

# Targeting Lost Souls

## Is Anyone Saved Apart from Prayer?

By Dick Eastman

Do our prayers for the unconverted ultimately make a difference? Is it really biblical to pray for the salvation of a lost soul?

Over the years, these questions have been debated among the body of Christ. I offer here some true stories that support the conviction that something indeed happens when believers target the salvation of a lost individual in prayer.

### The Case of Rod Peters

Rod Peters (not his real name) was the son of a deacon in a church where I served as a youth leader early in my ministry. Although Rod's father was a devout Christian, Rod had never accepted Christ. Involved in the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Rod was drinking heavily and experimenting with drugs. During this time, he met and married a young woman we'll call Molly, who was a typical "flower child."

Rod's father William often requested prayer for his son's salvation, at times with tears streaming down his face. I began to pray almost daily for Rod Peters, and my prayers continued for several years, even after I left my position at the church.

Realizing that Rod had been exposed to the Christian message all his life and had rejected it, it occurred to me one day in prayer that I should ask God to send a specific person to Rod—someone he respected and who could lead him to Christ. I

remember every detail of that rainy evening in May of 1972 that suggested my prayers had been answered.

I was in Reno, NV, conducting a spiritual renewal conference in a small church. I was in my motel room preparing that night's message when the phone rang. I was sure it was my wife, who was expecting our second child. To my surprise, it was Rod Peters.

"I wanted you to be one of the first to know I've just given my life to Jesus Christ," he said joyfully. "I know you've prayed for me a lot because my dad told me, so I wanted to call and say thank you for your prayers."

I could hardly believe my ears. I asked him how it happened. He explained that several months earlier he had noticed that his wife began to care for him in a radically different way. Rod asked her what had caused such a change. Molly explained that three months earlier she had been talking to her boss and learned he had become a born-again Christian. As a result of hearing his testimony, Molly was saved. And hearing Molly's testimony, Rod gave his heart to the Lord also.

Did the Holy Spirit intercede through my prayers (Rom. 8:26)? I had prayed for God to send a trusted witness to Rod. In creating the answer to that prayer, God brought both Molly and her boss to Christ!

### **The Case of Clifford Potter**

Jack McAlister, founder of Every Home for Christ, shared a remarkable testimony during a radio broadcast in 1961. McAlister told of an instructor at Canada's Prairie Bible Institute who remarked in one of his classes, "I don't believe a person is ever saved unless first someone has prayed for him or her."

Immediately, a student stood up and said, "I'm not sure that's true. No one I know of ever prayed for me." The student explained that his unbelieving parents hadn't. And he felt assured no relatives or friends ever had.

In this student's opinion, it was simply a matter of choice: he had walked into a small hometown church one night and heard the gospel preached for the first time. When the preacher gave the invitation, he responded.

Four years later, two classmates of this young man were doing visitation in the town where he had been converted, and they visited the home of an elderly Christian woman who was a devoted intercessor. When she discovered the two were from Prairie Bible Institute, she asked, "Do you know a young man named Clifford Potter?"

They responded that Clifford had been in their class and had gone on to be a missionary in Africa.

"A missionary to Africa?" the elderly saint asked. "Let me tell you a story," she said. "Years ago, I was working as a cashier in a local restaurant when a tall young man came in for lunch. I heard a whisper in my heart I sensed was the voice of God. It was clear I was to pray for this person. I told the Lord I knew nothing about this young man. But I bowed my head and prayed for his salvation anyway."

She had this same prompting that following day when the young man came into the restaurant. So, she prayed again for his salvation.

Not long afterward, she attended a gospel service at a small local church. That night, to this intercessor's amazement, the young man she had prayed for responded to the preacher's invitation and gave his life to Christ. She lingered after the service to learn the identity of the new convert and was told his name was Clifford Potter. Being somewhat shy, she decided not to tell him about her prayers.

After hearing the woman's story, the workers shared what Clifford had said in the classroom years before. Then the elderly saint knew that her prayers had made a difference.

### **The Case of R.A. Torrey**

Consider the case of revivalist Reuben A. Torrey (1856–1928), who was best known as the founder of Biola University. Early in Torrey's ministry in a church in Minneapolis, he learned the importance of intercessory prayer.

In those early days of ministry, the young pastor experienced a special burden for the husbands of two women in the congregation. Neither of the men was saved, and both the wives, who didn't know each other, had asked Dr. Torrey to pray for their husbands. The preacher committed to pray for them daily until both professed Christ.

Torrey did not see the conversions of the men while he was in Minnesota, but it didn't stop him from praying for them, even while pursuing his theological studies in Germany and when returning to America to begin his ministry as an evangelist.

More than two decades passed, and Torrey was invited back to Minneapolis to conduct a crusade. Several nights into the meeting, as Torrey concluded a dynamic message on salvation, he gave his customary invitation for sinners to stand and acknowledge their need for a Savior. To Torrey's amazement, the two men for whom he had interceded over the years were seated side by side—and stood up together! They had never met, nor did they know that Dr. Torrey had been praying for their salvation.

### **A Look at God's Word**

Several New Testament passages are instructive as we consider whether we should pray for the lost. First, the words of the

apostle in 1 John 5:14–15: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.”

Now compare these words with Peter’s insights concerning God’s will: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

First Timothy 2:4 reminds us that God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” If this is God’s will, and if all prayers offered according to God’s will are heard, why would we not pray for the salvation of a lost soul?

The prayers, in themselves, do not save a person. They may, however, prepare a lost person’s heart to receive Christ. They may play a part in removing the darkness from his or her spiritual eyes in order to see Jesus clearly (2 Cor. 4:3–4). In any case, we know that the apostle Paul believed in praying for the lost. He told Roman believers: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (Rom. 10:1).

Perhaps Paul believed in such praying because of one of his own pre-conversion experiences. Stephen, as he was being stoned by an angry crowd led by Saul of Tarsus (later the apostle Paul), prayed that God would not hold the crowd’s sin against them (Acts 7:60).

Could it be that Stephen’s prayer in those dying moments had some connection to the ultimate conversion of Saul, who became one of the greatest warriors for Christ in church history? I believe this will prove to be the case.

I also believe that some day, when we stand before God in a massive heavenly assembly of worshiping saints (Rev. 7:9), we

will learn just how vital our prayers were to the conversion of the lost—that, ultimately, no soul was brought to Christ apart from a believer's prayer.

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## **Six Focal Prayer Points to Help You Pray for the Lost**

One pattern to help you pray for the lost is the six interrogatives: who, what, when, why, where, and how.

1. **Whom can I trust?** Intercede for the lost souls by praying that they would be confronted with questions regarding trust. Ask God to plant in their hearts a skepticism about the lies they hear, whether philosophical, social, or political.
2. **What is my reason for being?** Pray that the lost will begin to ask, "What is my purpose for living?" Ask God to plant in their hearts an urgency concerning this question.
3. **When will I really be free?** When praying for people who are not free, pray that God will use this lack to draw them to Himself. When interceding for the lost in free nations, pray that the person will ask, "When will I be free of this emptiness in my heart?"
4. **Why do people reject God?** When praying for the lost in closed countries whose leaders reject God, ask God to cause lost souls to question why their leaders so vehemently reject the existence of God. Asked often enough, this question leads people on a deep heart quest. They will not only wonder if there is a God; soon they will actively seek Him.
5. **Where will I go when I die?** Ask God to cause unbelievers

to ask, "Where will I go when I die?" Pray that God will turn this question into a quest for an eternal answer and that He will plant a longing to resolve this issue.

6. **How can I cope with my problems?** Ask God to plant a sense of hopelessness in unbelievers' hearts. Every person faces problems beyond his or her abilities. Our prayers can cause people to realize their need for deliverance and prepare their hearts for the day the gospel will be given to them.

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