

Training for a Prayer-athon

How to Develop Your Intercessory Muscles

By Lisa Bartelt



A couple of years ago, my husband and I ran our first 5K race together. During his military service, he had done a lot of running, including 5K races. Me? For most of my life I had avoided running.

But we were in the midst of a marital crisis, and I felt God leading me to start running with my husband in preparation for a 5K race. So we used a popular program with a gradual running and walking schedule that promised we would be running three miles by the end of nine weeks. I had my doubts, but it worked. I discovered that I actually liked running. We may not all be training to run a physical race, but we are running a spiritual race. And if my prayer life is at all typical, I'm guessing that many of us are seriously undertrained. It doesn't have to be that way.

Casual Prayer Warrior

I would reluctantly call myself a runner. I'm more of a casual jogger. In comparison to those who run marathons, I'm not very good at it.

I wouldn't call myself a prayer warrior, either. Most days, my prayers are limited to written pleas during my Bible-reading time. I might add some "flare prayers" when I'm in trouble. I usually include regular mealtime thanksgiving prayers and an end-of-the-day prayer with my husband after the house is quiet.

Most days, I feel guilty about that kind of schedule.

The Bible calls me to "pray without ceasing," and words like intercession intimidate me. I could never be like that, I think. But I never thought I'd enjoy running three miles, either.

Train Yourself

If prayer is a spiritual discipline, it shouldn't surprise us prayer involves training. Yet too often I feel like I should wake up one day with a desire to pray for hours at a time. But I wouldn't wake up one day and decide to run a 26.2-mile marathon. I'd go into training. So why do I think I can become a marathon pray-er overnight?

The Apostle Paul said this to the church in Corinth: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever" (1 Cor. 9:25).

For most of us, becoming a prayer warrior—or someone with a consistent prayer life—won't happen on its own. Some people are gifted pray-ers. The rest of us need to work at it.

Here are some steps to help us train our spiritual prayer muscles for the race we're in:

Start small. The running program my husband and I followed started with a couple of weeks of alternating jogging and walking. Similarly, with prayer, we can take a lesson from the early Church. They paused throughout the day for times of prayer. Instead of vowing to pray for one straight hour, break up your time. Maybe you'll pray three times a day for a couple of minutes. Or you might pause every hour to briefly thank God. Eventually, it will become ingrained in your daily life, and you can add more (or longer) times of prayer.

Schedule it. To keep on track with running, I plan which days I can run, factoring in schedule changes and weather fluctuations. When I plan to run, and plan it into my day, I'm less likely to skip it. In the same way, schedule your prayer time. Yes, it's good to pray spontaneously when the Spirit leads. But I know if I only prayed that way, I wouldn't find the time for quality prayer.

Soak up the Word. Staying hydrated with water makes the run easier. I learned this the hard way. One day, I drank too much coffee and too little water before I ran, and I had difficulty finishing my run. The same is true of my prayer life if I'm not consistently nourished by the Word of God. Drinking the Living Water equips our prayers for effectiveness. As John writes in his first letter, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). We can ask according to God's will when we commune with Him in the Word.

Spur one another on. When my husband and I trained together, we encouraged each other to keep going. When it was raining and cold and we didn't want to run, we held each other accountable for the training. My husband had knee surgery recently, so I now run by myself. But I find it harder to stay motivated when I want to quit. In the same way, however, you

can make it work—email or in person, once a week or once a day—find someone who can encourage you to keep going when you want to quit.

Set a goal. Our first training program began exactly nine weeks before a local 5K. We were registered to run—and if we didn't stick with the program, we would be underprepared for the race. Give yourself a realistic goal for your prayer life. Maybe you won't be praying for two hours a day by the end of a month, but you might end up praying three shorter times a day.

Stretch. Stretching helps me loosen my muscles before I run. Similarly, you may need to loosen up your ideas about proper prayer and try different positions and methods. If you find yourself falling asleep while praying, try standing instead of sitting. Take a walk and talk to Jesus. Lie face down. Kneel. The Bible contains many examples of ways to pray. If you find yourself struggling, don't limit yourself to one way. Experiment with others that may work for you.

Stay focused. When I'm running through my neighborhood, I can get distracted by dogs, traffic, and other people. I can also find myself focused on the pain, my breathing, or how much farther I have to go. But none of those things help me accomplish the goal. If too many things distract you while you pray, you might become discouraged. Peter encourages the church to "be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray" (1 Peter 4:7). If your mind wanders because you have too many things on your "to do" list, then write those things down. Doodle on paper as you pray. Try the ancient practice of repeating a word or phrase such as, "Come, Lord Jesus" or "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," to focus your mind.

Beyond Lifetime Benefits

Paul instructs Timothy, "Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value

for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:7–8). As with physical training, godly training will be painful at times and won’t come easily. But the benefits will last longer than a lifetime.

My husband and I turned to running when we desperately needed a change for our marriage. It was a last resort. Without the program guiding us through the first small steps in running, I wouldn’t have stuck with it. I would have missed out on an experience that changed our marriage relationship.

Many of us, including myself, also turn to prayer as a last resort. Training for a “prayer-athon” requires small steps and the discipline to practice praying. It’s easy to become discouraged and pray haphazardly or only when there’s a crisis. But prayer can be so much more when we learn perseverance, commitment, and teamwork. The benefits will outlast our physical bodies and carry us into the life to come.

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