

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A time for strategic prayer

From the private, personal prayers of David recorded in the Psalms, to the prayers of Jesus recorded in the gospels, to the corporate prayers offered by prophets, priests and kings and the prayers of Paul offered on behalf of the early church, the Bible is filled with the ongoing dialogue between God and His praying people.

The prayers of God's people are offered in a myriad of contexts ranging from celebratory worship, to battlefields, to lonely dark nights of the soul. They are offered in every posture and sometimes in sighs and groans too deep for words. They are offered by men, women and children, warriors, priests, publicans, widows, apostles and the Lord Jesus Himself.

Three things can be said of every Biblical prayer.

- First, they are offered by believing people to a personal God by the power of His Holy Spirit.
- Second, they are heard, received and answered according to God's perfect will and in God's perfect timing.
- The result is that divine power is unleashed in ways the world cannot explain and in measures beyond human imagining.

The prayers of God's people in the Bible are offered at various hours, in every season, and in every circumstance of human life. These prayers bear witness to the reality that different times in life call for different kinds of prayer.

All times are suitable for prayers of adoration and praise for who God is. In every situation and every season of life we are to give thanks to God, for He is good, His steadfast love endures forever. These prayers are to always be on our hearts and on our lips. God is God, one, holy, jealous, just, merciful, perfect.

The list of God's character attributes is worthy of prayer every day, from everyone, in every circumstance.

The regular rhythms of life provide endless fodder for logistical intercessory prayers. This is where most of us spend the majority of our prayer time. Think here "prayer list."

How much of your prayer life is consumed with seeking God's present help concerning the logistics of your own life and the needs of those you love best in the world?

These desires of our hearts are important to God, but they are admittedly temporal in perspective.

There are times in the life of every disciple when we acknowledge that we're ready and willing for God to take us deeper into prayer and further into mission. We have grown weary of the sta-



Start a small group:

- Invite a friend or two to meet with you over prayer and the Word.
- Use this four session study to get started.

tus quo and God's Spirit provokes within us a willingness to submit to His active work bringing our life into greater conformity with Jesus Christ. These are prayers of active passivity, prayers inviting God to do in and through us whatever He wills, but they are still prayed from a temporal perspective.

"What other kind of prayer is there?," you might ask. Those prayed from an eternal perspective, focused on God's ultimate objectives for the world. These strategic prayers capture God's heart and seek God's purpose, not merely our own security, healing, blessing or benefit. Strategic prayers begin and end with God: God's will, God's way, God's timing.

As things are escalating, accelerating, rushing, hastening all around us, we may feel increasingly as if we're hanging on for dear life on a roller coaster gone careening out of control.

In times that we may perceive as perilous, are we willing to acknowledge God's ultimate sovereignty, seek God and wait for His answers, follow His counsel and His leading wherever that may lead? Are we willing to submit to God's ultimate authority over all life, including our own, doing whatever God directs, no matter how contrary to our way of thinking? If so, then let us become Biblically equipped to engage in strategic prayer.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned. Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Week I: What to do when you don't know what to do

Read II Chronicles 20:1-30

Verses one and two describe the context: God's people find themselves under threat and on the verge of war. Verse three indicates that the response of the king is a combination of alarm and desperation.

What are godly leaders to do when they honestly don't know what to do? Jehoshaphat called the people to assemble that they might corporately seek the Lord.

Verses 5-12 lay out the agenda of the prayer meeting, following the pattern of many other Old Testament prayers of lament.

- God is rightly addressed,
- His character and deeds are chronicled,
- the current need of His people is presented and trust in God expressed,
- and then in total submission the king prays, "we are powerless, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

We do not know how much time passes in verse 13. What we do know is that all the people waited. All of them. The children weren't entertained in another room while the adults sought the Lord. The men and women didn't meet in gender-specific circles.

No, the Bible says that, "all the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord."

They were watching, listening, being still, knowing that the Lord is God and confident that He would answer. And in verses 14-17, He did!

The Lord answers through the Spirit-inspired voice of one believer and the result is worship (v. 18-19). Led by the king who bowed his face to the ground, all the people fell down in worship before the Lord.

The following morning, the people rose to obediently follow the instruction received from the Lord.

By worldly military strategy, the plan was ridiculous. But God's ways are not our ways and, filled with faith in the faithfulness of God, the "army" headed into battle led by priests with praise upon their lips. The song they sang is echoed throughout the Scriptures, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His love endures forever."

The Scriptures tell us that "as they began to sing and praise" the Lord did what the Lord had promised to do and the people of God were delivered (v. 22-26).

The result was more worship and an impact in the world (v. 29-30) that produced a peace described as "rest on every side."

Questions for discussion:

1. What threatens the peace, purity and unity of the people of God today?
2. How perilous to the Body of Christ do you perceive these threats to be?
3. Like Jehoshaphat, are you alarmed and if so, are you in a position to call on at least one other person for a time of corporate prayer seeking Him?
4. Read and discuss the implications of verse 17: "*You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.*" How might you have felt if you were one of God's people hearing these words in answer to your prayer of desperation?

Pray together and wait: "Father, we are powerless, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

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Week II: Praying from generation to generation

Read Judges 2:6-17 and Luke 15

Although God is the same age to age, people tend to be vastly different generation to generation. In spanning the entire course of human history, it comes as no surprise that the Bible chronicles the myriad realities attendant to the generations of God's people. Consider the shift that takes place in terms of fidelity to God between the very first generation of Adam and Eve and the second generation of Cain and Abel and Seth. Of the nine generations from Adam to Noah only one, Enoch, is described as having walked with God (Gen. 5:22-24), and by the generation of Noah, God's heart is broken.

Genesis 6:5-6 reads, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain." God's remedy: a cleansing flood out of which He will redeem one family and start over again.

One chapter in the Bible is dedicated to the generations of Noah's family before the confrontation at Babel. One more chapter and we arrive at God's calling of Abram that God might have a people for Himself from among the nations who have all turned away.

The generation of Abraham and Lot is the generation of Sodom and Gomorrah. And the next generation includes Ishmael and the daughters of Lot, whose children are all the product of incest. Through Isaac, God promises to make Abraham the father of nations, with the hope that faith in God will be transmitted among the generations of Abraham. They will be God's people and He will be their God. Disappointment looms again as the sons of Ishmael "live in hostility toward all their brothers" (Genesis 25:18), and Jacob and Esau spend most of their adult lives in hostility toward each other.

Eventually we begin thinking about the generations having less to do with genetics and more to do with transmitting the faith once received. There is the transference of leadership from the generation of Moses to that of Joshua. According to the Bible, that went well. "The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had seen all the great things the Lord had done for Israel" (Judges 2:7). However, one chapter later in Judges 2:10, we read, "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel."

We are all aware that imparting the faith generation to generation is imperative. In Deuteronomy 6:4-6 the Jews have the Shema which Jesus called the greatest commandment. The verse which follows the Shema reads: "Impress them on our children." This transmittal of the faith is lost in the generation from Joshua to Judges when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

A similar reality is currently underway in the historically mainline Christian context in North America. More than a generation has been lost among the mainline denominations. We have failed to keep the faith in such a way that our children long to inherit it. We have failed to share the news of Jesus Christ in such a way that our children receive it as good. We have failed to demonstrate

the faith in such a way that our children desire to follow.

But all is not lost, for God's arm is not too short and God's will is not too weak to save. Like Jesus, we need to weep over and then seek out the lost sheep. And like the angels in heaven we need to rejoice over every sinner who repents (Luke 15).

Questions for discussion:

1. Read and discuss 2 Timothy 1:5. What observation does Paul make about the faith that lives in Timothy?
2. Recognizing that faith is not transmitted genetically, according to the Bible, how is the Christian faith "passed down?" (Read John 1:12-13, John 3:1-21 and I Corinthians 15:1-11 for insights.)
3. Considering the example of Eunice, Lois and Timothy, going back and going forward, what is the legacy of your faith, generation to generation? Or, who in the generations past transmitted the faith to you and to whom in the next generations have you transmitted the faith now living in you?
4. Paul was a spiritual father to many, including Timothy. Who are the "Timothy's" in your life, to whom you are actively transmitting the faith now?

Pray strategically for the lost whom God will reach today by His Spirit and His people.

Pray for the next generation of Christians.

Pray for the Lord to show you a person to whom you can pass the faith.

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Week III: Praying like Jesus

The Bible tells us in Luke 5:16 that “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Mark 1:35 confirms that saying, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed.”

Matthew and Luke both record Jesus’ instruction to the disciples on prayer, which we now call the Lord’s Prayer. John chapter 17 is a record of Jesus’ prayer for Himself, His disciples and all believers, and all the gospels record various prayers of Jesus including several from the cross.

If we want to pray like Jesus we will direct our prayers exclusively to the Father, believe fully in His power and submit fully to His will.

We will pray in all circumstances and we will expect miracles. We will pray regularly and we will pray ardently. And if we want to pray like Jesus, on occasion we will pray all night.

Luke 6:12 says, “... Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”

To this point, Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan, tempted for 40 days by the devil in the wilderness, praised for His Spirit-filled teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee, rejected by His hometown congregation in Nazareth, driven out evil spirits, healed the sick, taught the crowds at Gennesaret, called the first disciples and answered theological questions about fasting and the Sabbath. The verse immediately preceding the all-night prayer vigil says, “They were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

The crowds were large, the needs were great, a handful of disciples had been called away from their nets and Levi from his tax booth, but seemingly the time had arrived for the 12 to be identified and for their instruction to begin in earnest.

Whom had God chosen to be the 12 through whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ would go forth to the world by the power of the Spirit after Pentecost?

Who from among the crowds had God ordained to leave all the world had to offer in exchange for certain martyrdom?

Who was to betray Him?

On whose confession would His Church be built?

Who would run with chariots that the Gospel might reach Ethiopia?

Who were the 12?

Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John the sons of Zebedee, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James and Judas Iscariot, who from the beginning Jesus knew would betray Him.

There is not a record of the prayers of Jesus from that night, but you can imagine that at this point His prayer to the Father might have simply been, “These?”

“Yes, Son, these. These 12. You know Me. I choose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; that which is weak to shame the strong. None of them is of noble birth and yet they shall be the sons of the Most High. None of them is wise by human standards so that when the power of our Spirit is unleashed, the world will be astonished and filled with awe. None of them is now a man of influence, but from the day of your res-

urrection to the day when I make all things new, these 12 will be called the apostles. Through their testimony the entire world will come to know Your name. The name that I decree above every other name. Indeed, Son, these.”

And the Bible tells us that when morning came, Jesus called His disciples to Him and chose 12 whom He designated apostles (Luke 6:13).

Questions for discussion:

1. What difference have the 12 apostles made in the history of the world?
2. What did they leave behind to follow Jesus? What did they gain?
3. From your perspective, was it worth it?
4. How does your congregation go about identifying leadership for the church today?
5. Does your nominating committee spend all night in prayer after the pattern of Christ seeking God’s desire and design?

Pray strategically for the future of the Church, the body of Christ in the world.

Pray strategically for God to raise up leadership worthy of the calling to which He has called.

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Week IV: Praying like there's no tomorrow

Some nights are so dark, all we have are tears and prayer.

- Abraham had one of those nights. Read Genesis 22:1-19
- Jacob had some of those nights. Read Genesis 32:21-32; 37:34-35
- Hannah had one of those nights. Read I Samuel 1:10-18
- David had some of those nights. Read II Samuel 12:15-23, 18:32-19:4
- The Psalmists had many such nights. Read Psalm 42, 44, 74, 88
- Jonah had one of those nights in the belly of a fish, Daniel in the lion's den and three of God's people in a fiery furnace.
- The disciples of Jesus had one of those nights in the upper room following the crucifixion, and Paul had one of those nights on the road to Damascus.

They are known as dark nights of the soul and in them, we are not alone. Jesus had one of those nights, too.

Read Mark 14:32-42.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed.

One thing is clear, as the cross loomed, Jesus bowed His head and His will to the Father.

Jesus prayed in the garden like there was no tomorrow.

Here is the God-Man who sees all the way to the other side of eternity, but in His humanity He wonders if the wrath of God is more than He can bear. This is both a physical question about bearing the cross, and a spiritual question about bearing the sin of the world.

This is a prayer pleading for the wrath of God to be dealt with in some way other than by one bowed in total submission to the will of the Father.

This is a prayer prayed in agony and unquestioning faith in the faithfulness of God.

This is a prayer soiled with blood, drenched in sweat and bathed in tears.

This is a persistent prayer offered up over and over again until the one offering the prayer becomes the offering.

This is Jesus, praying like there's no tomorrow because although He knows God will raise Him up, the agony and shame of the Cross are excruciatingly real.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. When have you prayed like there was no tomorrow?
2. How did God answer those prayers?
3. Who do you know that is currently suffering in the midst of a dark night of the soul?
4. How can you be Christ's ambassador to that person, staying awake with them while they pray and wrestle with God?

Pray strategically for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Pray strategically for Christ's Kingdom to be advanced.