

Why Do We Pray?

This past weekend we celebrated Memorial Day, 2008 with a barbecue in our yard, to which we invited about forty friends and family members. A number of those who came are involved with us in the beginnings of the International House of Prayer Northwest, which is just beginning to be established in the city of Tacoma, Washington. A group of us was talking together about the emerging prayer movement around the world, and especially the little prayer groups that are popping up all over the greater Seattle area. There is an explosion of interest in night and day prayer, and the reality of that was the focus of our conversation.

The first question that comes to me as I consider this fact is, “Why?” Why are people calling on the name of the Lord as never before? What is causing the hearts of human beings to turn toward the Lord in unprecedented numbers and take the time and energy to seek Him?

In Ezekiel 22:30 is recorded a time in which the Lord God articulates through the prophet the sins and failings of the nation of Israel. He is poised to bring judgment on the land, and the anguish of His heart is that there is no one to “stand in the gap,” to stand before the Lord on behalf of the land. Though He finds no one at the time and judgment is released upon the land, this is a prophetic picture that later would be completed in the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross, the one Man who would stand effectively before God on behalf of the people of the earth.

This posture of standing before the Lord God on behalf of other people is the essence of intercession. It is the ongoing work of Jesus, even as He is in the presence of God today. We as His people, His Bride, are being summoned by the Spirit of God to join with Jesus Christ in this labor of intercession. We are invited to stand as His partners in the priestly ministry of holding the nations before the throne of God, that He might pour out His mercy instead of His wrath upon human beings.

Because this is so, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of the heart of God concerning intercessory prayer, so that we might fulfill our destiny as His people with maximum effectiveness and joy. Before we do this though, we must begin to move away from false perceptions about prayer and consider some prevalent—but inaccurate—ideas about intercession.

Mistaken Ideas about Intercessory Prayer

Like most Christians, I have been aware for a long time that prayer is an important part of my life as a follower of Jesus. The problem was that I didn't like to pray. I didn't enjoy prayer, whether in the context of corporate prayer meetings or in my virtually non-existent personal prayer life. Although my heart was stirred by the testimonies of others about prayer, my motivations were almost always in the realm of guilt, shame and religious pressure.

When I first began to hear about people who would give themselves to prayer in an extravagant way, I vacillated between holding those people up as heroes in my mind and succumbing to a self-condemning attitude of hopelessness. Since I really don't enjoy being depressed, I would simply put the matter out of my mind and get on about the business of ministry. When I did pray, I focused almost exclusively on what I needed God to do, either for me personally or for the ministry in which I was involved.

My suspicion is that many believers find themselves in this same boat. We know we should pray but we don't like to pray, and the fact for 21st century Americans is that unless something is enjoyable at some level, or unless it has a relatively quick payoff, we simply won't engage in the activity long term. In order to address this dilemma, I want to present some suggestions of what intercessory prayer *is not*, so that we might then be able to look with clearer eyes at what it is.

Prayer as Christian Duty

Perhaps the most common misconception about prayer with which believers struggle is the idea that prayer is our duty. Somehow, we have gotten it in our minds and hearts that God is a religious entity Who, unfortunately, just happens to be the all-powerful Lord of the universe. Therefore, though we don't really like to talk to Him, we sort of need to anyway. We don't really understand why God wants us to beg Him for our provisions. Our emotional perception is that since He is somewhat disinterested and distant, He must be persuaded to give us what we need.

I'm reminded of a little poem written by a friend years ago. Entitled "*Protocol*," it is a poignant assessment of duty-bound prayer. It goes like this:

**I hold my hands like this to pray,
Was told to do four times a day.
With friends I talk and reminisce;
Only God wants my hands like this.**

In reality, this kind of dutiful exercise is completely opposite of God's heart for His people in the place of prayer. We are told through the prophet Isaiah that at the end of the age even those who are foreigners to God's covenants will be brought to a place of *joyful* prayer. Consider these words:

**Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him,
And to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants--
Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant--
Even them I will bring to My holy mountain,
and make them joyful in My house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar;
For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."
Isaiah 56:6-7**

Notice the themes. Prayer will be initiated by God. It will be about loving the name of the Lord and experiencing joy in the house of prayer, a ministry in which all the nations of the earth shall participate. Religious duty is not the motivation for intercessory prayer.

Prayer as a Tool for Changing Things

The perception of prayer that seems the most common today is that it is God's way of changing things. While there is truth in this statement, in itself it is an inadequate perspective of prayer. Since I will explore this theme more fully in another article, I will treat the issue only briefly at this point. It is my perception that most intercessory prayer today is stimulated by the awareness that so much is wrong with the world, and that God must be persuaded through fervent and even anguished prayer to extend His hand and bring about change. The measuring stick for effectiveness in prayer is the degree to which the circumstances around us change, either in personal situations or in relationship to any other specific external state of affairs.

As an underpinning of this desire for personal and social intervention, much attention has been given recently to discovering the root sin problems of geographical areas. The "spiritual mapping" process yields much understanding as to the generational "sins of the fathers" that have polluted a city or a region. Once that information has been obtained, intercessors attempt to discern the identity of the spiritual principalities and powers that have exerted their influence in the region. The intercessors then repent from the sinful choices of which the forebears were guilty in order to bring about a measure of restoration.

Certain kinds of "prophetic acts" are often part of the practice of spiritual mapping, such as administering salt to river waters that flow through a city or marching around certain

geographical areas with musical instruments such as rams' horns and tambourines. In some cases, efforts are put forth to address the demonic principalities and powers that have authority over a particular city or region, although this has become a less frequent practice in recent years. John Paul Jackson, in his helpful book entitled "*Needless Casualties Of War*," demonstrated that this activity can be very damaging to those who involve themselves in it.

This kind of prayer has had significant and measurable effect in cities all over the world. George Otis, Jr., a well-known student of church growth and revival, has produced two videos, both entitled *Transformations* that give objective and observable evidence of the impact of city-wide prayer based on this methodology.

In this method of prayer, however, there is a danger that the continual focus on an area's sinfulness and the spiritual forces of darkness behind the problems may have a negative impact on intercessors. There has emerged in many places a sense of overwhelming fatigue and even despair that is gripping numerous prayer warriors, and I am convinced that much of it may come from focusing on the wrong things. When the focus of prayer is consistently placed on what is wrong in an area, we tend to develop eyes that see only the corruption, and we may lose our sense of the beautiful.

We were created to become what we behold, and God's intention is that we gaze on the beauty of His Son, Jesus Christ, and become like Him in the process. Then, in the context of intimacy with Jesus, filled with His Spirit of compassionate power, we will begin to accompany Him as He visits the cities of earth and brings the restoration of all things to the will of the Father, one person at a time.

Prayer to Increase Our Boundaries

A few years ago, the runaway best-selling book on every chart was a little 96-page volume entitled *The Prayer Of Jabez*. Written by Bruce Wilkinson, it is a meditation on the two-verse historical record of a man named Jabez, whose life story is encapsulated in *1 Chronicles 4:9-10*. To be sure, Jabez was born into a difficult situation. His "story" is tucked in the middle of the genealogies of Chronicles, and the first thing that sets him apart is that his mother named him. This indicates that she was probably a single mom, either widowed before his birth, or perhaps even an unwed mother. In the Middle Eastern culture of that day, this would have been among the worst possible scenarios.

Jabez' name means "to cause pain." Now there's a heritage for you! Beset by pain, Jabez is spoken of in the biblical text as being "more noble than his brothers," since he calls out to God to increase the boundaries of his life so that he will be blessed and not cause pain in the lives of others.

The beauty of this prayer is that it begins to touch the desire of God's heart to bless His children, particularly those who realize the brokenness of their lives. This passion in the heart of God for the well-being of His people is the right motivation for prayer, and I have personally been blessed and encouraged by the use of this prayer. There are individuals who pray the prayer of Jabez over my life daily, and I am tremendously grateful. I want to explore this deep desire in God's heart to bless His own more fully in the paragraphs to come.

The prayer of Jabez, however, quickly can become just a newer version of the "bless me" theology that has degenerated into selfishness over the years, with God becoming no more than the cosmic Santa Claus. The good news about this little prayer is that millions more are praying because of it. The danger is in staying focused on our own blessing instead of having our eyes filled with the wonder and majesty of the Person of Jesus as we entrust ourselves to His generous care and provision. Once again the focus of prayer becomes the changing of our circumstances, rather than having our hearts ravished with the beauty and majesty of God.

The desire of God's heart is to have a relationship of loving intimacy with human beings. Our role in that relationship is the one we must grapple with as we continue to explore the question of why we pray.

In our next article, we will suggest another and perhaps better way to approach prayer. Check back with us over the next few days!

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