as Your yes. Assure them that You see and hear them. Enable them to see Your power at work through these difficult circumstances. Show Yourself strong through their fragile state. Thank You that in spite of everything they are not crushed, driven to despair, or abandoned by You. Help them get up when circumstances knock them down so that Jesus' life shines through them (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

Identification with Christ

Jesus, help Your beloved to see that this hatred they are experiencing is visible proof they belong to You and not the world. Encourage them to take a humble view of this identity as they continue to obey Your teaching and walk in love. Help them to fully know You and the power of Your resurrection, even as this situation causes them to become more and more like You. Let every act of unjust suffering commend them to God (Isa. 43:1; John 15:18–21; Phil. 3:10; 1 Peter 2:18–20).

Faithful Friends

Heavenly Father, give Your suffering children true friends who seek to lighten their load rather than cause additional heartache. Give friends and family empathy for what the sufferers are going through; help them resist the urge to judge or assume they would handle things differently if put in the same situation. Help friends and loved ones to look for ways to encourage rather than chastising, condemning, or minimizing these overwhelming situations. Hold accountable those who profess to speak for You. Help sufferers to forgive and pray for any who allow the enemy to use them as unjust accusers. Help those afflicted to bless and not curse (Job 42:7–10; Luke 6:28).

Proper Discernment

Father, give these dear ones a proper understanding of what is going on through this trial. Give them wisdom and courage to ask the right questions about fears, concerns, and needs. While it is commendable to suffer without cause, show Your children if there are other reasons this suffering has come to them. Without guilt or condemnation, help them to recognize any sin in their lives that needs to be dealt with according to Your Word. Help them to find a trustworthy person to come alongside them in prayer and confession if needed—someone in right relationship with You (Rom. 8:1; James 5:13–16; 1 Peter 2:18–20).

Forbearance to Wait on the Lord

Father God, give Your hurting child the forbearance to wait on You, knowing we go through various seasons and each one has its purpose. Thank You that while weeping lasts for a night, You bring joy when the night is past. Turn their mourning to dancing! (Ps. 30:5, 11; Eccl. 3:1–3).

–SANDRA HIGLEY is an author and the editor of *Real Life Downloaded* (Youth Edition), an online Sunday school curriculum supplement that is free of charge. Download the free Real Life Downloaded app. She co-authored this article with her daughter, who has a debilitating (sometimes fatal) disease with no known cure.

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Praying through a Spiritual Desert

By Dave Earley

Is prayer ever a struggle for you? Does it feel more like a duty than a delight?

Have you attempted to pray and felt nothing, nothing at all? Are you doing your best to be close to God, yet it is as though He is a million miles away? Have you tried desperately to enter God's presence, only to sense that He is hiding from you?

You are not the first.

David's Desert

Near the end of his life, David was chased off his throne, out of his city, and into the wilderness. His son Absalom had launched the vicious political and military overthrow and was chasing David with an army (2 Samuel 15–18). So, David again

found himself away from the temple, in the wilderness, running for his life, and struggling through deeply difficult days of spiritual dryness.

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water (Psalm 63:1).

David decided to continue passionately pursuing God anyway, even in a place of deep distress and spiritual dryness. By faith, he remembered God's powerful presence and glorious goodness in the past—and praised the Lord.

“I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands” (Psalm 63:2–4).

As David desperately hung on to God, he realized that God was hanging on to him and would help him through it all.

Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

“I cling to you; your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:7–8).

When you are in a spiritual desert, the answer you receive is an awareness that you are not forgotten or forsaken. God is there, even though you don't see Him, hear Him, or feel Him. He is helping you and holding you. So a big key is to keep praying. Pursue God by faith and pray your way through your spiritual desert.

My Desert

As a young Christian, I was knocked off stride the first time I went through a season of “Soul Sahara.” When I surrendered my life to God, one of my greatest delights was enjoying a distinct sense of His presence. But one day it was gone.

For days I trudged through a spiritual desert. Each day my

soul became dustier and my heart emptier. God was gone, and I felt like I was going it alone.

Scared that I had crossed a line, I racked my brain trying to remember some serious sin that I had committed or some devastating lie I had believed. But I got nothing. Confused, I was certain I was only person to ever go through such a spiritually lonely season.

One of my mature Christian friends asked me what was wrong. When I told him, he responded, "Oh, that happens to all of us. When you are a new Christian, God's presence is all around and it seems like He answers every prayer, 'Yes!' But one day, He withdraws the sense of His presence so that you learn to walk by faith, not feelings. He has not left you, even though it feels like it. He is just helping you grow up."

Then he looked directly at me: "The issue is what you do now. You can press on or fall back. If you hang in there, eventually your awareness of God's presence will return."

I felt better and tried to press on in pursuing God by reading the Bible and praying. But I still felt like I was praying into a big, black hole of nothingness. Not long after that, I was reading Hebrews and a verse caught my attention.

"You can never please God without faith, without depending on him. Anyone who wants to come to God must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely look for him" (Hebrews 11:6, tlb).

The first and the last phrase caught my attention: "You can never please God without faith . . . he rewards those who sincerely look for him." So, I decided to pursue God by faith, trusting that He would eventually reward me by letting me "find" Him.

I went into the closet in my bedroom and closed the door. It was dark. I could not see anything. I could not hear anything.

I did not feel anything. Alone in the dark, I prayed what felt like a very bold prayer.

OK, God. I can't see You. I can't hear You. I can't touch You.

I can't smell You. I can't taste You. I can't feel You. I get it. You are hiding from me.

I am going to pray anyway.

I am praying by faith, not by feelings. I feel nothing. I am numb and dry inside. My soul is dark and barren. But You are worthy of my prayer. You are worthy of this time. So, I am praying.

You promise to hear and answer prayer. You promise never to leave us or forsake us. You said that You reward those who diligently seek You. So here I am, by faith, diligently seeking You.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Seeing nothing, I plunged on ahead.

By faith, I bring You prayers of thanksgiving, adoration, confession, and supplication—whether I feel You here today or not.

I am going to pray totally by faith. So here goes. God, I thank You because. . . .

And before I could get the next words of praise out of my mouth, I felt it. It was the refreshing splash of a drop of God's presence on my barren, dry soul. As I continued to pray, the presence of God increased drop after drop until it was as though that closet was flooded. By the time I was done, that spiritual cloud burst had drenched my soul. I was submerged in the replenishing water of the presence of God Himself. He had visited my closet, and I knew it.

I wish I could say it has always been that way when I tried to pray my way out of a dry time. Often, I pray by faith and feel

just as dry and parched as I did before I started. But I have learned that eventually our heavenly Father will say, "Enough." He will keep His promise and reward us with the treasure of Himself. He will show us that He was there all the time.

Your Spiritual Desert

When I refer to your spiritual desert, I mean a season of spiritual dryness and soul darkness. God seems distant and silent. You pray and worship and serve, yet you feel nothing, absolutely nothing. You feel alone, abandoned, and forsaken. Theologians refer to Deus Absconditus—the God who is hidden. It has been called a "dark night of the soul" or a "Sahara of the heart."

A spiritual desert may come on for no apparent reason. One day you wake up and God seems a million miles away. Yesterday, you felt God's presence when you prayed or worshiped. Your prayers were answered right and left. You could tell God was with you as you served Him. But today, not so much. The feelings are gone. The answers have stopped.

A spiritual desert can be triggered by deep disappointment. Maybe you confidently prayed for something, certain that God had promised it to you. Yet, it did not come. Maybe you had a dream that has not been fulfilled. Maybe someone hurt you deeply.

It can be brought on by a devastating event. Your husband died unexpectedly. Your adult child broke off communication with you. You thought you were going to be promoted at your job, and instead they fired you.

Ron Dunn was a popular author and Bible teacher. Dunn preached Bible conferences all over the United States, Europe, Australia, Canada, Central America, South Africa, and the Caribbean Islands. Dunn understood the challenges of a

spiritual desert. His beloved son Ronnie took his own life at the age of 18, plunging Dunn into depression and darkness. He described his journey through the desert in a book called *When Heaven Is Silent*. In it, he says that when suffering hits, we cry out, "Why? Why me?"

He describes his battle with grief, suffering and receiving nothing but silence from God. He talks about dealing with difficulties, disappointment, and again experiencing distance from God.

I found several of his comments especially memorable.

Our toughest battles are with God. You can rebuke the devil, plead the blood, station angels, and wear garlic around your neck, but nothing moves the darkness.

It's okay to tell God how you feel. After all, He already knows.

When God says no, it is not to deprive us of a blessing but to drive us to a better one.

In these seasons, we are called to walk in a deeper level of faith. God is looking for our faith as we continue to pray, serve, and worship. He looks for the faith that continues to trust and love God even though He seems to have left the building. It is a deeper level of faith that does the right thing even when you feel nothing.

I've been there. That's when I learned to pray—when I felt nothing. That's when I learned to pray my way through the spiritual desert.

Longing for Streams in the Desert

David was clearly in a spiritual desert when he wrote Psalm 42. He likened his spiritual thirst to the thirst of a deer who has run through a desert.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Psalm 42:1–3).

His way out of the dark desert? He chose to pursue and praise God anyway. “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:5).

“Why Have You Forsaken Me?”

No one else has ever experienced the level of spiritual darkness that Jesus walked through. That night in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus ran to God. Recognizing the overwhelming amount of torture and anguish He was about to endure, sweating drops of blood as He agonized in prayer, He begged His Father to come up with another way to rescue the world.

Yet, He received no reply.

Hours later, hanging on the cross, Jesus’ physical suffering hit its zenith. To make matters worse, the full measure of our sins was placed upon Him. Jesus and the Father had lived in constant community through eternity. But that afternoon, as darkness covered Golgotha, the Father had to turn His back on His suffering Son. Jesus experienced soul darkness, spiritual distance, and silence from the Father for the first time. Horrified, He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Yet, heaven was silent. No help came. Jesus suffered and died alone, separated from His Father.

When I am in the spiritual desert it helps me to remember that I am not alone. I am in good company. I recall the sad words of Job as he sat in the dust, scrapping his wounds and counting his losses. I think of young Joseph chained in a cage

on his way to Egypt. I picture him years later as a forgotten man in an Egyptian prison.

I consider Elijah, alone by the Brook Cherith and later all alone in the wilderness, wishing he was dead. I remember Paul in jail in Rome, all alone and far from home, awaiting his execution.

I see Mary, the mother of Jesus, crying out to the Father to save Him—and hearing nothing in return. And of course, I remember Jesus, hanging on the cross crying out, “My God . . . why have you forsaken me?”

Suggestion:

There is only one good way through a spiritual desert—keep going until you come out on the other side. Persist in faith, expectation, praise, and prayer until the Sahara season is over and spiritual refreshment floods your soul again.

—**Dave Earley** is a pastor, professor and author of numerous books including *The 21 Most Effective Prayers in the Bible* and *21 Keys to Answered Prayer*, from which this article was adapted. He also is the founder of The 21 Days Global Prayer Event, held each January.

Blunt Honesty in Prayer: Psalm 69

By Dana Olson

The blunt honesty of David in Psalm 69 has long ministered to

my soul. It has freed me from the tendency to think that I need to dress up my prayers and make them pretty or nice—like a young girl dressing up her paper dolls. God’s shoulders are broad enough to carry any burden weighing me down.

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;
my throat is parched.
My eyes fail,

looking for my God

Those who hate me without reason
outnumber the hairs of my head;
many are my enemies without cause

You, God, know my folly . . . (Psalm 69:1–5).

Tell It to God

Do you feel like you’re sinking in the muck today? Are you drowning in an abundance of cares and concerns and corruption? Tell it to God!

Do you feel like God is silent in your hour of great need? Yes, sometimes when we long to hear the voice of God, His silence leaves us “waiting for my God.” Then, too, tell it to God!

Your boss’s demands leave you upset and disillusioned, ready to quit a job you desperately need. Your cancer has spread and you hear the medical staff speaking in hushed tones. Your toddler is drawing on the walls or your teenager is suspended

from school or your adult child has gone prodigal. You turn on the news and get the distinct impression that the world has gone mad and the nation is coming apart at the seams.

It's no time for paper-doll, dressed-up prayers. It's time to tell God like it is.

"Father, I feel like I'm drowning! I'm sinking in the muddy muck of life. I don't know what else to do. Hear my cry. Please rescue me!" (paraphrased prayer from vv. 14-15).

What a relief to know our heavenly Father is not sitting in judgment over our prayers. He's not scoring our prayers like ice skating judges at the Olympic games. He knows we don't live a Ken and Barbie life in an earthly utopia.

God knows our hearts. Before we cry out, He is fully aware and already working. It's true that His timing is not our timing; His agenda is more complete than ours. Nevertheless, we can cast all our cares upon Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7).

As we read on in Psalm 69, we hear echoes of the cross and Christ's suffering. "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst" (v. 21). That's helpful as well. Along with the psalm encouraging us to pray bluntly about the circumstances and situations that are troubling us, so also it points us to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who died to pay for our sins and rose to give us the hope of eternal life.

This world is not our home. Those who are in Christ will see tribulation in the present but are buoyed up by the promise of the Holy Spirit now—and then eternity with God. Our present heartaches will give way to hallelujahs at the throne of God. Present distress will turn to delight at the return of Christ. Forever beckons.

I will praise God's name in song

and glorify him with thanksgiving (v. 30.)

Let heaven and earth praise him,

the seas and all that move in them,
for God will save Zion (vv. 34–35a).

To pray through Psalm 69 is to be guided by God's Word into several different kinds of prayer:

- We *confess* to God the utter folly of our own sins.
- We tell God honestly that life is hard and recount the things troubling us. We *ask* for deliverance.
- We pray the gospel truth of Christ's suffering, *thanking God* for the hope of the cross.
- We *praise* God that He reigns over all. We *exalt* His name and trust His timing. We sing!

One beauty of the blunt honesty of Psalm 69 is this: as we put into words the hardest distresses of our life and tell Him bluntly what is burdening us, the very act of doing so reminds us to turn to the Source of deliverance, the Source of hope, the Source of everlasting life.

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Equip Your People to Pray for

America!

This Thursday is the National Day of Prayer. Millions of believers will be gathering in prayer groups in churches, on state capitol and county and city office building grounds to pray for our nation. A powerful new 31-day prayer initiative *We Declare* by Dave Kubal of Intercessors for America has just been released to equip believers to pray on target over the issues that face America. We highly recommend that you get a copy of this book and engage your entire congregation to pray through it at some point prior to our November election.

Here is a sample day from the prayer guide:

Day 10: If You Can Keep It

When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people groan. (Proverbs 29:2)

In 1787 an inquirer asked Benjamin Franklin what sort of a government the young nation of the United States was to have. Franklin replied: "A republic, if you can keep it."

Franklin was part of the Constitutional Convention that had for months wrestled over what form of constitution our country was to devise, and what priorities it was to embrace. This wasn't an easy process, and Franklin knew that the end result of all the heated debates and exhausting deliberations would not be perfect. However, he and the other Framers also saw that the emerging constitution was a solid framework. It would unite the nation based on God-honoring ideals balanced with guardrails that accounted for the fallenness of human nature. The new document would also allow for measured flexibility by means of amendments, should the need arise.

Now, Franklin and the others believed the framework was important—that's why they poured so much of their energy into

it. But they also knew, as Franklin had said, that the citizens of the nascent republic would ultimately be responsible for its success or failure. If the new order was to survive in a dangerous world that was largely hostile to this American experiment, it would require the active involvement of citizens who cherished justice and righteousness. To protect itself from being overrun or suffering self-destruction, the republic would need individuals to spur it on toward its mission of protecting life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

How are we meeting that challenge today? Well, the evidence—the toxicity, violence, and glorification of vices in our society—seems to suggest that we’ve lost our way. Our republic is teetering on a cliff of destruction. Many have strayed from the Way, the Truth, and the Life. They have forgotten the biblical values that are the fabric for any healthy nation.

But that’s not all. Christians—active believers—have also lost their way in the public square. Some of us have co-opted our beliefs to “play the game” like the world. Many of us just avoid the messy political arena altogether.

If we want to keep our republic, Christians will need to reengage as salt and light in our communities and halls of power. We need to exhort our neighbors and our nation onward in the true pursuit of happiness—the true flourishing—with disarming love and the utterance of prophetic truth. Let us pray for the rejuvenation today of a citizenry that can keep our republic strong and secure in the hands of the Lord.

PRAY

- When you think of America’s virtues, what is the first one to come to mind? Pray for that virtue close to your heart to be reinforced in our culture today.

- What about America's worst sin or vice? What does your spirit specifically grieve over in our society? Pray today for God to do a mighty work to help us all as a nation overcome that darkness.
- Pray for Christians in your community to truly be salt and light to their neighbors. Pray for disarming love and prophetic truth to open the door to spiritual healing and new life for our nation.

ENGAGE

Think now about how you can join with a group of prayer warriors on the National Day of Prayer or a similar opportunity in order to intercede together for the people of our land—that we may keep our republic strong.

Taken from the new prayer initiative *We Declare: 31 Days of Intercession for America* by Dave Kubal (PrayerShop Publishing 2024).

In the Crosshairs

Prayer in the Time of War

By Kie Bowman

You have probably never heard anyone describe war as heaven. In fact, it is the exact opposite.

Unfortunately, war is a fact of life in the 21st century. The Geneva Academy recognizes more than 110 armed conflicts in the

world today.¹ We almost expect the horrors of war in our world, since in the last 3,400 years there have been only 268 years when war was not active somewhere in the world.²

From a political perspective, there is little you can do to stop terrorism or drone attacks against our Navy or illegal missile tests by the world's most dangerous actors. But in the spiritual realm there is a lot you can do. You make an impact beyond measure when you pray.

The History of War in Scripture

Joshua was a general (Josh. 11:1–23). David “killed his tens of thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7). Jesus prophetically described the grisly scene of invading armies coming against Jerusalem (Matt. 24:7–22). The Book of Revelation predicts the final battle will be fought in Israel in the Valley of Armageddon (Rev. 16:14–16).

The Bible takes war seriously. In a sense, human “war” started as armed conflict when Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4:8), and it will end when Jesus defeats an international army after the 1,000-year reign (Rev. 20:7–10).

In these days of international terrorism, armed conflict, and the world holding its collective breath with fear and uncertainty, what principles can we learn from the prayer ministries of the biblical heroes who walked a familiar path? How can we pray in the crosshairs of war?

Pray for Peace

The early Church had no political influence. Soon after Pentecost, the church leaders were arrested and imprisoned (Acts 4:1–20). In fact, the Book of Acts is a history of apostolic imprisonments (Acts 5:17–42, 12:5, 16:16–40, 18:12–17, 19:24–41, 21:27ff). Leonard Ravenhill once said, “The early Church had so little influence

with men they couldn't stay out of jail, but they had so much influence with God no jail could hold them."

While the early Church had almost none of the advantages the American Church takes for granted, they had something we desperately need. They knew how to pray. In fact, "Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (Acts 12:5).

In the worst conditions, the Church was, first and foremost, a praying Church. Their lack of social standing meant they were always at risk of running afoul of some Roman leader or decree. Paul understood that keeping the infant Church out of the "line of fire" politically and socially was a way of protecting the viability of the ministry. This outlook could be the motivation behind Paul's advice: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

While they were not in a war zone when Paul wrote to Timothy, the apostle had spent enough time in jail and had been the victim of unprovoked violence often enough to know how dangerous preaching the gospel could be in the Roman Empire. So, he urged the Church to pray so they could live in peace and continue their ministry.

No matter how bad the situation becomes, no matter how many drones fly overhead, or how many tyrants wage senseless wars, believers are called to pray for peace.

Pray with Conviction

The overwhelming majority of Americans believe morals are in a free fall in our country. Almost 80 percent of us think it is bad and getting worse.³

In the face of our moral decay, Scripture describes the results of standing boldly for God, even when a culture is corrupt. Unfortunately, in a morally decadent culture, godliness becomes marginalized—and the evil majority persecutes the faithful. Peter warned us when he said, “They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4).

When we see the sexual intemperance, the cruelty and violence, the political corruption, the drug abuse and crime in our cities, and failures among the clergy, we are forced to ponder the question: “Is Western culture too far gone already?”

For instance, in December 2022, Isabel Vaughn-Spruce was arrested in Birmingham, England, for praying silently in public across the street from an abortion clinic. The charges were eventually dropped a few months later. Apologies followed, but the message sent by the original arrest is blatant.⁴ The British pro-life advocate, arrested for silent prayer, was a victim of the culture wars.

Imagine the pressure you might experience if your prayers are ever outlawed during a full-scale military action. It is happening in parts of the world already. What would you do if it happened to you?

More than 2,600 years ago, Daniel rose to political power in a godless nation. But we cannot forget he was there as a prisoner of war (Dan. 1:1–6). God’s hand was on Daniel as he overcame the challenges of serving under five kings and the Babylonian and Persian wars that upended national security. In one of those battles, a new Persian king, Darius the Mede, overthrew Belshazzar the Chaldean (Daniel 5:29–31). In other words, a new country, new culture, new customs, and a completely different kingdom seized power.

Following his ascension to the throne, Darius passed a law that no one could pray to any god except to King Darius

himself. To do so would be an act of treason, punishable by death (Dan. 6:6–9). In other words, prayer was viewed as a war crime.

What happened next was one of the most defiant, courageous, and inspiring acts in the Bible. Daniel waged a counteroffensive against the hot war aimed at his prayer life.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before (Dan. 6:10).

What do we learn from Daniel's response to the war against prayer? For one thing, his testimony reminds us that prayer can give us a steel backbone, eager to stand for God in the face of overwhelming circumstances and impossible odds.

The man or woman who dares to believe that prayer is an act of defiance against the raging wars around them is a person of deep conviction. And remember, conviction is not a belief you hold; conviction is a belief that holds you.

Prayer as a Sacrifice

Pastor and author Craig Groeschel has often said, "We sacrifice what we love for what we love more." As a culture, we do not know much about sacrifice.

In seasons of intense conflict, however, we start to learn the hard way. We know instinctively that if we love something or someone enough, we ignore the price tag. We voluntarily sacrifice what we love for what we love more. We find this principle illustrated in the Book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's opening chapter introduces the conflict—will the privileged courtier find a reason to sacrifice for the suffering people of God? Nehemiah is a comfortable civil

servant confronted with the terrible news of the devastated condition of his "hometown." There are Jewish refugees and escapees living in the shadows of poverty and terror, and Nehemiah had ignored his responsibility for too long. So, he prayed (Neh. 1:1–11).

Nehemiah actually had a dream job. He worked in the palace with daily access to the royal family. He ate well, wanted for little, and could have lived the rest of his life surrounded by comforts barely imaginable to the general population. But when he repented, fasted, and wept in prayer for days, God did something new in his heart.

Nehemiah was led to leave his service in the Persian Empire and travel to war-torn Jerusalem—hundreds of miles west across the desert—to lead his people to rebuild the wall as a security system around the battle-plundered city. God led him to sacrifice the known for the unknown—the security of the palace for the unpredictability of a city in ruins, ravaged by war.

Nehemiah walked away from guarantees and stepped into a life of faith. He found his resolve in the secret place with God, where a man of the palace and privilege became a man of prayer. A nation devastated by the evils of war decades earlier got a second chance through the sacrifice of one man who prayed.

John Bunyan once said, "Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan." We may not see the results Nehemiah saw because we never enter the sacrifice phase of prayer. We pray only when it is convenient and then only briefly.

Nehemiah, on the other hand, prayed in pain for days. His sacrifice in prayer led to the renewal of the Jewish people.

Even though he had to keep his sword handy while he constructed the wall (Neh. 4:17), Nehemiah lived not in the

midst of war but in its aftermath. The city without a wall did not know it needed a man to lead it—one who had been to the depths of personal sacrifice in prayer.

A New Kind of Leader

Broken cultures rarely realize that their greatest need is spiritual rather than material. The aftermath of war calls for a new kind of leader—one stripped of self-interest and who has plunged to uncharted depths in prayer.

Jesus warned of “wars and rumors of wars” (Matt. 24:6). But Alex and Stephen Kendrick were right about God’s plan for the world when they said, “When prayer becomes your immediate reflex instead of your last resort, the whole battlefield begins to tilt in your direction.”⁵

¹“Middle East and North Africa: More than 45 Armed Conflicts,” GENEVA ACADEMY, <https://www.geneva-academy.ch/gallies/today-s-armed-conflicts/>.

² Chris Hedges, “What Every Person Should Know About War,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html/>.

³ Megan Brenan and Nicole Willcoxon, “Record-High 50% of Americans Rate U.S. Moral Values as ‘Poor,’” GALLUP, June 6, 2022, <https://www.news.gallop.com/poll/393659/record-high-americans-rate-moral-values-poor.aspx/>.

⁴Caroline Downey, “Charges Dropped against British Woman for Praying Outside Abortion Clinic,” *National Review*, February 3,

2023,

<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/charges-dropped-against-british-woman-arrested-for-praying-outside-abortion-clinic/>.

⁵Stephen and Alex Kendrick, *The Battle Plan for Prayer*, B&H Publishing Group, 2015.

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Compassion and Outrage

By Bob Bakke

While I was writing this article, Hamas unleashed 1,500 terrorists from Gaza into the south of Israel. They murdered, abused, raped, and kidnapped unarmed Jewish revelers and the residents of nearby kibbutzim—raining thousands of missiles on civilian neighborhoods. Hardened Israeli soldiers and first responders could not believe the grotesque slaughter in Hamas' wake. So many dead. So many are yet to die.

The camera lens made us eyewitnesses to revolting images. Global tensions are thick. By the time you read this, who knows what evil will have played out. World war? Maybe Jesus will have returned.

Prayer Clues from Jesus

When humankind degrades itself, how should we pray? Does Jesus

give us clues? What about revival? Personally, Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11 helps me.

The town of Bethany was grim when Jesus arrived. Lazarus was dead. Jesus' enemies were conspiring to kill him. Lazarus' sisters met Jesus with such pathetic and brokenhearted disappointment that Jesus Himself wept.

John tells us that Jesus was "deeply moved in the spirit" (vs. 33). "Deeply moved" is the verb *embrimaomai*, describing fervent anger. It's combined with *pneumati*, "in spirit"—or "to the core of His being."

Jesus was also "troubled," John writes. Raymond Brown translates this "shuddered." Jesus was so angry that He trembled. But there's more. The Greek indicates that Jesus was stirring Himself up to this anger—a conscious gathering up of divine potency and holy indignation.

In his book, *The Dust of Death*, Os Guinness argues that Christians need these two things:

1. the compassion of Christ, and
2. the outrage of Christ.

Guinness points to John 11: "John [states 'deeply troubled'] twice in his account of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. This deep emotion is usually interpreted in relation to the verse 'Jesus wept.' . . . Weeping, or sorrow [however], does not exhaust what is meant by Jesus being 'deeply moved,' for Jesus knew that Lazarus would be alive and standing beside Him in a matter of moments. Where is the sorrow in that? . . . the root meaning of *embrimaomai* is to 'snort in the spirit.'

"It was used by Aeschylus to describe Greek stallions before battle, rearing up on their hind legs, pawing the air and snorting before they charged. Similarly, Jesus 'snorted in the spirit': He was moved deeply in the sense of a furious inner

anger. Entering His Father's world as the Son of God, He found not order, beauty, harmony, and fulfillment, but fractured disorder, raw ugliness, complete disarray—everywhere the abortion of God's original plan.

“Standing at the graveside, He came face to face with a death that symbolized and summarized the accumulation of evil, pain, sorrow, suffering, injustice, cruelty, and despair. Thus, while He was moved to tears for his friends in sorrow, He was also deeply moved by the outrageous abnormality of death” (pg. 385).

Outrage to Prayer

What did Jesus do with His outrage? He channeled it into prayer. He lifted His head and hands and prayed for everyone to hear. Then, with three thunderous words—“Lazarus, come out!”—Jesus cried out. Revival came. Death was transformed. Unspeakable love led to divine outrage funneled into prayer and answered by Triune power bestowing life and glory.

Jesus so loves the world that He is outraged by our ruin. Whether it's news from Gaza, catastrophic earthquakes in Afghanistan, hundreds of churches burned in India, or the trafficking of children, our love should produce praying that eclipses the serene and beatific and, instead, looks and sounds like war—a gritty, furious, passionate battle to conquer evil and to save the dying—flowing from the heart of Christ.

For the Next Generation

This is how we intend to pray on February 29—the Collegiate Day of Prayer. The broadcast, hosted at Baylor University in Waco, TX, will lead millions of us in crying out to God for 22 million students and 4,300 college campuses across America.

Many campuses are spiritual war zones where the godless conspire against Christ; where faith is assaulted and truth is

mocked. Millions of students are casualties.

We cannot be unmoved by this. Grieved by how Gen Z is abandoning Christianity and compelled by the love of Jesus and His readiness to revive that which is dead, let's answer the call. We are raising up an army to respond.

Let's get ready for battle. Come fight for this generation. Come pray.

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