

Dennis Brown has given us a wonderful gift with his excellent book on prayer. The impact of this vitally important book is best discovered by reading it in its entirety. Each chapter builds on the previous chapters emphasizing the importance of ones relationship with our Heavenly Father. His personal illustrations cause the book to come alive. The author does a superb job explaining the indescribable privilege of prayer as a natural extension of our relationship with God the Father. Your own prayer life will be enhanced as you put into practice the precepts laid out in this book.

Dr. Thomas E. Hermiz

Evangelist and former President of World Gospel Mission
General Superintendent, Churches of Christ in Christian Union

Dennis Brown writes with insight and wisdom. In *Connected!* he has masterfully addressed a subject that has been the focus of many other books, but in a way that is enjoyable, exceptionally fresh and spiritually invigorating.

Carla McCloud

Teacher and Prayer Ministry leader,
Vineyard Church, Reynoldsburg, Ohio

In writing *Connected!* Dennis Brown has shared insights born from his own pilgrimage of prayer. These pages deliver fresh and passionate truths flavored with the rich experiences from his life in ministry both here and abroad. Dennis evidences an authentic desire to draw us beyond a careless casualness in which prayer is little more than a spiritual task on a daily to do list. These chapters call us to embrace prayer as the very fabric of our relationship with God. His words provide the grist for the mill of our journey to know God, to walk in His presence, and to live out that relationship as an act of ministry through prayer.

Dr. Stan Toler

Best Selling Author, International Speaker
General Superintended (emeritus), Church of the Nazarene

My wife and I have followed Dennis Brown's writing ministry for several years. *Connected!* is his best yet. As a life-long layman, I found even the deeper discussions easy to understand. By redefining prayer as the expression of our relationship with God, Dennis has made it possible

for me to understand what “pray without ceasing” really means—an endless conversation with God.

Frank Perry
Mayor (retired), Cardington, Ohio
Former Superintendent of Lincoln Schools, Cardington, Ohio

Dennis Brown’s book entitled *Connected! Unlocking the DNA of Authentic Prayer* is an excellent resource on the topic of prayer. His insights will speak to all believers from the most casual reader to the student in pursuit of a ministry as a calling.

Dennis leads us through his journey of prayer with a writing style that is engaging and easy to read. I found myself smiling and even laughing out loud at times. My relationship with God and my understanding of prayer have been blessed.

I am happy to recommend *Connected!*
A more dynamic prayer life awaits.

James N. Lehman, O.D.
Family Vision Care, Grove City, Ohio
Youth & Music ministry volunteer

Dennis Brown is a gifted writer, but at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene he is known as a true prayer warrior as well. He has served our prayer ministries for several years with his gift of teaching and his heart of intercession.

Connected! is an insightful book that examines the varied facets of prayer with a commitment to help us make prayer a functional and practical part of our lives. His insight speaks to the issues of prayer as a ministry in the church. But his words cause us to examine the depth of our prayer lives and the way it intersects with our lives at home, in the work place, and wherever our influence is felt.

No matter how long you have walked with God, you will be enriched and challenged as you allow these pages to permeate your heart and mind. Prepare to be changed as you prayerfully delve into these pages.

Bill Bolin
Prayer Ministries Coordinator
Grove City Church of the Nazarene, Grove City, OH

Connected!

Unlocking the DNA of Authentic Prayer

Dennis E. Brown



Copyright © 2014 Dennis E. Brown.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission. NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® and NIV® are registered trademarks of Biblica, Inc. Use of either trademark for the offering of goods or services requires the prior written consent of Biblica US, Inc.

Author Credits: Restoring Those Who Have Fallen: the Healing Art of Spiritual Restoration, Devotional blog “The Embrace of Grace” (<http://theembraceofgrace.org>)

WestBow Press books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

WestBow Press
A Division of Thomas Nelson & Zondervan
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.westbowpress.com
1 (866) 928-1240

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only.

Certain stock imagery © Thinkstock.

ISBN: 978-1-4908-6061-9 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4908-6063-3 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-4908-6059-6 (e)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014920608

Printed in the United States of America.

WestBow Press rev. date: 12/12/2014

Contents

Meet the Team!	vii
Foreword	ix
The First Word	xi
Part 1: Connected! – The DNA	1
1. Be Honest: What Does Prayer Really Mean to You	3
2. The Lens Makes the Difference	14
3. Seeking Righteousness and Pursuing Peace	23
4. Holiness: the Definitive Component in Understanding Prayer.....	31
Part 2: Disconnected! – Barriers to an Effective Prayer Life	41
5. The Heart of the Matter.....	45
6. Obstacles Are Inevitable	56
7. Beware the Blind Spot.....	71
Part 3: Discovering Your Ministry of Prayer	77
8. Back to the Basics	79
9. The DNA of Prayer Ministry	88
10. Ministries of Intercession.....	100
11. The Ministry of Intercession: Let's Get Personal	105
12. The Alignment Factor: Intercession for Ministry Leaders	110
13. How to Intercede for Worship Events	121
14. Keeping “The Main Thing” in Sight: Intercession for the Lost.....	129
15. Ministries of Prayer—Ministries of Power, Part 1: The Problem with Power.....	138
16. Ministries of Prayer—Ministries of Power, Part 2: Staying Authority Centered.....	147
Part 4: The Last Word	159
17. Becoming a House of Prayer.....	161
Also by Dennis E. Brown.....	170

Meet the Team!

There isn't a single book that has ever been published without several sets of hands involved in the process. And that is true about this book as well.

This book has several sets of finger prints, and any expression of gratitude will be woefully inadequate.

It's no coincidence that many authors begin with thanking their spouses, and I am no exception. Dena has patiently endured the long and broken time line it took to finish *Connected!* Major interruptions to our lives became equally major interruptions in getting this project done, but she never lost faith in me.

My brother Daryl, in spite of some life adjustments of his own, has given me invaluable feedback. His astute theological clarity has always been a ready resource for me over the years including those scripture references that allude me in my growing number of "senior moments."

Wes Eby, my friend whose editorial skills take no back seat to anyone, has invested hours on a book that was longer than he had anticipated. His expertise and encouragement have been worth more than words can express.

A handful of other people from various walks of life have provided feedback and encouragement on various chapters. Some were writers themselves. Others thankfully just love to read.

Then there are those exquisitely wonderful people who make up my inner circle prayer partners for my writing and teaching ministry. They may be scattered around the country, but their prayers have formed one spiritual laser beam that has intersected my days with true precision. From time to time, many others have let me know that they are praying, and they too have done so just when I have often needed it most.

Let me introduce Bill Bolin, the prayer ministry coordinator at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene. His trust in me to provide him with the section on ministries of prayer has never wavered in spite of the interruptions and delays that were unavoidable. He has lavished on me words of encouragement and blessing that were always timely. It is a privilege to serve under Bill's leadership and to have him as my friend.

My wife has urged me to mention one other source of constant support. His name is Sammy. Sammy was supposed to be a Samantha, but the "expert" who talked us into bringing this strange little creature into our home failed us miserably. This strange cat has no penchant or patience for being petted. But for some odd reason he jumps up on my desk to the left of my computer, becomes this cuddly fur ball, and interrupts my flow of thoughts several times a day. If I ignore him, he sneaks his right paw ever

so slyly over my keyboard. His head soon follows. For some unknown and irritating reason, the only time and place that Sammy wants attention or feels the need to be held is when I am at my computer.

Between the cat hair on my computer keys, the occasional itchy eyes (mine, not Sammy's), there have been considerable hours spent trying to get my thoughts back to where they were before Sammy showed up. More times than I can remember, those interruptions provided moments when I was forced to restart, only to become aware that what I ended up writing was better than what I would have if I had not been forced to "paws" for a moment.

Donkeys talk to prophets so why am I surprised that a stray cat becomes a catalyst to force some "time out" that lets me hear from the Lord.

Who'd a thunk it!



Foreword

“I’m not sure I believe in prayer anymore.”

The thought continually hounded me as I wandered through a desert place in my life and ministry. I had been a pastor for just a short time, but it was long enough to become discouraged from the seemingly constant battles of ministry and demands of leadership. Little did I know that God was using this desert season to prepare me for a revelation that would transform my prayers and revolutionize my life.

Out of desperation I attended a prayer conference where I was introduced to the idea of praying through the Lord’s Prayer every day by Dr. Larry Lea. As I left the conference I realized that the Holy Spirit had put the *desire* to pray back into my heart. And over the following months as I consistently developed the *discipline* to pray in my day to day schedule, I soon began to experience the *delight* of prayer that has sustained me for over 30 years now.

God has led Dennis Brown along a different path than me, but we have converged together in our life-long prayer journey. Dennis doesn’t just write about prayer, he lives it. I know. I’m his pastor. And I, along with hundreds of others in our Grove City Nazarene church community, have received God’s mercy, wisdom, and strength through his anointed intercession. His practical prayer stories inspire me, his thoughtful prayer insights drive me deeper into God’s Word, and his faith-filled prayer life challenges me to expect great things from our great God.

So whether you are just discovering the *desire* to pray, or seeking to develop the *discipline* of prayer, get ready to experience the *delight* of prayer as you delve into the pages of this book.

Mark Fuller

Pastor, Grove City Church of the Nazarene

The First Word

So, why another book about prayer?

When I was at Fuller Seminary's School of International Studies, Dr. Charles Kraft offered a class entitled Worldview. I enrolled in the class, and if I remember correctly, I was the only Masters candidate in the class. There were ten or eleven others, all working on doctorate degrees.

And, by the way, there was no textbook. In fact at that time there were no books anywhere committed strictly to the subject of worldview. The only exception was an unpublished manuscript written by Dr. Michael Kearney, a professor at the University of California, Riverside.

Those of us in the class were challenged to go on a kind of academic scavenger hunt for material, any material, large or small on the topic. We ended up with hundreds of pages from cultural anthropology texts, pages from various periodicals and journals, research papers, philosophy resources, and case studies by cultural anthropologist as well as missiologists. We shared and devoured the resources in an open-forum format. Some of those sources were only a paragraph or two. A few were full chapters like the one from James Spradley's anthropology text. Others were case studies and some did not even mention worldview specifically but served as good narratives or examples of the subject.

Toward the end of the course, Dr. Kraft approached me about creating a reader for the course as a Master's thesis project. I was to use the material the class members had collected and anything else I could find.

It took me nearly a full year and 710 pages single spaced to reflect the theory of worldview and the categories that all worldviews share. With Dr. Kraft's insight and advice, I selected and edited resources that supported, illustrated and even argued against the theoretical assertions in the reader.

But, at least the course had a textbook, of sorts.

When I was returning to Papua New Guinea, I scheduled a layover in Pasadena and was surprised when I showed up on the Fuller campus to find Dr. Kraft heading for his new Worldview class. He asked me to sit in on the class and introduced me to the class who were all holding my project as their textbook/reader.

As satisfying as that was, that moment was especially memorable because of something he shared with the class. As he explained who I was and what we had done to produce the reader, he added that of all the people in the original class, I was the one who had the most to learn.

It was not a put-down in any way. It was the truth!

I was not as far along in my post graduate studies as the rest of the class members, and I also had less experience writing academic papers as the others. I am certain that Dr. Kraft had a more demanding task with reading and recommending editing changes than he might have had with the others, but he was stuck with me, because the rest were working on dissertations already.

The reason I tell you that story is that in many ways this book falls into much the same category for me. I can name a long list of people I know personally, godly men and women, who have learned to pray and have practiced what they have learned to a much greater extent than I.

So, why should you read this book?

The Christian bookstore shelves and the religions shelves in secular bookstores are loaded with books on prayer. Some of them are more helpful than others, but all offer something of benefit in one way or another and in varying degrees.

But of all those who are writing about prayer, I have undoubtedly had the most to learn. I am not a prayer giant like Peter Wagner or Dutch Sheets or Cindy Jacobs, but I have been challenged and have grown from what they have written. Other authors like Phillip Yancey, Max Lucado, R.C. Sproul, Stormie Omartian, and Richard Foster write with great skill about the topic of prayer and their words have impacted thousands. And the old classics by E.M Bounds and Andrew Murray and A.W. Tozer are priceless.

So, how is this book different?

This is a book that reflects an awakening and real transformation in my personal prayer life. I have felt compelled to share what God helped me discover that changed everything for me.

I was raised in a Christian home. In fact my father was a minister. I have been acquainted with prayer since childhood.

I entered the ministry at the age of seventeen, and was ordained by the age of twenty-one. My ministry career has spanned more than fifty years. Many of those years I served in the field of missions. I functioned as an advisor to pastors in Papua New Guinea, and later as the field director. I spent time as a production coordinator and project manager for mission literature at the international headquarters for the Church of the Nazarene. Other years were spent in graduate studies learning how to communicate more effectively across cultural barriers.

Interspersed through all that, I have written dozens of mission articles, co-written numerous denominations projects, and several personal projects both small and not so small. I have also pastored in four churches here in the U.S. and planted five churches outside the U.S. Most recently I have been teaching at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene on a variety of

topics and at the urging of Stan Toler, a longtime friend, I have begun to write again.

During those years, my prayer life, as far as I could tell, was on a par with most of those around me. I believed in prayer and from various discussions with hundreds of other believers through all those years I was not the only one who had struggled to be consistent in my prayer life.

Six years ago I began to sense that I might have something to share with others about how my perception of prayer had been totally transformed. The change began more than a decade ago. If that sounds like a long time, then just chalk it up to me being a slow learner, perhaps, but God was awakening something fresh in my life.

I began teaching classes on prayer at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene in Grove City, OH. Each time I taught the series, I was blessed with feedback from class members, some who had been Christians for many years. Many shared with me that what I was teaching had brought them to a kind of epiphany in understanding prayer. I knew exactly what they meant.

What stood out to me was how many of them seem to identify with my experience in which prayer had always been a dutiful task, a kind of spiritual chore on the daily To Do list. I kept trying to get it right and be consistent, but it was much like my efforts to diet, sometimes on and then there was the rest of the times.

The first section of this book actually focuses on how prayer was redefined for me. Those four chapters together examine and connect the facets that form an understanding of authentic prayer. I hope these chapters will shift prayer from a task-oriented experience to the rich and vital expression of an intimate relationship with God.

Discovering the relational nature of prayer changes everything.

The short second section examines how we can believe in prayer on the one hand, yet on the other hand pray so little. The barriers to an effective prayer life include a variety of factors, but one major hindrance usually comes as a surprise to many: a blind spot that few people even know is there.

Those two sections grew from the seeds of those class sessions at the church. Topics and notes have been greatly expanded and augmented, so those who have been in the classes probably will find some familiar material but much that has been added.

The original version of the third section was reworked and expanded at the request of the prayer ministry in my church. Those chapters have been reviewed and approved by the leadership of the church including our

prayer ministry coordinator, Bill Bolin. My intent has been to provide a thoughtful tool for the church that will help prepare people to discover the genuine joy and fulfilment in their own ministries of prayer.

The single chapter in the Prologue takes a fresh and complete look at the expression about the church being “a house of prayer.” The impact of those short words go much deeper than commonly thought.

My hope and prayer is that the anointing of God will transform us as we unlock the DNA of authentic prayer.

PART 1

Connected!

The DNA

How often have you heard a sermon or saw a new title or shared in a Bible study about prayer?

If I don't miss my guess, your experience has not been all that different from mine. I listened closely. I read and even reread the books. My reaction: Each time I would set my jaw with a new determination to finally become a man of prayer.

And, oh yes, there was the guilt. Over and over I had failed, and each new turn of intention was overlaid with guilt.

And then everything changed.

In these first chapters I am going to unpack what has been one of the most life-altering discovery processes of my spiritual journey. After years in the professional ministry, I found myself staring once again in the face of my failure to experience prayer in a more meaningful way. I had always struggled with consistency, but prayer was on my To Do list and I did. But I always knew there was more.

The transformation I have experienced in my prayer life over the last several years began when I became increasingly aware that I truly had missed the point of prayer my whole life. There was a classic "Aha!" moment. The scales fell off of my spiritual eyes, and I honestly saw prayer as if for the first time.

I realized that I had moved past the point of guilt about a tepid prayer life and was entering totally new territory. The initial awakening came

over a period of several weeks as I reveled in the fresh awareness that was taking root in my heart and mind.

In one sense I was once again a novice looking at prayer through different eyes. In another sense, however, I was aware that what the Lord was unfolding in my inner being was something for which I had hungered deeply.

I confess that when I began writing this book, I resisted the idea of beginning by defining prayer. After all, nearly everybody who writes about prayer takes that approach in some form or another. But in all candor, nothing has ever impacted my spiritual pilgrimage like having prayer redefined for me. The thought process that emerged over those months is shared in these four chapters and in the very order in which they were unfolded for me.

As you read these opening chapters, please read them in the order in which they have been written. I suspect that some who have a strong interest in living a holy life may be tempted to skip to chapter four first, but I beg of you not to do that. Each chapter provides a foundation on which the following chapter is built, and together they explore the truths that once blended provide the composite definition—the DNA —of prayer.

As you are about to discover, ultimately the DNA of prayer is summed up in the word *connected*.

Let the change begin.

Be Honest: What Does Prayer Really Mean to You

Prayer is often the least understood aspect of a Christian's life. If he does not understand it, how can he claim any true commitment to it?

- Author unknown

The first computer I owned was an Osbourne. About the size of a portable sewing machine, the screen was all of four inches square. It was part of my luggage when I returned to the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

I knew two things about computers: (1) how to turn one on, and (2) with the advent of personal computers I ran the risk of returning home four years later as a functional illiterate without it. My computer training was a crash course on a need-to-know basis.

My grandmother probably thought that the pressure of finishing my seminary studies affected my sanity. This was a lady who oohed and aahed at electric typewriters. The generation gap between us dramatically widened when I became immersed in the world of pixels and RAM and ROM.

I remember the day that I came across the term *motherboard*. I had to laugh. It occurred to me that Grandma knew about motherboards already. Hers was about two feet long and three inches wide, made of wood with a convenient handle. It hung in the kitchen, and although it was never used for cooking, it sure could heat things up.

When people come to any topic from different directions, effective communication requires some dexterity. Words and ideas can mean different things to different people.

I've had a variety of Australian friends over the years who have broadened my vocabulary. When I was with them, I had to abandon the idea of finding a drugstore and settle for a *chemist* instead. A *flat* became a *puncture*, and an *apartment* became a *flat*. And you never call someone a *bum* or lightheartedly tell someone you were just *bumming around*, because when you look that one up, you're going to find a rather impolite reference to a posterior.

The old axiom that words have meaning is true. Language itself is another factor that can make meaning mystifying. One comedic suggestion

points out that to someone for whom English is a rough second language, it's possible that a word like *arbitrator* could invoke an image of a guy who used to work at Arby's but quit to go to work at McDonald's. *Avoidable* could easily convey what a toreador tries to do every weekend.

While we can have a little fun with words, it still makes a good point: if you want to communicate, it helps if everybody is on the same page.

So, there can be no better place to start a conversation about prayer than with a clear sense of what prayer is.

How do *you* define prayer?

If you ask that of someone who has little or no church background, at best you are likely to hear such generalized expressions as "talking to God." Since this is a Christian book about Christian prayer, in all probability most of those reading this book would use more spiritual language, such as conversation or communion with the Father. Generally, the word *prayer* is associated with the idea of request or petition more than any other image.

We should not assume that everybody around us has the same idea about prayer. Those who come from various cultural and religious backgrounds will have their own idea of prayer. New Agers think of prayer as tapping into the wisdom and strength of the universe.

But we don't have to reach out into the social or cultural hinterlands to discover that prayer is not as uniformly understood as we generally think it is. Even in our own communities among people with whom we share much the same sense of life (i.e. worldview), prayer may be at best ambiguous.

Even among people sitting in evangelical pews, the term *prayer* may not have much meaning beyond the generally shared idea of offering a petition to God. Some, perhaps even many, might rely on the pat answers mentioned earlier that refer to communication or fellowship with God.

In light of the way we practice prayer, however, or perhaps more accurately the way we do *not* practice prayer, it is all too evident that we may not know what prayer really is. What we *do* speaks far more forcefully about what prayer is to us than anything we have learned from the latest book or sermon.

A Barna research headline a few years ago indicated that the lowest priority among the ministries described by pastors was the ministry of prayer, and with few exceptions, there is little evidence to argue otherwise. Just from the headline and the lead sentence or two it was not immediately clear if the article was reflecting on where churches put their ministry priorities or how people responded to the scheduled ministries of the church. In one sense, it makes little difference, because either option presents a dismal picture.

The paradox of prayerlessness among professing Christians is abysmal. Every pastor or evangelist knows that if you really want to make churchgoers uncomfortable just turn to the subject of prayer. We all claim that we believe in prayer and that we should be praying, but we don't.

Later in this book, we will examine various barriers to prayer, some of which you will readily recognize and others you may not have considered, including a major blind spot that affects our faith. But at this point the question is simply: why is there such a disparagement between what we claim we believe and what we put into practice?

So let's begin—well, at the beginning.

We start with the simple question: "What is prayer?" Or more to the point: "How do *you* define prayer?"

Remember, we are not talking about how prayer is defined in some theology book or for that matter in the myriad of Christian living books on prayer that fill the shelves in our Christian book stores. This is about prayer as defined by practice.

In practical terms, there are two perceptions of prayer that are common to a vast majority of us: 1) a spiritual task, and/or 2) an emergency plan.

Definition 1: A task

If the way we practice prayer is any indication, many see prayer as a task. We are supposed to pray, so it goes on our to-do list. Sometimes we do; most of the time we don't. Or perhaps we do, but we do it laboriously, dutifully, and with little expectation other than sore knees.

We've been told prayer is a practice that somehow honors God, and so we pray to satisfy some sort of requirement of a God who apparently finds pleasure in watching us knuckle under. Since prayer as a duty has little if any intrinsic sense of enjoyment, it is primarily an effort to mollify a capricious God and in some way or another to qualify us for a response or favor from Him. This kind of prayer may even be cathartic at times, but we are left with very little awareness of how far off target our understanding of prayer really is.

A cartoon I have kept in my files shows a little girl on her knees beside her bed. Behind her stands her mom instructing her to say the whole prayer, not just "etcetera, etcetera." Prayer that is simply a task may not rise to much more than the near meaningless repetition that the little girl found convenient.

Another evidence that prayer is little more than a task is the way we get caught up in the mechanics of it. We seek the latest books or courses that are going to provide us with the most effective formula of how to pray.

If you picked up this book with that idea, I hope you'll keep on reading, but I feel obliged to disclose to you that we are not going to go down that road. There are hundreds of resources that give us outlines, discuss theological correctness, suggested postures, times of day or night, how much time is adequate, and a dozen more varied dimensions that are used to dissect the topic of prayer.

Many of the tools we find in those kinds of books may even be useful to enrich our understanding of varied aspects of prayer, but they can also be distracting when we become slavishly attached to them. We will inevitable become disillusioned when the practice of any particular technique is no longer new and fresh, and once again we begin to search for something meaningful to help us want to pray.

We may get caught up in such things as how many elements there are in prayer, for example. One source will tell us that there are four components to prayer and give us the ACTS acronym (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). There is, of course, nothing wrong with that. All of those will be a part of a healthy prayer life.

Another source, however, will tell us that there are five components to prayer. After all there are five dimensions of the Lord's Prayer. Still others tell us that there are six components. In each case the implication is that if you are going to pray properly you have to be sure to consistently include all the elements and preferably in the order prescribed.

Again, there is nothing heretical about any of those formulas. They may even serve to highlight facets of prayer that we need to more fully recognize. From time to time we may need reminded that our prayer life is out of balance or that we are deficient in some aspect of our relationship with the Lord.

The problem with these or any other prescription for prayer is that these are not be-all, end-all discussions of prayer. Those who seek these kinds of aids are generally looking for some kind of step-by-step instruction manual. They assume that the real issue about prayer is that it will only be effective if they do it right.

This perspective assumes that prayer is about us. *We* must do it. *We* must do it correctly. *We* must demonstrate some sort of spiritual skill. *We* are only going to see results if *we* get all the T's crossed and I's dotted. "We-itus" is a painful trap that leaves us with a seriously distorted image of prayer. We fail to recognize that prayer is primarily about who God is, not who we are.

Definition 2: An emergency plan

If the truth be known, for the vast majority of people, including many church members, prayer is primarily some sort of an emergency plan. Prayer is one of those things people do when trouble strikes.

One honest soul in a recent survey defined prayer as “anything that comes out of my mouth when my derriere is in trouble.” That probably describes most people, even people in the church.

The classic example of this kind of perception of prayer is the foxhole conversion. Ask those who have served in times of war what happens when the artillery is bursting all around them and the next second is uncertain. “God, let me live, and I’ll straighten up my life!” I’ve known some guys with foxhole experiences, and some of them actually changed, but once the shells are not exploding, often the bargain is forgotten, and life resumes as before.

Trouble lures us to pray.

A few years ago, I remember a cartoon about Moses. He and his long black beard was at the head of a long procession that snaked behind him for what must have been miles of barren desert. Someone who looked very much like a Mrs. Moses had stepped up, stopped the procession and laid it on poor Moses: “Moses! We have been out her for 39 years. Would you *please* stop and ask for directions!”

I imagine that, whether we like to admit it or not, that may be an apt description of our practice of prayer. When life begins to get a little unclear or when we finally have to face the fact that we are in trouble, we get all spiritual and start praying.

There is one special line from “Without a Song” written in 1929 by Billy Rose and Edward Eliscu that stuck in my memory, probably because of the way Ray Charles could soulfully deliver it:

I got my trouble and woe and sure as I know the Jordan will roll.

Trouble and woe are as certain as the water that flows down the Jordan River. A good case of trouble and woe flows our way, and we inevitably start thinking about prayer, at least for a while.

It is natural for people to retreat to prayer when they face trouble. Trouble can make us feel afraid and helpless, and perhaps even hopeless. Human nature is always on the hunt for some measure of control and consistency, and when some unexpected or overwhelming event raises its ugly face and we begin to recognize our lack of control, we instinctively turn to prayer.

We reach for help. Even those who have never darkened a church door or have ever prayed before will, without a moment of forethought, cry out to God. Hunkered down and under fire, facing the news of a child injured in an accident, crushed when a father or brother violates your trust and you're left to suffer from the life-altering effects, coping with the intrusion of death or terminal illness, and a thousand others scenarios—even the most hardened sinner among us is drawn to prayer, at least for the moment.

The tragedy is that many who claim a relationship with God rarely utter a prayer except in the time of trouble. I was there several years ago when a mother heard a judge pronounce sentence on her son, and her words literally seemed to burst from her lips as if she had been gut-punched: "Oh, God, help us!" She admitted later that she honestly had rarely engaged in prayer other than at the family dinner table and as a participant in the public prayer time at church. In her case she recalled that moment of pain several years later as a turning point in her awareness of prayer, but often it is little more than a fleeting moment.

There's nothing wrong, of course, with turning to God when you find yourself overwhelmed and afraid. There is ample evidence that God invites us to call on Him when we encounter the struggles of life.

The Psalms are filled with the desperate cries of fear and uncertainty. The question "How long, O Lord" appears repeatedly. The plight of a nation besieged by its enemies is evidenced in the cries of the psalmists.

Yet, the problem-solving perception of prayer seldom grows deep spiritual roots for us. Most troubles hit us with an initial jolt. Even if the problem is not solved, the sting that we feel initially soon dissipates. After the shock wears off, the pull of prayer tends to weaken as well, and soon we revert to the more tried-and-true ways to solve issues. We worry a bit and then begin to exert some influence to make a change. We have been conditioned to manipulate the elements of our surroundings emotionally and socially as well as physically. So we dive in with determination to change our situation, influence the decisions of others, and create the outcome we want.

We may go through the motions of praying while we are doing all that. We may say things about giving God our problem, but to us the *real* problem-solving doesn't begin until we get off our knees and get to work or find someone who will. That's just the way we are wired.

That's the way prayer looks to the natural eye. Some even go so far as to assert that prayer along with faith is nothing more than the crutch of the weak, and this natural tendency to run to prayer in the face of trouble is served up as evidence.

This kind of approach to prayer is anemic at best, and it is more prevalent in the church world than we would like to admit. Our prayer

request lists should always include those who are facing trouble, and in times of trouble we have the privilege of praying. But there is more to prayer than a cacophony of crises, one after another.

Defining prayer

Dictionary definitions of prayer use nearly consistent language. The first and most common is that of petition to God or another object of worship. Next there is usually some mention of communion with God, but in nearly every case the emphasis is on the components of prayer: requests, giving thanks, adoration, and confession.

In broad terms these definitions are compatible with the biblical sense of prayer. There are indeed petitions and confessions, giving thanks and extending adoration. I contend that if we genuinely gain insight to what prayer is, we must look beyond such surface discussions into deeper waters.

Defining prayer is really not complicated, and yet in its most fundamental terms it is actually quite profound. If you're ready, put your seat belt on. Here's the starting point:

Prayer extends from and evidences our relationship with God.

Prayer is not defined as something we do but something we experience. Instead of being defined in terms of the task or varied prescribed components, prayer at its core is relational. Any understanding of prayer that is not centered on relationship will inevitably be task-oriented and too easily become preoccupied with how much and how well, questions that are self-centered, not God-centered.

A self-focused approach to prayer may even sound quite spiritual, especially when I see my prayer life as a means by which I can enhance my relationship with God. But, again, that is primarily about what I am doing.

The relational nature of prayer is not about what I bring to the experience, but rather what God is doing as I am centered on Him.

Because Christ Himself is our model, what prayer meant to Him should have an impact on our perspective of prayer. And His model of prayer was Father-centered. Scriptures indicate that the primary role of prayer to Jesus was to reveal the Father. For example, Luke 3:21 states that as He was praying, the "heavens were opened."

Throughout Jesus' days here on earth, His times of prayer may have involved a variety of situations, but in all of them, He prayed to encounter the presence and will of the Father.

His encounters with the presence of the Father reveal that prayer in the life of Christ was specifically about the relationship of a child to a father. No incident in the life of Jesus makes this point more dramatically than when He is about to face the Cross, and in the garden asks the Father to allow this cup to pass from Him. Mark 14:36 discloses the intimacy with the word *Abba*.

Abba is sometimes said to be translated as “Dad” or even “Daddy.” To suggest this degree of informality is an effort to provide a picture of intimacy, but it goes too far. For Jewish people, this word would not have included the ultra-familiar relationship that our word *daddy* suggests. Jewish custom considered the name of someone as reflective of that person’s character and qualities. Though there is no prohibition in scripture about speaking God’s name, out of reverence, they adopted the practice of substituting a word that simply means The Name when referring to Jehovah God.

It is then unlikely that their use of *abba* would lend itself to anything that seemed to lack a sense of honor and respect. The father figure may not have included the familiarity of our word *daddy*, but it did not lack in terms of intimacy.

When Jesus says in one form or another that if we ask anything of the Father, He will provide it for us, he is suggesting that God is a Father who cares deeply for his children. Matthew tells us in chapter seven that if an earthly father can give good gifts to his children, how much greater is the heart of our Heavenly Father as He responds to us as His children.

This relationship is not one between equal parties. Mark Fuller, my pastor at Grove City (Ohio) Church of the Nazarene, recently shared a sermon that listed the ways in which a relationship with God is totally unbalanced. As he so ably noted, we bring so little, yet we gain so much. We trade our filthy rags for His cloak of righteousness.

One father began teaching his son how to fish when the boy was very young. Dad had the boat and all the equipment. Dad knew what kind of lure was needed for what kind of fish. Dad knew how to cast and just when to hook the catch. More than once he helped reel in the fish when it was too large for his small son. For every one the boy landed, Dad caught three. At the end of the day Dad and son arrived home with the string of fish, and with a grin stretched across his face, the boy called to his mom, “Look what we caught!”

Our Heavenly Father covenants with us and we learn more and more to be like Him. Yet we are always the child whose contribution to this relationship will forever pale compared to what He brings to it. The power at work in us is not ours but His.

And it is out of that relationship that prayer emerges. A vibrant relationship gives birth to a rich and vital practice of prayer. This is about the child spending time with the Father, learning from Him, accessing what the Father makes available to him, being strengthened by Him.

In contrast a weak relationship is evidenced by an anemic prayer life.

Using an earthly relationship as a comparison to our relationship with God, however, has its limits. No earthly or natural illustration can adequately serve to illustrate spiritual truth.

That is precisely the problem we run into at this point. We are not talking about something *natural*. In fact, prayer is not a product of anything natural at all. Prayer as the evidence and expression of relationship is only possible because as His children we take time to experience His presence and grace.

No amount of natural effort or technique can turn words into genuine prayer as our words may and often do fail us. Romans 8:26 reminds us that even when we do not know what words to use or when we are left with only inner groaning, there is no absence of prayer.

Again, there is nothing natural about real prayer. And the relationship that prayer reflects has no natural roots. All religious systems reveal mankind's search for what is beyond the natural, but the only relationship that meets the longing of the human heart is the result of God's intentional provision for His relationship with those He created.

Profoundly, even the hunger we have to know God is not based on anything natural. Rather, the innate instinct within us has its origin in God's own design described in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that proclaims that God "has...set eternity in the human heart."

Not even the most reprobate among us can escape what God has ordained. We are drawn to pray because planted deep within us is this awareness of the eternal and a void that only the presence of the eternal can satisfy.

Little wonder that we reach so instinctively for prayer when faced with the dark threatening clouds that obscure the safety of the familiar, but that inner sense of the eternal also draws us to prayer when we are filled with awe or joy. That which God has planted within our spiritual DNA draws us to seek out the God of grace. Even the resistant heart can instinctively recognize the need of a relationship in the face of our natural weaknesses and limitations.

Since prayer cannot be understood in purely natural terms, efforts to learn about prayer from examples of great pray-ers, as inspirational as they may be, will be limited and can even be potentially frustrating if we are expecting to find some secret formula to emulate.

I suggest that the story of “Praying Hyde” is just one such example.

John Nelson Hyde had gone to work in the Punjab area of India but met with resistance and even persecution. As the son of a Presbyterian minister, he was appointed to an area of the world that is now part of Pakistan. His study of the Bible was so intense that other missionaries actually criticized him for diverting time he should have spent in language study to his intense study of the Word.

Hyde, although partially deaf, was able to develop a limited language fluency, but his heart relationship with God found its own spiritual fluency. His greatest contribution to the evangelism of India was his burden for the nation of his calling. He convinced his fellow missionaries to form what became known as the Punjab Prayer Union, each committing to set aside half of every day to pray. His colleagues reported that it was not uncommon for John Hyde to spend a whole day in prayer.

Hyde’s health was deteriorating, and while in Calcutta, he was persuaded to let a doctor see him. That is when it was discovered that John Hyde’s heart had literally shifted from one side of his chest to another. Some sources claim that according to medical authorities the only cause of such a phenomenon is intense stress. In Hyde’s case that stress came from the intensity of his intercession for India.

During my early years as a Christian, I confess that the story of John “Praying” Hyde discouragingly suggested to me that a life of prayer was only within reach of super saints. I mistakenly assumed that if I were to learn to pray I had to shoot for this kind of deep spiritual devotion and that anything less would be only mediocre to average.

My reaction only betrayed how little I knew about prayer. Again my focus was set on myself, what I needed to achieve, the level of devotion and intense spiritual commitment that I needed to muster in my life.

Of course, such an example is bewildering to us on another level as well. We live in a culture where action is valued more than contemplation. Problems get solved by putting our hands to the plow. Mystics meditate. Heroes get to work. So while that prayer model suggested one approach to Christian commitment, the ministry career path that I chose was on a different path. The focus centered around success formulas more than people in the professional ministry want to admit. As a result the hand to the plow trumped the profile of the more mystic devotional life. Prayer became a facet of my job description, something far removed from any sort of relational model.

Here is the heart of the problem: the natural man or woman is not capable of understanding this whole conversation. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul states that “the natural man cannot understand spiritual things.” The

idea of spiritual relationships simply seems like some sort of imaginary expectation, and prayer is defined by the natural mind as an exercise in positive thinking at best.

God wants us to rise above the natural and discover in Him a whole new dimension of reality that is available to us.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Think about your prayer life. What kind of problem have you had in the past or may be having even now? Share your thoughts and make a list of the different kinds of struggles you and your friends have experienced.
- 2) In your life, when have you learned more about prayer than any other time? What was going on? How did your thoughts about prayer change at that time?

The Lens Makes the Difference

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18a)

...that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Philippians 1:9).

Few of us would opt for a replacement knee or a prosthetic limb if the one we started with was adequate. As it happens from time to time people discover that their original equipment can no longer do the job. That goes for eyes as well.

A few years ago, as I sat in my ophthalmologist's office, the wait seemed longer than normal. I had already seen the assistant. She had checked the pressure in both eyes and then ran a couple other tests as well. One was entirely new to me, but I thought nothing of it. The only thing that concerned me was that the wait for the doctor was getting a bit excessive.

When he finally arrived, his first words were a little jarring. "Well, Mr. Brown," he offered, "we need to get to work on those cataracts." For a guy who was planning to put a knife in my eye, he was so matter-of-fact in his tone that you would have thought he was talking about trimming my eyebrows.

Now, you have to understand. The last time I remember him mentioning cataracts was when he and I were considerably younger. The brief mention back then was about cataracts starting to form, and not a single word had passed between us about this matter until this rather abrupt announcement.

For quite some time, I had concluded that I was losing my sight. I had on occasion even tried closing my eyes and moving through the house just to see if I could. I would have probably done OK except for those pesky walls and an obstinate piano bench.

I had not been able to read street signs for over two years unless I was planning to stop in the middle of the street and walk up to them. And who can see highways signs beyond the clear distance of thirty or forty feet anyway? Of course at sixty-five miles per hour, I was repeatedly reminded of those speed-reading courses for three easy payments of \$49.95 that I had regrettably passed up several times.

On a more serious note, my regular reading had all but come to a halt. For years I have been a voracious reader, so it was disturbing that I could read my Bible only when I was at my computer with the zoom set at about 250. And if my glasses were hiding somewhere *again*, reading anything was akin to the memories of riding roller coasters or wearing a size thirty two inch belt.

I do not need to tell anyone who has gone through cataract surgery what a change it makes, but for the rest of you, let me unequivocally announce that the sky on a bright sunny day is *not* brilliant gray. I had no idea that the sky had become so blue the last few years. Even Crayola hasn't yet invented a color like that.

With today's automatic digital cameras, there is less awareness of the importance of the lens. But with the older manual cameras, the lens made all the difference in the way we saw what was around us. The Erave River that flowed past my house in Papua New Guinea was difficult to photograph because with one lens you got the sense of the immediate area with its small whitecaps as the river fell steeply. But the long distance lens let you sense the treacherousness of any attempt to navigate those waters with its endless obstacle course of boulders and fallen trees.

The way we understand prayer as an expression of our relationship with God will be effected significantly by the lens through which we view relationship. If we rely on nothing better than the kind of relationships we experience with those around us, even at best we will fail to fully grasp the concept of prayer.

What we need is a model of relationship that God Himself has provided, and there is no more compelling paradigm than the kingdom of God. The Kingdom reveals the amazing richness of relationship.

To the natural mind, even those who live in social and geo-political settings in which the term *kingdom* applies, the *kingdom of God* is a foreign concept. To some it may even conjure up images of a parallel reality "out there" somewhere, out of reach except in a mystical and random convergence, something comparable to Rod Sterling's "Twilight Zone."

Scripture, however, reveals that the kingdom of God is anything but "out there somewhere." Rather, it is a spiritual reality here and now. According to Luke 17:21, the Kingdom of God is "within you."

Unlike the kind of mystical and nebulous sense of otherness embedded in any of a dozen religious contemplations, the kingdom of God is as real as the chair you're sitting in or the walls around you. Even though it is not part of the physical world with which we so easily and naturally identify, the Kingdom is no less real.

In fact, in one sense, the spiritual realm may even be considered the ultimate reality. When time, and all that is fixed in time and space, comes to an end, the Kingdom does not. If temporal vs spiritual is factored into the equation, spiritual realities are ultimate, simply because they outlast all else.

To understand how the kingdom of God can enlighten us about the issue of relationship, however, we need to know first what *kingdom* means. Our point of reference is rather limited. From our natural perspective, and in particular with our western worldview, our sense of kingdom is almost exclusively equated with geography.

In the United States the most familiar image of royalty is probably the British royal family. I suppose, in most cases, privilege and the celebrity nature of being a royal is what comes to mind. We see royals as figureheads that help maintain a national identity. The reign over the United Kingdom of Great Britain includes geographical locations like England, Northern Ireland, and a host of commonwealths scattered around the globe.

I was living in Papua New Guinea (PNG) when Australia, a British common-wealth, was still the caretaker nation entrusted by the United Nations after World War II to guide PNG on the path of independence. I was also there on September 16, 1975, when this new independent country joined the family of British Commonwealth nations.

In our current times, we are becoming familiar with other kings as well, especially those in the Middle East. Unfortunately that part of the world is so culturally distant from us that in the United States we think of these kings more as political if not tyrannical oil barons. We have images of something along the lines of Bedouin leaders depicted in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

We simply have no point of reference that explains the concept of *kingdom* in the way it is used when speaking of the kingdom of God.

Instead of a geographical realm, the term *kingdom* when referring to the kingdom of God is synonymous with "authority." It speaks of the authority or right of the king to reign.

King David was promised that his kingdom would be "everlasting" if he remained faithful to obey God's instructions (1 Chronicles 28:7). In light of history, political boundaries and rulers have been somewhat "un-everlasting." If the definition of *kingdom* depended on geography and politics, God's promise to David was meaningless. So it is obvious that any everlasting kingdom could have its basis only in an authority as everlasting as the promised kingdom itself would be.

And everlasting it is!

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:6-7). You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-33).

What God has established is everlasting *authority* in Christ, the "root and offspring of David" (Revelation 22:16). This kingdom, if there is a physical realm in any sense of the word, is located within those of us who in the here and now embrace and are embraced by Christ's kingly authority. His kingly authority is established in an eternal reality that supersedes this temporal setting.

Jack Hayford, the pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California from 1969 to 1999, gave one of the most recognized contemporary hymns of our time. His words provide a clear understanding of what *Kingdom of God* means with the simply expression "Kingdom authority." Hayford knew that the term *kingdom* was too ill-defined for many, so he chose to be redundant in his lyrics by adding the word "authority."

In my college days, one professor nearly went broke keeping his supply of red-ink pens in stock, because my papers bled with the word "redundant" on every other page. He tried his best to teach me that redundancy is ill-advised and undesirable if I am to be a good writer. At least in part, I actually had to unlearn the lesson, because as his repeated efforts to teach me otherwise illustrate, redundancy – properly and responsibly used – is an effective teaching tool.

Obviously redundancy in writing can be irritating, even silly. How many times have you heard someone say, "This is the honest truth" or "actual fact," "exactly the same," "armed gunman," or "dwindle down."

On the other hand I learned from my father (who had an extensive background in accounting) that in bookkeeping, redundancy is actually

necessary. Shortcuts in accounting do not leave clear records that cross-check themselves.

In Hayford's song lyrics, "kingdom authority" is a necessity as a teaching tool. It sheds valuable light on the central issue in defining prayer as an expression of our relationship with the King.

Our relationship to God's kingdom authority is evidenced even in our prayer of repentance. Our plea for mercy and grace is a choice to place ourselves under God's kingly authority. Deserving of nothing but eternal punishment, we are met at the Cross with the outstretched arms of the King.

John tells us that "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). Now that's relationship! Not some distant relative, not a servant, not someone who moved into the neighborhood; but one of the nuclear family, a child, and a child of the King at that.

In 2 Samuel 9 we find the story of Mephibosheth. His story can enrich our understanding of relationship to the kingdom of God, and easily points us to a greater grasp of what grace is.

One day David who had become the king asked if there was anyone left of the household of Saul, his predecessor. Remember now, we are talking about the Saul who had tried to kill David on more than one occasion. As the king, David had the power to wipe out the very memory of Saul, but his promise to Saul's son Jonathan, who had been David's close friend, prompts him instead to honor the lineage of Saul.

His search comes to rest on a little crippled kid named Mephibosheth, the only remaining descendant of Saul. Mephibosheth was living in poverty and by the stroke of the king's authority, he finds himself living under the favor of the king. David restored to Mephibosheth all the land his grandfather Saul had once owned. Even more remarkably, he gave the boy the place of a son in the palace.

This episode in the life of David is an illustration of grace. This saga of undeserved love depicts the nature of God's own love for us.

Do we really grasp the reality of grace?

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:17b-19).

"Established in love!" Grace is the foundation on which our hopes and lives are built, as well as the key to understanding Kingdom relationships.

To be established in grace could also be expressed as being “anchored” in grace. When architects design skyscrapers they anchor the buildings with what are called “pilings” deep into the earth. These pilings stabilize the building if or when the ground shifts. The CN Tower, a communications tower in Toronto, for example, stands over 1,800 feet high and required pilings of over fifty feet deep. On the other hand, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, only stand 1,400 feet high, but the pilings are 394 feet deep. That may sound a bit strange until you realize that the depth of the pilings is determined by the depth of the bedrock.

We are talking about deeply rooted stabilizing grace. The psalmist declared:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Psalm 18:2).

The Lord Himself is the bedrock upon which our relationship stands, and it is His grace that allows us to experience that kind of safety and stability. To the natural man, this is like talking about standing on air, but through faith we can experience the firm foundation and stability of a relationship with God.

This stability empowers us to begin to grasp the magnitude of grace. Paul contends that the knowledge of God’s love is the doorway to being filled with every measure of God’s fullness.

If we truly understand this, even in small measure, we would want to get to know Him. Really know Him. We would want to know what His word says to us, and how He wants us to conduct our lives.

We would discover what the psalmist meant when he said that he delights in the law of God (Psalm 1:2). The law!

We live by grace, undeserved love. If we are not stirred about that, how can we begin to grasp what the psalmist means when he talks about taking pleasure in the law?

Ever try to read the law? Do this, do more of that, don’t do this, never do that. Rules, penalties, more rules. But David knows that even the rules disclose the heart of God. This God of grace longs for us to avoid that which separates us from His holiness.

When this chapter turned to the topic of “kingdom” it may have appeared to be a detour from the subject of prayer. If by this time you’re wondering what this has to do with prayer, the answer is everything.

How can I experience with delight something that to the natural person is so meaningless, so dry, so difficult? The answer: I am aware that I have been given a priceless gift, and I need to know the Giver and understand my relationship with Him.

Hayford's praise chorus has one more clue that we must not miss in our effort to understand prayer. Encountering God's majesty is to engage in worship, to fall on our faces before God in awe of His majestic Kingdom authority.

At the heart of it, prayer is not about the requests that I bring or even the many ways I can express my gratitude to God. It's not about how many parts of prayer I can remember to check off during my devotional time. It's certainly not about how effective I am at expressing deep truths in lofty words.

Prayer is about His presence. It's about Him, not us.

It is the experience of stepping into the presence of the God who has changed and is changing my life. I may do that at a regular time every day. I may do it for an hour. I may also do it for twenty seconds while I am driving. And each such encounter with His presence reminds me that He is greater than any needs that may be pressing in on me.

It's not about our requests or praise formulas or our exuberance and devotion. Our requests, our needs, our feelings, our experiences only have meaning when we clearly understand in whose presence we stand, because that is when we can discover what all those things mean to Him.

That is how we learn His perspective. As we worship Him, we discover and experience Him. The sense of His majesty becomes the grid through which we see the issues of our lives more clearly and become aware that every need is a means by which He can reveal Himself and His Kingdom authority.

Can there ever be anything more that we need than the unspeakable treasure of His authority and grace in our lives?

Matthew 13:44-46 records what is called parables of hidden treasures:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The image is unmistakable! There can be no price too great to pay for something that is priceless. [That has the feel of a classic "DUH!" kind of statement, doesn't it?]

Perhaps with that in mind, Paul's words in Philippians 3:6-10 about himself can begin to take on a different feel. From *The Message*, his words paint a vivid image.

You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God's righteousness.

I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

What is prayer?

In chapter one, we began defining prayer as an experience that extends from and both evidences and expresses our relationship with God. We now must add that prayer is an act of worship in which we acknowledge God's Kingdom authority. With these lens we can gain needed clarity about all else that may be taking place in our lives.

Although we acknowledge His continual presence in our lives, prayer takes place in and at any moment in which we choose to focus on that presence. In His presence flow the secrets of Life, the secrets of Himself. In His presence we come to know Him. He is able to reveal to us afresh the nature of His love and His desires. His word comes alive and our hearts are warmed, and all of life is redefined.

Only then can we ask whatever we want and it will be done for us. We cannot know what to ask until we know what He wants. We cannot discern with human understanding what His will is, but in our worship of His majesty our hearts are turned from the toils and issues of the day to the wonder of His authority. Through the lens of worship we assume a posture of agreement for any and all things that glorify Him, and with nothing else on our agenda, we ask. And it will be done.

Our fleshly desires fade, our self-focus is replaced with Kingdom eyes, and the limited sense of reality that defines what is important is overpowered with an awareness of what is eternal.

And we have experienced prayer.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Take some time to discuss the meaning of *kingdom*. How does it change things for you when you redefine *kingdom* as interchangeable with the word *authority*? Try looking at other passages of scripture that refer to the kingdom and rethink those reference with the expression *kingdom authority*.

Try Matthew 12:28, Mark 10:15, Luke 9:2 and 11

- 2) Talk about the implications of the following statement:

“In His presence flow the secrets of Life, the secrets of Himself. In His presence we come to know Him. He is able to reveal to us afresh the nature of His love and His desires. His word comes alive and our hearts are warmed, and all of life is redefined. Only then can we ask whatever we want and it will be done for us. We cannot know what to ask until we know what He wants.”

Seeking Righteousness and Pursuing Peace

“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33, NIV).

Seek ye first the reign of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33, YLT)

Have you ever noticed what happens to a teenager when the phone rings? Before personal cell phones, the landline in the house was the object of intense interest. The phone would ring and even if you were sitting 10 feet away from it, your teenager in the garage on the back of the property would miraculously materialize seemingly out of nowhere. Then there was the inevitable sag of the shoulders and the pained look of utter confusion mixed with disappointment if the phone was for you instead.

Of course, a lot has changed in recent years. Now the cell phone has replaced the landline as a virtual lifeline. The infernal thing doesn't just ring but has dozens of tailored tones warning you who is on the other end. Add the endless beeping and buzzing that signals the latest text message or snapshot or social media contribution, and we have what may be bordering on a major contribution to noise pollution.

One thing, however, has not changed. The younger set (and even some of the not-so-younger set) reacts with a sense of immediacy to all those beeps and ringtones and buzzes. Someday I'm sure that phones will be surgically implanted and activated by a mere smile or an Elizabeth Montgomery-like bewitching twitch of the nose. Think of all the stress we will be able to avoid. No more urgent searching for our phones or stopping the Scooby Doo ringtone from blaringly interrupting the boss's briefing or the pastor's prayer.

It is amazing how a few years changes our priorities. Ogden Nash, an American humorist, is credited with having astutely observed, “Middle age is when you're sitting at home on a Saturday night and the telephone rings and you hope is it not for you.” I am post-middle age and have reached what might be called a “state of near-geriatric grace” in which I am perfectly content to hit mute buttons and get messages when I get around to it.

Our sense of priority unquestionably changes over time with the passing of events and circumstances. When there is too much month at the end of the money, for example, it is not difficult to talk yourself into waiting for that must-see movie to come out on DVD. Then of course there is the new husband who inevitably and painfully discovers that bread and milk come *after* eye shadow and blush.

It would be better if some priorities were etched in stone, reflecting principles that are not open for negotiation. As our culture continues to slide precipitously toward the brink of its own demise, our commitment to truth, for example, regrettably has fallen prey to the self-centered embrace of convenience. Family has been replaced with a nebulous definition of “significant” relationships leaving us socially anchorless.

As important as such social and cultural priorities are, the issue of spiritual priorities has even more profound implications to us. I am not referring here merely to the need of placing spiritual matters above the many other facets of our lives, as right as that may be. Rather, this is about what we embrace and defend as our spiritual core values.

Jesus set the bar for us when He told us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). As noted in chapter 2, the sense of *kingdom* is poorly understood in our culture. Jesus is placing before us the single highest priority that should define our spiritual quest: the place that His Kingly authority is to have in our lives.

There must be no mistake. The worship we discussed in chapter two is further characterized here as a posture of submission. In light of His majestic kingly authority we are to live in willing subjection to the desires and directives of the King. From the time we become new creations in Christ, we are to be wholly committed to sacredness and unreservedly constrained only by His holy purpose.

This is *Kingdom living*, and it is sanctified living. God miraculously separates His new creations from the impulses of darkness and sets them apart for His holy purposes. The Apostle Peter spoke of those “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2a).

This expressed purpose of God to separate or sanctify us unto Himself is a reality for every believer from the moment we are new creations. This is not to be confused with a deeper work of the Spirit in our lives that we will examine later.

First of all, we recognize that our sanctification is an act of God. John 17:17 clearly indicates that Jesus knew the desire of the Father when he said, “Sanctify them with the truth; your word is truth.”

Yet the admonishment to seek His kingdom and righteousness obviously refers to something we are to do, not something done to us. We must *choose* to submit to the purposes of God. When we come to the Cross and seek to place ourselves under the authority of the King, we bring nothing but the shame and sin of rebellion against His authority. In grace, He bestows life where there has been nothing but death. As new creations, we choose to live in perpetual submission to His authority.

The single most important aspect of Kingdom life is a heart that is committed to seeking an unbroken alignment with the purposes of God. Kingdom living requires us to separate ourselves from anything that would contradict and defile our commitment.

In preparation for the siege of Jericho, as God had instructed, Joshua called on the people to “consecrate” themselves (Joshua 3:5). Nothing was to contaminate their full commitment to what God was telling them to do.

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul reminded the Corinthian Church that light has no relationship with darkness and righteousness is incompatible with wickedness (verses 14-15). He then prompted them to remember that this is the God who covenants with His people:

I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people (2 Corinthians 6:16b).

What follows is a summons to the nation to sanctify themselves. They are to come out from among the influences of darkness and unrighteousness (verse 17), and embrace only the Father who embraces them (see verse 18).

Sanctification is not complicated. The matrix in which sanctified living has its roots is the covenant relationship of Kingdom life.

There it is again, that word *relationship*.

Relationship is the prime number in the spiritual equation. Everything centers on relationship. We were created in God’s image and the scripture tells us that God walked with Adam and had a relationship with him (Genesis 2:15-120). Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian believers clearly notes that God has called us “into fellowship with his Son” (1 Corinthians 1:9).

Hopefully, it is evident by now that the relationship of Kingdom life is not some side issue to our topic of prayer. This whole discussion about prayer is anchored unapologetically in the bedrock of relationship.

In earlier chapters, prayer was first defined as the expression and evidence of our relationship with God. The second element in forming a definition of prayer was the experience of a worshipful acknowledgment

of God's kingdom authority. That is the lens through which we can gain needed clarity about all else that may be taking place in our lives.

Take note that acknowledging God's authority is not a passive experience. We do not take a kind of *que será será* posture. Submission to His authority is a choice that requires an active response.

Prayer is anchored in a relationship, but it is an *interactive* relationship that requires some real effort on our part.

We must take responsibility to set aside time in our daily lives to accommodate the need to purposely acknowledge our relationship with God. We must choose to spend time in His presence and share His agenda for our lives. We must say "no" to the disruptions of the enemy to distract and discourage. Prayer requires us to reach out and embrace, not just be embraced.

This is a love relationship. I recently saw as a church sign that announced "God loves you, and there's not a thing you can do about it!" In the ultimate sense that is true. One of my favorite quotes from Philip Yancey makes that same point:

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

(Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace*)

That is, in fact, part of what makes grace so amazing.

And as true as that is, there is indeed something we can do. We can respond to it.

What is even more amazing, however, is that our ability to respond is not something we can generate by our puny human capacity to choose. We are able to respond to this gift of love only because by His initiative God has placed within us the impulse to do so.

Hebrews 12:2 clearly identifies that Jesus is the "author" of faith (KJV), and Paul notes in Romans 12:3 that faith is allotted to us by Christ Himself. The capacity to respond and embrace His love, in fact our ability to engage in this love relationship at all, has its origin in God's choice to enable us to have such faith. He births within us the very capability we need to make the choice to love Him back.

Zelda Fitzgerald, the wife of famed American short-story writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, speaking of her approach to life, said, "I want to love first and live incidentally." In other words, take care of the loving and the living will follow.

The spiritual parallel is somewhat obvious. Respond to and embrace grace, and life will not only be possible but ultimately meaningful.

There is nothing, then, that should be a higher spiritual priority than to respond to His love by seeking to live under His authority. There is no higher calling. All other spiritual activities (service to others, sacrificial giving, acts of mercy, even engaging in the professional ministry) issue from that relationship. And that is equally true of prayer.

Prayer like faith itself is not an activity that we have the capacity to generate from within ourselves. That may seem like a strange thing to say, since people of all types of religions have practices that we generally define as prayer. Without the intent and purpose of God, however, it would be beyond the scope of mere mortals even to be aware of Him, let alone engage in a relationship with Him.

Ecclesiastes 3:11(b) reveals the mystery of spiritual awareness. The writer says unequivocally that it is God Himself who has “set eternity in the human heart” (NIV).

By God’s own design, the crowning point of His creation was mankind, distinctively made in His own image. That image, marred and distorted as it is by the sin of rebellion, still carries a sense of the eternal and the capacity to experience what is called *common grace*. Even those who have no interest in a relationship with Him have the innate capacity to express love, be creative, respond with forgiveness and kindness and civility.

But the words in Ecclesiastes carry far greater importance than the implications of common grace. An eternal God has placed within every human being an awareness that life is not defined solely by the limitations of time and space. By God’s plan, we have a spiritual instinct making us aware that beyond the boundaries of our earthly lives, there is more. That “more” is a portal through which we can come to recognize and potentially seek eternal realities.

Not only has God promised that “those who seek me find me” (Proverbs 8:17), and that He is the “rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6), but He has provided an inner awareness that draws us to Him. The greatest expression of grace, other than the incarnation and the cross, may be the utterly unfathomable act of God to place within us what we could never have known otherwise, the instinct to seek Him.

To seek His righteous kingly authority, then, is the response of the human heart uniquely enabled to do so by God’s unmerited love. And everything that results from our choice to embrace His authority is by definition a gift.

Prayer is our response to the Holy Spirit who draws us more and more to God’s loving authority and the expression of our participation in His agenda. From His purposes and wisdom we receive the dynamic of His divine design that allows His likeness to be evidenced in us.

And so, to our understanding of prayer, we now add the third element, the embrace of God's righteousness.

If His kingly authority is indeed our priority, then the evidence of that relationship is the inner hunger for His righteousness. Hebrews 12:14 has a great deal of light to shed on this subject of seeking the righteousness of God. As a boy, I first learned this verse in the King James Version:

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

The New International Version puts it this way:

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

To be totally candid, this verse is most often quoted (in whatever version) by singling out the last phrase as a sort of a proof text centering on our need to live holy lives. But the impact of these words carry some enriching and deeply revealing truths that are too easily missed with the proof-text approach.

This verse in the Orthodox Jewish Bible begins, "Pursue shalom." Several other translations use the word "pursue" as well, and I confess that I like that word. There is something deliberate and purposeful in the imagery of pursuit. It is the word *shalom*, however, that redefines this verse.

Shalom includes much that is not reflected in the word "peace" found in many translations. I understand that translations have to be readable. They need to flow so that in whatever language something is being translated, there is no distraction from the sense of the message. But in English "peace" by itself is too benign, too broad, and fails to convey adequately the thrust of *shalom*.

Shalom in its root verb form means "complete, perfect and full." Strong's Concordance expands its use to include:

[C]ompleteness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony and the absence of agitation or discord.

There must be no obscurity here. Shalom needs to be understood in its extensiveness. In our westernized perspective, the word peace carries a predominate sense of the absence of conflict, regardless of what is compromised in the process. Principles, truths, and genuine relationships

are sacrificed in order to claim peace. Little wonder that the scripture speaks of people crying “peace, peace” when there is none.

In Judges 6:24, Gideon built an altar with the banner “The Lord is Peace.” The Hebrew is *Hashem-Shalom*, literally “The Name is Peace.” In English it reads better to say “His name is Peace.” Gideon was reminding all who would see this altar that genuine peace is embodied in the One whose name is Shalom. Wholeness, or that which completes us, can only be realized through our relationship with Shalom.

Note that we have never left the subject of relationship. This is about our sense of being complete and our pursuit of full and perfect tranquility in our relationship with God.

This is God who has made Himself fully available. In fact, He is not only available for us to pursue Him, He is actually fully engaged in pursuing us. We are only capable of embracing His divine plan of grace because we have first been embraced by grace (see 1 John 4:19).

You’ve probably heard the quip about the man who chased his future wife until she caught him. That’s actually a good way to understand the grace of God. As we pursue Him, we do not have to go far. We have only to turn and allow His grace to embrace us.

The reason we have spent so much time on the posture of the shalom relationship is that it is actually woven into the fabric of prayer. Prayer defined relationally reveals a new dimension of richness through the prism of shalom.

The topic of prayer, then, is anything but peripheral to the subject of holiness, without which no one can “see God.” The longing of the human heart to find complete fulfillment and wholeness is centered in shalom.

To discuss either prayer or holiness without including the other is to impoverish our sense of both.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Read the following statement:

The single most important aspect of Kingdom life is a heart that is committed to seeking an unbroken alignment with the purposes of God. Kingdom living requires us to separate ourselves from anything that would contradict and defile our commitment.

What does “contradict and defile our commitment” mean in practical terms?

- 2) What are the implications of the following:

Prayer is our response to the Holy Spirit who draws us more and more to God’s loving authority. The agenda of prayer is not about some noble human initiative, not about our wish lists, and certainly not about special words or phrases that call on God to act favorably toward us. It is the expression of our participation in His agenda.

How does that change the way we pray? How does it change the way we pray for specific requests?

- 3) Re-read the definition of *shalom* and share among yourselves how that impacts your understanding of a relationship with God.

Holiness: the Definitive Component in Understanding Prayer

“Though in its beginnings prayer is so simple that the feeble child can pray, yet it is at the same time the highest and holiest work to which man can rise. It is the fellowship with the Unseen and Most Holy One.”

Andrew Murray, *Teach Us to Pray*

While living in Southern California—a lifetime ago, I helped moderate a symposium on the topic “The Simple Lifestyle,” an expression that was being tossed around rather commonly in those days. The group of pastors who participated hoped to come to some consensus about what a simple lifestyle meant in practical terms.

The morning session was all over the place topically, but for the most part the discussions focused on finances. We heard expressions like “doing with less,” “living frugally,” and “scaling back.” We agreed that all too often and all too easily *wants* morphed into *needs*. As enlivened as the morning session was, the group seemed less than satisfied with the end product.

After lunch, I led with this question: “What is the opposite of *simple*?”

Surprising enough, the question seemed to catch everyone off guard. After a variety of responses that were still locked in on finances, I offered that the opposite of *simple* was *complex*. Then came the question, “What is a complex lifestyle?” From there, the whole tenor of the day began to shift.

The difficulty to that point was that our perceptions were being funneled through the narrow focus on economics. When we broadened our discussion to identify what makes life, not just our finances, simple or complex, we began to find some clarity. Living a simple lifestyle involves more than the way we manage money. It’s more than frugality or practicing recycling.

What makes life complex is a conflict of values. Each of us has a worldview with core values that affect our behavior. A simple lifestyle comes from cohesive, consistent values and the resulting behaviors in all areas of life. If, however, values are in conflict, our behavior will be

inconsistent and life becomes complex. That certainly translates into how we value and manage our resources, but the core issue is stewardship whether that involves much or little.

To more fully understand this mysterious practice we call prayer, this chapter turns to the topic of holiness. Like simple lifestyle, our understanding of holiness often suffers from lack of clarity. As a result prayer loses its simplicity.

Bring up the topic of holiness and the reaction in many cases will be mixed. One common response will immediately shift attention to the “holier than thou” crowd. Seen as spiritually pompous and judgmental, these folk have not only missed holiness by the proverbial country mile, but have managed to damage the concept of holiness in the process.

Many people will immediately assume holiness to be a spiritual “mission impossible.” The desire to be holy is held as admirable, but beyond our reach. Often those with this view have had their search for purpose and completeness detoured by disappointments and failures.

Like the few described in Matthew 7:14 who have chosen the narrow road and found life, some have truly discovered the way of holiness. Their lives clearly reflect the love of God. In contrast, many who have claimed to be holy have demonstrated its unmistakable absence.

The goal of this chapter is clarity about holiness. A clear sense of holiness is essential as the final component to complete our definition of prayer.

The admonition to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16) or be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48) should be clear evidence that such a level of relationship is available for us. God would surely not call us to something we cannot experience, yet the idea of perfection and holiness is elusive. The relationship with a holy God is too easily detoured through a mine field of performance issues and debates about perfection.

Another detour is an unhealthy preoccupation with the “unholy.” Granted, sometimes, as with the forum topic, an effort to define something can often benefit from asking what it is not. On the other hand, many have expended great effort to identify what does not fit with their definition of holiness. The result: clarity about holy living fades in the harsh light of imposed complexities.

In the end nothing can be defined solely by what it is not.

In fact, being holy is not complex at all.

Holiness of heart and life is first and last about the holiness of God. In both the Old Testament and New Testament, the words translated into English as “holy” mean *set apart from*, *set apart to* or *separated*. There

is a distinct *otherness* about God that is to be the very essence of what it means for us to be holy as He is holy.

God and His world were in harmony in the beginning. He pronounced it all “good.” When He added Adam and Eve into the picture, He enjoyed fellowship with them. Then sin entered the scene and everything changed, except God.

Before sin became a factor, the standard was set. God’s sense of delight at what He created established the bar that defines what He intended life to be. The gift of “eternity in [our] hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) anchors us to that standard.

Whatever else is included in defining holy living, our understanding is linked to what God saw and declared as good. We marvel at creation. The beauty of His handiwork is boundless; his laws of nature fill us with awe. But the most astounding element in God’s plan is His intent to enjoy fellowship with that unique part of creation that bore His own image.

Holiness of heart is a miracle of grace designed to restore us to that fellowship and allow His likeness to be reflected in us once again.

A discussion to examine all the various views about how God makes this happen is beyond the intent of this chapter. What cannot be ignored, however, is that a life of holiness is a work of God’s grace that is subsequent to our experience of conversion.

The expressions *entire sanctification* and *second blessing* may often be acquainted with early Methodism and various evangelical churches. But the concept of a second level experience appears in some form or another in a broad spectrum of Christian groups both Protestant and Catholic.

More importantly, there is ample scriptural evidence that beyond conversion a second-level experience awaits all believers. One of the clearest examples can be found in the letter to believers in Rome. Paul vividly extends the call for these Christians to give themselves to the Lord in a second-level decision and by God’s grace no longer be conformed to the mindset of the world (Romans 12:1-2). They have already passed from death to life, yet another transformation is needed.

As we will see shortly, this second-level decision bears on our final definition of prayer. Suffice it to say for now that all of this points to the nature of our relationship with God.

Clarity about holiness suffers whenever the focus shifts beyond the issue of relationship. When that happens the focus shifts to performance.

When the carnal mind contemplates holiness, the assumption is that doing enough of the right things and doing them well enough makes us holy or qualifies us to be holy. When relationship is replaced by performance, what emerges is “the list.” The Pharisees called it “the Law.” Modern

Pharisaism also focuses on legal definitions of what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. They have well-defined formulas of behavior that are labeled as holy. Then of course there is the companion second list with all that is unholy.

There is, of course, no fixed single list. Each group has its own list, some of which may be shared in common with other groups. On the other hand since the lists tend to differ, there may be significant tension between these groups about what is acceptable or unacceptable. Those differences, however, often are reflective of cultural variations and norms more than anything spiritual.

Not only do the lists vary from group to group, but with the passing of time, some of the “do nots” fade and show up in the acceptable category. Inevitably they are replaced by new off-limit practices or variations of old ones.

During my preteen years, one woman would stand during the Wednesday evening testimony time and declare her aversion to television. On more than one occasion she made it exceedingly clear that she would never have one of those “devil boxes” in her home.

Fast forward a few years. On Sunday afternoons I would occasionally go to her house where her boys, and I spent the afternoon –you guessed it –watching television. Of course, the testimony had taken on a different tone as she made it exceedingly clear that she’d never allow those awful late-night movies on her TV. And as you might have guessed, with the passing of time, the target was moved yet again.

Holy living was, and still is, in some circles, commonly defined by prohibitions: no smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no movies, no short skirts, no long hair, no jewelry or at least no flashy jewelry, no toe-less shoes, no cosmetics, no perms, and a host of other things that were out of bounds. Girls who started using a little make-up or whose skirts were showing a full knee cap were met with frowns and reminders that they were becoming “worldly.” Boys who let their hair get too long or even worse, combed it back in a trendy “duck tail” were given the same treatment.

Well, you get the point.

With all of the misdirection of my early years, I am grateful nevertheless that the spiritual environment was filled with the admonition to be holy. The expression *entire sanctification* was a virtual mantra on the lips of every preacher, evangelist, and Sunday school teacher. It was an oft-repeated component of our “testimony meetings” in which those in the pews would stand and testify about their spiritual journeys for the week.

In spite of the many practiced testimonials that often rang hollow considering conduct that was evident to the contrary, there were those

special men and women whose lives, filled with grace, modeled holiness. They fervently declared their allegiance to a Holy God who had “sanctified them holy,” and their lives bore witness to the shalom of His holy presence.

All the lists that dominated the testimonies and filled sermons and lessons could not make holiness understandable. And oddly enough, in spite of the relentless effort, they do not even really explain what holiness is not.

Prohibitions are generally oriented around cultural or social practices that are labeled as sinful according to that group’s perspectives and norms at any given time and place. What may seem normal to one group may be abnormal to another.

In conservative church circles even today (of which I am a part), the use of alcohol, for example, is considered a practice that leads too easily to excess that abuses the body and minds of the temples of the Holy Spirit. But don’t try to tell that to Christians living in France where wine is a dietary staple, and the water can make you sick.

One of the most egregious examples of cultural impositions being used to define conduct that is part of holy living took place several years ago in Papua New Guinea. One ultra-conservative mission group received an edict from their home board in the United States requiring all women members of their churches worldwide to wear nylon hose. The obedient missionaries handed down the ruling, the national church leaders consented (although I suspect some of them didn’t even know what hose were) and the result was unmitigated nonsense. The hose that were sent from the churches to the field were no match for the calloused feet of PNG women. The life of that edict was over before it began.

But you don’t have to go that far from home to see the same kind of thing. In the late 1960s, a church was considering my father for their pastorate until my mother was seen wearing “worldly” dress shoes with no toes in them. Of course not 50 miles from there, at a major university, the Jesus Movement was in full bloom and students were finding new life in Christ even with all their toes showing through sandals, both stylish and well-worn. Practices that break with a group’s social norms are often seen as immodest and a threat to moral standards.

Examine any example you choose, and you will find that as cultures shift so do the measures of acceptable versus fringe behavior. The difficulty comes when what was once fringe behavior culturally becomes the norm. Those same hose that had become a part of one conservative church’s “uniform” by the mid to late 1970s had only thirty years earlier been revealed by DuPont at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. If history reveals nothing else, we know that at that time this same church and others like

them would have categorically rejected the new nylons as worldly and provocative.

In all fairness, much of the outward measures or restrictions were embraced by well-meaning Christians who were attempting to avoid what they thought were the appearances of worldliness. We were admonished often to “come out from among them and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17), meaning separate from those outside of the church. In the cultural or social context of those days, certain behaviors were defined as rebellious, sensuous, or prideful and were rejected by the church.

To be candid, we have now reached a point where nothing seems to be objectionable or beyond the bounds of acceptability even in holiness circles. As current cultural norms shift, the very idea of sin is being reserved only for the most egregious behavior.

Like a carnival magician who only succeeds with his trick by misdirecting our attention, Satan has his own strategy of misdirection. Instead of understanding holiness in terms of relationship with God, many fall victim to Satan’s deception. Some are preoccupied with devising ways to display their distinctiveness from all who walk in what they have defined as “unholy” ways, a focus that all too easily deteriorates into spiritual pride.

Others, especially more recent generations, are more intent on sidestepping the need for distinctiveness, defining a relationship with God in broad, even nebulous terms. Whatever holiness means to them, it has little if anything to do with restrictions. To the contrary, they assert that it is in building bridges of unjudgmental relationships that one can experience a relationship with God.

The point hardly needs to be made that shifting cultural sands and the related perceptions provide no foundation on which to construct a definition of holiness. In fact holiness has no basis at all other than the unchanging nature of God.

To follow holiness requires only that in our relationship with Him we make a second level decision to fully commit to Him the new life we have been given by His grace.

And, holiness does not result even for a single second from anything we do.

The Book of Haggai graphically displays that truth. The first chapter tells of a great revival in which the people preoccupied with their own personal needs and comforts recognized they had neglected the house of the Lord. In resettling in the land, rebuilding the Temple had been shoved off in the corner of “someday.” Haggai’s message became the instrument through which God stirred the hearts of the people. They

realigned their priorities and set about gathering great cedar timbers and rebuilding the Temple.

In the second chapter, Haggai appears to have changed the subject, but that is not the case. The prophet confronts the priests with a kind of theological pop quiz. There are only two questions. The first: If the priests are carrying consecrated meat (meat designated for sacrifices) in their apron and that meat comes in contact with some bread or wine, for example, does that bread or wine become consecrated as well? The priests answered correctly, “No.”

The second question: If someone who has been defiled by contact with a dead body touches bread or wine, do those things become defiled? The priests answered, again correctly, “Yes.”

The point? Holiness cannot be transmitted by contact. What I do even as a servant of the Lord cannot produce holiness. My children are not holy just because I am holy. The ministry on which I put my hand is not consecrated or holy unto God because I am a holy leader. I may pass on a holy example, but nothing becomes holy because of me.

On the other hand, uncleanness is a different matter. We can literally contaminate the lives of others by our uncleanness. My family can become spiritually contaminated by my sin. My ministry can be soiled by my uncleanness.

The Temple that had been rebuilt wasn’t a holy place because consecrated people had put their hands to the task. Both the people as well as the Temple were holy because God declared it to be so. He alone is holy (Revelation 15:4), and only He can impart holiness.

The admonition of Leviticus 20:7, for example, to sanctify ourselves or set ourselves apart speaks to the matter of our choice to make ourselves available to the Sanctifier. The call to seek His Kingdom authority above all else and embrace His righteousness in Matthew 6:23 is both an invitation and a command of grace to position ourselves before the One who waits to share Himself with us. The mystery of holiness rests in the covenant relationship with a Holy God.

And there is that word again, *relationship*. God is the God of covenant who invites us to enter into this unique relationship.

As familiar as we may be with the Exodus 19–20 account of the Ten Commandments, the narrative of the covenant itself is often overlooked. The exchange in chapter 19:4 - 8a reveals the God of Covenant:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be

my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.... So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said."

This is the God who later declares through John that He wants to "abide in us" (1 John 3:24). His desire for a relationship with us is evident from Genesis through Revelation, and the Exodus verses clearly indicate that He is initiating the covenant proposal. Notice the ominous "If-then."

"Now *if* you do . . . *then*...you will be..." (emphasis added).

In response, the people declare, "We will do everything the Lord says to do." And a covenant was born! The party of the first part—God—and the party of the second part—the people—had formed a contract, an agreement that served as a bond between them, and obligated them to act appropriately to sustain the relationship.

The popular view of this passage of scripture seems to miss the matter of covenant or at least misunderstand it. How often have you heard the comment, "If I can just keep the commandments . . ." The assumption is that obedience to the commandments is a prerequisite to a favored relationship with God.

To the contrary, the commandments came after the covenant relationship was already established. God had already declared that they were His people. That is why in the following chapters He provided them with instructions that would allow them to make their relationship with Him evident. The commandments were given to the nation, because they were His people, not so they could become His people.

The New Testament parallel is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Again, we hear the wistful "if I could only live by the Sermon on the Mount..." but this discourse was given to disciples who had already left all to follow Jesus. This was not a set of standards floated out there to recruit them or see if they could qualify as His disciples. They were already His, and He provided them with instructions that would allow them to live in their relationship with Him.

There is no denying that both the Exodus and Matthew passages are depicting a covenant relationship grounded in grace. Compelled by His amazing love, God seeks at every turn to reestablish the relationship that was lost in Eden.

But we must be clear. His act of love is also an act of His will. For us and our cultural limitations, love has the texture of emotions. Much of what we experience under the banner of love is based on feelings.

God's love, however, is an act of divine choice, and in return we are invited into a relationship that reflects our choice to live in relationship with Him. Covenant is a relationship of love that has its basis in the will, not in the unreliable winds of feelings. It is in this covenant relationship our Creator models to us that lasting love is an act of the will.

In the same way that *eternal* defines Him, God's love is fundamental to who He is. If He is not eternal, He is not God. If He is not love, then He is not God at all.

Knowing that allows us to understand the profound reality of His choice to make it possible for us to share in an intimate way who He is. He loves us because love is the essence of His nature, and our covenant relationship with Him is the portal through which His very nature is both revealed to us and in us. We submit to Him and He makes Himself known through us.

The otherwise stark statements of Matthew 5:48 ("Be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect.") or 1 Peter 1:16 ("Be holy, because I am holy.") find their real meanings in the context of covenant. Left to our own devices, we can be neither perfect nor holy. But as participants in a covenant relationship with God, we are vessels through which His own likeness is revealed.

His perspective is righteous, and as He shares Himself we are enabled to hold true what He holds true. We can reject what He rejects, and value what He values. We gain a perspective that is not our own, but His.

This is oneness. In our covenant relationship with Him, He fully enables us to embrace and be embraced by His righteousness. In Galatians 2:20 Paul describes this as a life that is not his own:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

God's infilling brings to life within us the eternal shalom, the completeness inherent in His likeness but lost in Eden.

Experiencing this wholeness is possible, because God has withheld nothing from us.

His divine power has given us *everything we need for a godly life* through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory

and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3 - 4, emphasis added).

Peter is making it clear that God intends for us to live godly lives. We truly can know Him and share in His divine nature.

In the first four chapters of this book, the common thread has always been our relationship with God. Our discussion of that relationship has reached its definitive end as we recognize that to know Him fully is to share in His likeness.

This focus on relationship is central in unfolding our concept of prayer. With all that we have considered in these chapters, how then are we to define prayer?

Prayer, as the extension of our relationship with God, is an expression of our worship in which we acknowledge His Kingdom authority, seek His righteousness, and embrace wholeness in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Why then do we find prayer so difficult? In the chapters that follow some of the answers may surprise you.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Now that you have read this chapter, explain my statement that "... being holy is not complex at all."
- 2) Discuss the idea of covenant. How does that idea change your understanding of the 10 Commandments?
- 3) In what way has the concept of *shalom* affected the way we should understand what it means to live a holy life?

PART 2

Disconnected! **Barriers to an Effective Prayer Life**

Question: If we truly believe in prayer, why don't we pray?

I don't want to brag, but I have a history of overcoming barriers in my life. At various times I have faced obstacles that stood in the way of doing something I needed or wanted to do, and with time and patience I was able to resolve those issues.

For example, at one point I had to learn to deal with a language I did not know. Everybody around me was speaking a language that was new to me. I could see people's mouths moving and hear sounds coming out of them, but for the life of me I had no idea what those sounds meant. By my first birthday, however, I had started to get the hang of it. By the time I was three, I was having conversations regularly.

Many years later, serving as a career missionary, I once again found myself living with people who spoke a different language than mine. Since I had done this once already, you would think I could do it again just as easily. Strangely enough, it was harder, but I did anyway.

Life is full of challenges. Nearly anything we want or need to do will meet with some kind of obstacle or barrier that we have to overcome.

The highway near my home is presently lined with orange barrels. Supposedly that indicates that some kind of road work will be done, but I never see anyone near those barrels. I can't help but be a little suspicious

that the state may just have too many orange barrels, and if they have to be stored someplace, why not in plain sight. Meanwhile the barrels serve as barriers, so we have to make changes in our driving patterns.

Of course, not all barriers are bad. Those barrels are meant to redirect us and keep us safe. Some barriers may actually come from those who want to help us grow and become better. Try to start a new business, and you'll find the lending agency throwing all kinds of roadblocks in your way. Jumping through those hoops, however, only assures you and the lender that you have a real plan to succeed and pay back their loan. Those steps are designed to protect you from getting in over your head financially.

Other barriers are simply natural. Mountain ranges and major rivers sometimes provide boundaries that divide groups of people or even whole nations. Barrier reefs separate a coastline from the open seas. Fallen trees, landslides, deserts, and rain forests may clearly affect traffic flow and travel plans, all totally natural.

On the other hand, there are various kinds of barriers that are not natural nor intended to be helpful. Often they are designed to interfere and derail us. The old classic westerns on TV quite often had someone chopping down a tree to stop a stage coach or a train to rob the strongbox or passengers. In the political arena, laws are passed at times with less than honorable intentions, and as a result someone corners the market on light bulbs nobody really wants.

Regardless of the barriers we encounter, including the ones that are contrived, we have to find ways over or around or through them.

There is an entire industry woven around the problem of barriers. There are books, articles, and seminars that have emerged in abundance, supposedly designed to help us over and around the barriers we encounter in life. Typically the advice comes straight from the Madison Avenue "success" manuals. The approach focuses in one way or another on clarity of and commitment to goals followed by eliminating distractions. The secrets range from time management principles to getting our *chakras* in balance.

We tend to tweak a business model to fit our spiritual journeys. When cognitive clarity and time-management tools are translated into strategies for our prayer lives, we hear such expressions as "set an appointment with God." We are advised to take control of our environment, to turn off the phone, hang out the Do Not Disturb sign, and keep a pad of paper nearby to jot down notes that belong on our to do list for later. The goal is to succeed with this task like all the rest that follow throughout the day.

Much if not all of that is sound advice, to be sure, and in our pursuit of an effective prayer life, we would do well to heed any such suggestions

that we may find beneficial. But prayer is not simply one of our many goals, and effectiveness in prayer cannot be measured with the tools of secular success models. When prayer is reduced to a task that we have to manage, we run a serious risk of missing the true nature of prayer as an expression of our relationship with God.

Where to begin

Focusing on barriers to our prayer lives must begin by recognizing that nothing hinders prayer more than an inadequate or faulty understanding of prayer. That is why the first part of this book addresses the need to see prayer through the lens of relationship.

For many years of my spiritual journey, prayer had more to do with my persistence than with His presence. As one of the various spiritual chores each day, the primary agenda of my prayer life was simply to get it done, to fit it into the flow of each busy day.

Over time the issue morphed into how well I did or did not get that done. Needless to say, more often than not my prayer times were far less meaningful than they should have been. Not only did I often fail to get it done, but what I did accomplish was rushed or muddled by the press of all the other things crammed into my schedule and were waiting to be done.

So, why don't we pray? What keeps us from having a consistent and even vibrant prayer life?

When we purpose to pray, we can expect to encounter some opposition. Nothing disturbs the enemy of our souls more than our practice of living out our relationship with God. And nothing is more essential and deeply expressive of that relationship than prayer.

In the chapters that follow, we will examine barriers to a consistent and effective prayer life. Some of them appear to be natural barriers, normal deterrents in almost every sense of the word, except they become instruments in the hands of the enemy. It would be naïve to ignore the enemy's effort to manipulate even the natural elements of our days to distract us spiritually.

We will also stare into the face of spiritual opposition that is intended to derail our prayer lives. These strategies center on attempts to disrupt our relationship with God.

Whatever the barriers may be, we are to be wise and vigilant, because we are not just a target. We are in fact the bull's-eye. Satan's effort is focused on reducing us to ineffectiveness in our prayer lives. If he can render us prayerless, he strikes at the heart of God's plan for His Kingdom to be evidenced here as it is in heaven.

The Heart of the Matter

The heart of spiritual integrity is the relationship to grace.

Dennis Brown, *Restoring Those Who Have Fallen*

Zagreb, Croatia, is the home of what is clearly the most unique museum in the world, the Museum of Broken Relationships. Those who established this award-winning museum knew that society celebrates love and the power of relationships, but when relationships are broken the conventional response is to put it behind us. We get rid of lingering items that remind us of what we have lost, and try in various ways to cleanse our memories of the experience.

The museum took the opposite approach. It exhibits donated items and notes from people who have experienced broken relationships. They assert that it is appropriate to recognize such relationships considering the powerful and often lasting emotional impact such experiences have on us. Even though relationships are broken, the affect and influence that they have had on us are significant and should be remembered.

One of the most unusual displays is a photo of an under-knee prosthesis accompanied by a short note:

In a Zagreb hospital I met a beautiful, young, and ambitious social worker from the Ministry of Defense. Love was born when she helped me get certain materials, which I needed for my under-knee prosthesis, as a war invalid. The prosthesis endured longer than our love. It was made of sturdier material!

Just for a moment, let's revisit the definition of prayer:

Prayer is the worship encounter that evidences and expresses our relationship with God, acknowledging His Kingdom authority over every aspect of our lives, especially as we experience his peace (shalom), seek His righteousness, and submit to the sanctifying work of the Spirit to restore a holy relationship (see chapter 4).

There's that key word *relationship* again.

In one way or another, everything that effects our lives is intrinsically linked to one or more relationships. That may very well be why life's twists and turns impact us the way they do.

Several years ago when I was living in Southern California, I was singing with a ministry called Reachout. As one of the tenor soloists, I was privileged to do a duet with a young lady named Christie who was under contract with Disney studios. I will never forget Christie nor will anyone else who came to know her personally. She was filled with a sense of the Lord's joy, and it radiated from her like a ray of light. She had one of the purest soprano voices I have ever heard, and singing with her was a total delight.

One evening she came to rehearsal and her whole countenance was changed. As a few of us gathered around her, she told us what had happened.

Her husband, also working with Disney as a talented set designer, came home one night, and with no warning announced that he was leaving. He simply wanted to move on and had no room for her in his life. He proceeded that very night to pack everything of his and left their apartment. The whole thing was cold and calculated and devastating.

Nothing so drastically affects us as a breach of relationship.

When we begin looking at why we say we believe in prayer, but don't actually pray, we must look first at what puts our relationship with God at risk. Satan goes to any lengths to engineer a breach of that relationship. He will entice us to make deliberate choices that contradict our commitment to God. Whether that involves something we do or something we fail to do, his goal is to entice us to the sin of violating the bond we have with God, and nothing hinders our prayer lives more dramatically.

I am making an assumption here, however, that most believers are not going to easily fall into flagrant acts of sin. Few if any believers who have been practicing the presence of God in their lives are going to rob a bank or commit adultery or tell a lie tomorrow morning.

But, sin can come in more subtle forms.

Perhaps the most deceptive form of sin is evidenced when believers squander grace by mere negligence. In our walk with God, we may allow busy schedules, stresses related to families or our work environments, financial worries, and a host of other interferences to distract us from the worship commitment of prayer.

There can be a gradual "cooling" that becomes the norm in our lives. We still live morally, still tithe, still enjoy the public worship service, but the zeal of grace can begin to wane and eventually all but disappear. If left unattended, our relationship with the God of grace will fade into estrangement.

Even worse, this estrangement may seem virtually undetectable not only to others but even to ourselves. To be certain the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit will call our attention even to the smallest choice that neglects His grace. If we choose to compromise and excuse ourselves, our relationship gradually adjusts to the distance that those choices bring between us and God. The norm shifts so imperceptibly that we may barely detect it.

When we turned to Him and embraced His grace, we became citizens of His Kingdom, and the very essence of the Kingdom is God's authority. Jack Hayford's chorus from the 1960s entitled "Majesty" makes use of a necessary redundancy when he says, "Majesty, Kingdom authority." The kingdom of God is not a realm that can be located on a map, but rather it is His right to rule, His Kingly authority, if you will.

To enter into the kingdom of God is to submit to His authority. Choices that are not compatible with living under His authority are acts of rebellion against Him. Such choices set aside His right to rule and the grace with which His authority is exercised and replaces it with our right to be in charge. That is the nature of sin.

I have been referring to sin as a choice that is incompatible with the grace God has extended to us, a rejection of and rebellion against God's loving authority. That's the Wesleyan in me, but not everybody thinks of sin in Wesleyan terms. Some choose to focus on sin as the universal failure to fall short of absolute perfection.

God's desire for us to become more and more like Him would imply that He wants every believer not to be beset by weaknesses, misunderstandings, and failures of judgment. It is His desire that nothing remains in us that does not glorify the Father.

When any element of our lives fails to reflect the grace of God or is inconsistent with a life lived in grace, the heart of a true believer is saddened and recognizes the need for repentance. Any time our lives fail to reflect His character before a watching world, the presence of grace ignites a flame of genuine sorrow. Our relationship with a holy God shares His grief at all that does not reflect His holy otherness.

The need for confession and repentance is an inescapable reality for all of us as long as we live. This is the case regardless of how long one has been a child of God or what level of spiritual experience one may have experienced.

J. Southerland Logan, a notable evangelist who served as a chaplain to the Queen's court in his British homeland, preached a sermon entitled "A Place of Repentance in the Sanctified Life" at a large Midwest camp

meeting. The message caused an uproar at the camp. The well-intentioned Wesleyans had so “out-Wesleyed” Wesley that they failed to recognize solid biblical teaching about holy living.

The most saintly among us cannot escape the need to confess before God anything in his or her life that is in contrast to His holy presence. Even Wesley’s teaching about “entire sanctification” did not eliminate such confession, as his own journals so clearly reveal. As long as I wear out shoe leather in this world, I will not reach a point of such perfection that I never act contrary to God’s holiness. And when I do, I must bow in humble confession and repentance, allowing the comfort of His grace to be restored to my heart.

His grace faithfully makes me aware when I have grieved Him. It may be a curt reaction, a thoughtless word, or an error in judgment. I may have acted with flawed understanding. Perhaps it is a display of pride or any other evidence that my humanity has interfered with our relationship. And my reaction should be unhesitant repentance.

No one, Wesleyan or otherwise, can limit repentance only to rebellious choices. When fleshly shortcomings and lack of wisdom reflect poorly on the Father, the response of a heart filled with His grace will react with grief.

If our hearts are filled with His presence and grace, we will be grieved when our choices and actions do not reflect that grace. Just as the God who fills us is grieved at all that is unholy, so we who are drawn to His holiness can recognize when we have grieved the Holy Spirit. We will readily recognize when we have, however inadvertently, acted in haste or in our humanity and thus reflected anything less than His likeness.

Of course, sin, in whatever form it appears, stands in contradiction of God’s love and authority. The narrative in Genesis 3 records the first instance when sin made its appearance. Satan entices Eve with the alluring possibility that there is something to be gained by questioning God’s restrictions. He advances the notion that God is not as loving as they might think, because He is withholding something desirable, even beneficial, from them. When Eve acts on Satan’s suggestion, and Adam becomes complicit in that choice, their fellowship with God was broken and His authority was violated.

Thus sin appears on the stage of history as Adam and Eve turn aside from God’s loving relationship and authority. That is clearly the same strategy that our enemy uses today. The basis of all sin is rebellion against God’s authority and grace. God in His grace extends to us the wonder of a relationship with Him. The only condition is that we choose to obey His instruction that will lead to a life of joy.

So what does Satan use to entice us to reject God’s authority?

At the root of any rejection of God's authority is pride. Proverbs 6:16 notes the things God hates, and the first on the list is pride. Pride causes us to turn away and lose sight of God (Deuteronomy 8:14), and there is no room for God in our lives when pride takes residence (Psalm 10:4).

In 2 Chronicles 26:16 we find a description of Uzziah as a king whose fame was enhanced because of his team of inventors and their innovative weapons. The scripture records that as Uzziah grew strong, he also grew proud. In his pride he usurped the role of the priest and took it on himself to enter the Temple to burn incense.

The temptation of pride lures us to think of ourselves more highly than we should (Romans 12:3).

Our perspective of material blessings can become distorted and lead to pride. Israel was warned about this very thing:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God...otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God...[and] say to yourself, "my power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."

(Deuteronomy 8:10 - 14, 17)

I was friends with a man who was quite successful in his real estate business. He served as a leader in his local church and was recognized for his business skills, frequently providing guidance to the pastors and the board for business matters. He and his wife were part of the same home cell group that my wife and I attended.

Within a very short time, his rather substantial business empire collapsed. I witnessed the firm sense of faith that his wife and he demonstrated through it all, but they were deeply grieved at the change that came over their son.

The young man, a senior in high school, had just been given a Corvette for graduation. As you would imagine, he enjoyed a position of immense popularity in the community. The financial tsunami that hit his family left him angry and bitter. His attitude toward God was defiant, and nothing anyone could do or say would console him. God was unjust, and he wanted nothing more to do with God or the church.

The man wept during one of those cell group meetings. He recognized that his own faith would stand, but that he had failed to teach his son a proper perspective of the blessings he had enjoyed.

We would be wise to recognize that even spiritual blessings can become enticements to pride as well. Paul instructed Timothy to choose overseers, but not recent converts, because they “could become conceited and fall into the same judgment as the devil” (1 Timothy 3:6). Conceited about what? Obviously, the elevation to a leadership position.

A young Bible college student was asked to preach at a local church. My father and I happened to be there with Max, one of Dad’s boyhood friends who was also a minister. When the young man was introduced as the speaker, he virtually bounced out of his seat and behind the pulpit. The short 15-minute “message” he had hoped to bring quickly and irretrievably became a disaster. Whatever he had in mind never reached the pews. At the end, his shoulders sagged as he returned to his seat with noticeably less vigor than he had evidenced earlier.

Max, known for his wit as well as his wisdom, turned to my dad and said, “If the boy had gone up the way he came down, he would have been able to go down the way he went up.”

Paul warned us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Romans 12:3), which suggests that we can, in fact, have a view of ourselves that is healthy. There are always those church folk that mistakenly think that they have to debase themselves to remain humble. But Paul indicates in this passage that we can have a balanced sense of self-respect.

The context of his words relate to the spiritual gifts that are distributed by the Holy Spirit to allow us to have ministry roles within the body of Christ. I learned years ago that I had the gifts of teaching and administration, but my gifts are not reasons for pride. The gifts, in fact, say more about the Spirit’s plan for my life and for my place in the Body than it says about me.

Pride can form around spiritual blessings if we do not keep a proper perspective about them and ourselves.

Many years ago, I knew a young minister who was an eloquent speaker. He served as an evangelist for several years. His ministry was blessed with the fruit of many who came to Christ, and his gift of oratory elevated him in ministry circles. He later became the senior pastor of a thriving congregation.

But a subtle change over time went undetected by many, if not all. In his vigor to work with the youth, he invested time in becoming physically fit. Eventually he became a weight lifter of near world-class level. As he stepped into the pulpit to preach, he stood tall, a specimen of physical manliness.

He once spoke to a group of young men preparing for the ministry who listened intently on every word. After all, this minister had just spent time in the weight room with them. I was there and saw him free lift 250 pounds.

But eventually the ugly root of pride became more and more evident. When I saw him again nearly ten years later, he strutted like a celebrity, his shirt unbuttoned, muscles noticeably bulging, and an air of unmistakable pride. In time his pride caused his personal and professional demise. As he was dying, he acknowledged that he was spiritually bankrupt. By the grace of God he was given time to repent of his pride and once again know the peace of a right relationship with God.

Pride does not always take that same form, however. The sin of pride can assume a posture of humility as well. This form of pride is particularly present where legalism exists.

As I have discussed on several occasions, legalism is found in a variety of church environments. It inevitably is an integral part of churches that are focused on the lists of behaviors they define as “holy” or “unholy.” Abstaining from what are called “worldly” behaviors are easily translated as achievements of spiritual merit.

Legalism can also be found in less conservative even main-line churches. A strong emphasis on social services often takes on an assumption that the more one does to serve others the more righteousness is credited to the one who serves. The mentality of salvation by works rather than grace in that environment is no different than what is found in more conservative churches. Just the prescribed formula is different.

In either case, this is legalism, the belief that what I do earns me the spiritual kudos with God that counts for my righteousness.

The failure of legalism is that it presumes that righteousness is linked to certain prescriptions of behavior. Even when it assumes the appearance of modesty or humility, every form of legalism is a sin with pride at its root.

Breaches in Our Relationships with Others

Another strategy of the enemy to interfere with our relationship with God is to cause our relationships with others to be damaged. Broken relationships lead to isolation, and we were not meant to live alone. To be estranged from another is to be diminished and incomplete, and certainly less than grace intends for us to be.

Free Methodist Bishop Donald Bastian wrote a book many years ago entitled simply *Belonging*, and subtitled *Adventures in Church Membership*.

Used for membership classes and in studying the doctrine of the church, the title sets the tone for what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. It is not intended to suggest the kind of membership common in some sort of civic organization or club. Rather it points us to the deeper and richer dynamic of belonging to one another in the Body of Christ.

Joan Baez, a notable folksinger in the 1960s, recorded “No Man Is an Island,” which became one of her signature songs. The chorus says:

No man is an island. No man stands alone.
Each man’s joy is joy to me, each man’s grief is my own.

We need one another so I will defend
Each man as my brother, each man as my friend.

Quite unintentionally, her words provide a portrait of something that can only be fully realized by the Body. Long before Joan Baez sang this song, the Apostle Paul spoke of how we are to offer comfort to others with the same comfort we have received from God Himself (2 Corinthians 1:3 - 4). And 1 Peter 2:17 speaks of the brotherhood of believers or as rendered in *The Message*, the spiritual family. I actually like the folk song a lot, but the idealism of the words were preempted centuries ago in God’s design for our relationship with others, especially in the household of faith. Romans 12:15 defines the life of the Body as one of rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn.

The movie *Castaway* starring Tom Hanks graphically illustrates that isolation is not natural. He becomes so starved for a relationship that he adopts a volleyball named Wilson (what else!) as his companion. His attachment is so strong that later when he is adrift in the ocean in his attempt to find his way back to civilization, Wilson floats off with the current. And Hanks’ character genuinely grieves.

In the earliest moments of the scriptural record, God vividly makes it clear that we were not designed to be alone. As he makes Adam, God declares, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18) To fully grasp what God had in mind, you need to remember that Adam was not actually going to be alone, because God planned to have fellowship with him, so God’s own words indicate the need for earthly companionship. The bond with another human being is part of what made Adam complete.

This points to the need for us to be in vital relationships. This should be modeled in the body of Christ more vividly than anywhere else. The New Testament image of the Church is a body that is made up of many different parts, yet unified as one.

Perhaps nothing sums up the nature of our relationships in the Body more succinctly than John 15:14. Jesus states that we are His friends if we do what He commands. So what does he command? In verse 17 we find His deepest desire in three short words: Love each another.

The common image of prayer is as a private experience, but the implications of Body life suggests that prayer may ultimately be fulfilled in relationship with others. Perhaps the more accurate sense of prayer may be that it is at least as much a corporate experience as a private one.

The corporate nature of prayer may be easily missed by those of us in the Western world. We tend to read scripture as if it were all meant for us individually, when in fact a large portion of the Bible is addressed to or focused on the people of God collectively. For example, First Corinthians 12: 31 says “eagerly desire the greater gifts.” The Greek verb translated *desire* is a command in the plural, not the singular. In other words, the Body together as one is to seek those particular gifts rather than someone privately praying for God to give him or her the most important gift.

There is every possibility that prayer, while it is an experience for each of us in our private moments with God, is ultimately the venue for the Body. Something wonderful happens when the Church comes together in the presence of God to live out that unity with Him and as His Body experiences the power in honoring Him. Matthew 18:19 - 20 highlights praying in agreement with others, and thus places a high premium on prayer together. In Acts 2 the Church corporately engaged in listening to the apostles teaching, fellowship, and prayer. Even in the Old Testament, the people of Israel were admonished in 2 Chronicles 7:14 to collectively seek God’s face for forgiveness and healing as a nation.

Of course, our time alone with God allows us to reflect and avoid distractions. In Matthew 6:6 we see that there is value in praying in solitude, in finding our private “prayer closet.” Yet this is solitude only from other people. In truth our personal prayer times are only meaningful because we experience relationship with Another—Almighty God.

We began this section of the chapter with the focus on our relationships with others and an acknowledgment that when those relationships are breached our prayer lives can be hindered. Our relationships with our spouses are a specific example:

Husbands... be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect... so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Peter 3:7).

Another example is our indifference toward the needs of others:

Whoever shuts their ear to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered (Proverbs 21:13).

I did not choose those two examples casually. The first one, the marriage relationship, is designed by God to be an earthly example of Christ's relationship with the Church.

When that relationship is broken or dysfunctional, the sacred trust has been violated, and left unresolved will become a major barrier to prayer.

Likewise, our relationship with those in need is at the heart of what God Himself calls "pure and faultless" religion (James 1:27). He specifically mentions orphans and widows, the people in society during Jesus' day who were helpless and least able to pay someone back.

Our relationships with others, both believers and nonbelievers, provide us with avenues through which we share God's very nature.

God's word tells us He is love, not just that He loves, but *is* love. In other words, love has its ultimate definition in Him, and the role of His Spirit includes communicating that truth with our spirit and then through us to others.

By God's own design He reveals His love through the touch of others who act as agents of His grace in our lives. In turn, our capacity to love opens the door for us to be the means by which others come to experience His grace.

This dynamic has a direct impact on prayer, because prayer is to be experienced together (Matthew 18:19 - 20). God has designed the members of His Body to be joined as one, and prayer as the expression of our relationship with Him is incomplete without this unity. Likewise, His Body has the capacity to express His nature as love. And prayer—especially prayer together—is the instrument by which in love we bring others' needs into the presence of God.

Any breach of our relationship with other believers is a broken avenue through which the nature of God expressed through His Body is missing.

But what about breaches of relationship with nonbelievers? Are not our lives intended to be living, breathing evidences of grace? In fact, the primary means by which the broader community encounters God's grace is through the evidence displayed in the Body. This is why we are encouraged to live in peace with everyone (Hebrews 12:14), to do good to everyone, especially those in the Body (Galatians 6:10).

Relationships that are broken may diminish our capacity to function as agents of grace, and that has a significant impact on our prayer lives.

Matthew 5:23 - 24 clearly instructs us that time at the altar is to be set aside while we go to someone with whom we need to be reconciled. How can we seek to experience the presence of God when we harbor ill toward someone or have wounded them and not sought healing for our actions?

If I have violated a relationship, then I need to seek forgiveness and be reconciled. If I have been wounded but have failed to forgive, then I need to answer for my failure and offer the hand of reconciliation when possible.

Clearly the enemy of our souls seeks to derail any effort to have a vital prayer life by attacking our relationships. His temptation is first targeted at our relationship with God, and then our earthly relationships as well.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Talk about how sin is defined.

What was on the list of sins you were most aware of when you were younger? How has your understanding of sin changed from the time you were a child until now?

- 2) From the latter part of this chapter, how does your relationship with other people affect your relationship with God?

6

Obstacles Are Inevitable

Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goals.

Henry Ford

Have you heard the one about the poor guy who thought he could solve a problem he had with his wife's cooking? She seemed to take far too long. Each step required a separate trip to the fridge or the pantry. Fearlessly he took it upon himself to address the matter, and surprisingly meals are now served in about half the time—as long as he doesn't get distracted.

Even the best intentions cannot guarantee the outcome.

But one thing is certain, when it comes to our prayer lives, even the best coping skills in the world may not be enough to deal with every obstacle. We may require a resource that exceeds the limits of human capabilities.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the most significant way the enemy tries to interfere with our prayer lives strikes at the very core factor about prayer: our relationship with the Lord. That is by no means his only focus. The enemy can turn normal and natural factors into the tools of his craft and come against us in a variety of ways.

In any case, we should adjust Ford's quote to say:

Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the One whose strength enables you to realize your goal. Barriers come in all shapes and sizes, and the enemy never tires.

Beware the Common that Becomes Uncommon

Be on guard. When we set our minds and hearts on prayer, a whole variety of natural elements of our day can become distracting. As much as God is for us, Satan is against us and will use any means whatsoever to interrupt or distract us from enjoying and affirming our relationship with God. Do not be surprised when the stuff of everyday life begins to take on the characteristics of spiritual shape-shifters, looming menacingly over our best intentions.

Let's look at a few common examples.

Fatigue

Take fatigue for example. One night I fell asleep during my evening prayer time. When I woke up, I figured the most spiritual thing I could do was go to bed. I wanted to pray and enjoyed the short time that I had to pray before I fell asleep, but I was apparently just too tired. Oddly enough, the day had actually been quite restful. Nothing was pressing, and I was able to spend more time than normal reading and writing. Yet as I began to pray, my eyelids felt like they were lined with lead. For the life of me, I could not stay awake.

If that becomes a regular problem, then I have to respond appropriately. If I am experiencing chronic fatigue, I will need to restructure my day and my priorities. I may need to schedule prayer time during another part of the day when I am not so tired.

A few years ago, I became aware that I had become a driven man. I had taken on too much and was spread far too thin. I realize now that I had been lured to that point by two things: my desire to make a contribution to the Kingdom and a subtle appeal to my ego. The enemy had craftily taken a good thing—my desire to serve the Lord well—and caused me to focus too much on what *I* could do rather on what the Lord could do.

This was a sneak attack, to be sure, but one of the side effects was that I was so tired at night and so busy during the day, my prayer life began to suffer. So I had a choice. I adjusted my schedule and addressed the fatigue problem to once again give priority to my relationship to God through prayer.

Illness

Illness may sometimes affect our ability to concentrate while we pray. It's rather problematic to have my regular prayer time if I am hanging over the edge of the bed with a handy trash can nearby just in case. During my last bout of old-fashioned flu, I was barely aware of the time of day, who was in the room, or who was president. I may not even recognize my own name in times like that. Prayer in those moments gets real basic: Oh God, help me!

Come to think of it, there may even be something at least somewhat profound about that. Total dependence and weakness is the soil in which the work of the Spirit can flourish.

I recently interacted with a lady who was struggling with a chronic sickness and submitted a prayer request online. As I asked the Lord how to respond, I immediately saw in her request that Satan had used this illness to interfere with her “devotional time,” as she referenced to it.

As of this writing, I have been through a series of major surgeries. Life, as I have always known it, has been significantly interrupted. Early on I realized that the enemy was attempting to capitalize on the routines and weariness of recuperation. He was trying relentlessly to lure me into slackening off my regular time with the Lord.

Fortunately the Lord helped me both to recognize and address that scheme. In fact, during these “interruptions” I’m pleased that my relationship with the Lord was actually renewed and strengthened.

Interruption

Interruption can certainly be another kind of barrier to prayer. There isn’t a mother alive with three children under the age of six whose best plans for the day would not suffer from interruption after interruption. Come to think of it, one kid under the age of six may be enough to demolish the best intentions of any schedule. Ministers can point to Suzanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, all they want. But pulling your apron over your head as a signal that you are praying and are not to be interrupted may just not work for everybody.

How many times has the phone rung or a minor emergency reared its ugly head just when you’ve settled down to read the Word and pray? And what about that irksome but urgent need to go to the bathroom just as you start to pray! The other day as I picked up my Bible, I fell into a fit of sneezing for no discernable reason. As natural as all those things may be, it is also entirely possible that they may be strategies of interference from the enemy. There is nothing inappropriate about asking the Lord to help with these interruptions and any effort that Satan may be exercising to influence their timing.

Changes of schedules or routines

We are indeed creatures of habit. Life generally seems to manage well when there is a significant degree of regularity. A steady cadence can help us march through our day.

Spiritual habits are equally helpful. In Matthew 6:6 when Jesus told His disciples to find a private place to pray, He was not giving a directive for that single moment. His words imply a regular practice of honoring God with time set aside for Him and no one else.

Now, I may be out on a limb here, but I really don’t believe I’m the only one who finds changes in routine troublesome. I have prescriptions to take every morning. Inevitably when I have to endure a permanent shift

in routine, it takes me about 10 days before I can remember to take those morning meds. I get caught up in the new routine and simply forget.

The same is true with my prayer life. My special time that I set aside to deliberately pray is at night. For several years, that has been my habit. Oddly enough I am a morning person and have been for years. Yet I have found the night to be my most desirable prayer time.

For some reason, that seems to be changing. Recently, I have been falling asleep during prayer, and I don't like it at all. I'll wake up about an hour or two later and try to pick up where I left off with my prayer list. But obviously the quality of my prayer time is compromised.

I'm sure at least some people reading this are saying, "Just do it in the morning when you are awake." Sounds reasonable. But I've detected a pattern as I've tried to make the change. I go to my office in the morning and within minutes of reading and praying, I fall asleep. That really irritates me. I have not had a problem with drowsiness in the morning before attempting to have my prayer time early, so I have to believe that the enemy is imposing an unnatural weariness on me to interfere with my prayer time. And I suspect that my nightly routine has been the target of the enemy's interference as well.

Now do you see what I mean by the natural becomes entangled with the spiritual? I have been deliberately going back to my night time prayer schedule and seeking the help of the Lord to ward off the drowsiness. And it's working.

And the list goes on

Telemarking calls. The washer breaks down. The dog just got out and has the neighbor's cat treed. Your spouse calls and reveals once again that the car does not run on fumes. A baseball flies through the one window that wasn't already open.

The list may be endless.

I am not suggesting that every time some sort of natural factor emerges to mess with our prayer plans we try to find a demon behind some bush. However, here's what I am saying: We need to be observant and sensitive to what is happening. We need to detect if, at any point, the enemy is attempting to use any of these things as a hook to damage our time with the Lord. If there is any chance this is happening, stop, take it to the Lord, and follow His promptings.

Meanwhile use common sense and make any adjustments that seem helpful. Cell phones have mute and vibrate buttons for a reason. There is now a Kleenex box beside my recliner. Who cares about the neighbor's

cat anyway? And let's be practical. Your spouse's call is a clear prompt to pray for forgiveness. You already knew the fuel gauge didn't work and the trip mileage has been warning you for days that the belly of the beast was getting empty.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Another area in which we are often vulnerable to Satan's attacks are our unfulfilled expectations. I don't need to ask if you've ever experienced disappointment. I'm certainly not the only one who kept feeding the gumball machine and never getting the color I wanted.

Life is filled with disappointments, some at least as traumatizing as the gumball tragedy. Our spiritual journeys will certainly include a variety of times when we will be dissatisfied or even disillusioned. Immature faith sends naive young Christians into spirals of confusion and disappointment when others are not receptive to their excited witness of new-found truth and joy. Misunderstood scriptures can lead people to assume outcomes that are not at all what is actually promised. Christian leaders fall spiritually and leave a trail of the disillusioned who had clear expectations when they began to follow such leaders.

But unanswered prayer may be the most debilitating of all unfulfilled expectations. Someone prays, but nothing seems to happen. They seek God's help with health or financial or career issues. They've been told by some that God wants them to be healthy, wealthy and successful. Yet they face each day with little change from the one before. They may even pray for extended periods of time under the assumption that persistence earns results, but again no answer comes.

The Apostle Paul knew all about that. He called it "a thorn in my flesh." Some think he was talking about a physical need, but we really don't know what it was. We do know that he asked God to remove it three times, and the answer was no.

Why would God do that?

Paul actually addresses that question in 2 Corinthians 12. Keep in mind that Paul was someone who was highly esteemed by the Church, because God had entrusted him with great insight. Yet he reveals that "in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh . . . to torment me" (v. 7b). When he prayed to have it removed, God's answer was not what he expected:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (v. 9a).

Paul's response?

[F]or Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties (v. 10a).

Paul actually says he takes pleasure in being vulnerable. Physical weaknesses. Social pressures. Unexpected abuse. Bad breaks. Even persecution. All are occasions in which his lack of strength allows God's strength to be put on display.

I accept that the purpose of my life is to glorify God. But when He chooses to bring glory to Himself through my areas of vulnerability, I'm not always as delighted as Paul.

Our natural tendency is to seek to be comfortable, successful, socially accepted if not actually admired. But what if, for example, our brokenness or our failure to meet the culturally accepted standard of success labels us as weak and insignificant? What if we find ourselves living in the shadows of rejection or financial strain? Am I willing to let grace replace anxiety and self-pity with the security of a strength that is not my own?

God's grace is sufficient, not just to give us enough backbone to tolerate such difficulties or to keep us from falling apart or to stay afloat in spite of them. Grace makes us agents through which the glory of God can be displayed.

We need to be reminded, of course, that we are not always able to see how that is taking place. The plan of God is at work even when we are not able to see it happening.

If you've ever been to Disneyland or Disney World, it is easy to get caught up in the fun and fantasy and never give a moment's thought to the city beneath the surface. While every amenity found on the surface is available, the massive mechanization of the hidden world in the tunneled city below is nearly unbelievable.

In the realm of the spirit, we need to be aware that there are things going on behind the scenes as well. God does not sit idly by watching events play out on this temporal stage. This world is sustained, held together by Him (Colossians 1:7). God's response to our prayers, however delayed or different from what was expected, is administered by His hand of grace. His purpose is always designed to allow His image to be reflected through us.

The enemy will exert considerable effort to use what we perceive as unanswered prayer to detour our spiritual journey. He may tempt us to be disappointed with God Himself. He may even entice us to throw our spiritual hands in the air and walk away, back to Egypt.

Another tactic will often be to convince us that there was no answer, because we didn't deserve one. That may be the most deceitful lie of all. Naturally we are not deserving. The hand of God touches us with grace, never on the basis of what we deserve. If Billy Graham lived another lifetime, held twice as many crusades, and saw 10 times as many people come to Christ, he would not have earned a single microsecond's worth of grace.

At times we may, in fact, not see the answer to a request, but that has nothing to do with what we do or do not deserve. Our lives are not about what we deserve, but about the wonder of God's grace, and it is our walk of faith, not sight, that makes us the evidences of grace before "rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm" (Ephesians 3:10d).

Satan will also try to distract us from persevering in prayer. The need to persevere is not a natural thing for those of us in Western cultures where we have come to expect things quickly if not instantly. I use to look through my library, select books, use indices, read paragraph after paragraph, put on my glasses, prop a book open to my chosen pages, type (if you can call what I do typing), then go back and fix the typos. Then I would move on to the next resource to find material I wanted to use and do the same thing all over again. Now I access the internet, and my books gather dust. I even read my Bible on the iPad, because I can see it better in any version I want. The art of perseverance in everyday life is becoming extinct.

Yet we need very much to persevere.

At times perseverance must be met with covenantal prayer. Such a spiritual exercise is fairly benign to us culturally. In our worldview we embrace a strong sense of individualism. We look up to those who stand on their own two feet and do not have to depend on someone else. The idea of covenant is fairly underdeveloped, so covenant prayer may easily be thought of simply as having a corporate time of prayer with others.

Clearly we know that where any two believers agree as touching any one thing it will be done, but that is not covenantal prayer. To covenant in prayer is to believe together and for a given time affirm our faith in concert with others. This may require a commitment to pray for an extended time. But in a day of instant everything, if we don't see an answer to prayer quickly, we are easily discouraged. A committed long-term prayer agreement is difficult.

The great Christian and Missionary Alliance theologian A.W. Tozer, without formal theological education, became one of the more prolific and profound voices for the faith among evangelicals. When he became the editor of *The Alliance* in June of 1950, he wrote:

It will cost something to walk slow [sic] in the parade of the ages, while excited men of time rush about confusing motion with progress.

The problem of impatience in a fast-paced culture is well engrained in us.

Some of our expectations go unfulfilled, because we are not praying in harmony with the heart and desire of God. "God, you know Bill is a real jerk. Set him back on his ear and bring him down a peg or two." "God, please let Jessica win the beauty contest. We need the scholarship money." "God, let Barry fall in love with me. I know he thinks he loves Sandra, but help him to leave her and love me."

I think you get the picture. Even when we think our motive is right, it may not be. We must always submit to the purposes of God rather than try to dictate to Him what He should do.

This is not unrelated to the kind of prayer that is in the hunt for a spectacular display of God's power. That is often a prayer that is meant to satisfy our own need to be a part of something exciting.

When I had one of my toes removed a few years ago, there were some fellows who gathered around me to pray. Before I realized what was happening, they began praying, "God, restore that toe. Let a new one grow in its place." They were actually disturbed when I did not join them or affirm their prayer. But I could not be a part of something so blatantly based on a wrong motive.

Can God do that? Sure, but why?

While they were praying for me, there was a man on the other side of the room who had lost a leg. One afternoon a car careened across his front lawn, taking out his porch where he was resting. If they were hoping to see a miracle, why not pray for him to grow a new leg? He certainly needs his leg more than I need one of my toes.

I guess they hoped to see something spectacular, but their faith was apparently only big enough for a toe, not a leg. They were seeking to have an experience. The agenda was about them, not me or the guy in the room who could have used a leg.

Do I believe in miracles? I've seen multitudes of miracles, but we must allow God to move and work in His own way and time. There was simply no witness in my spirit that what they were praying had anything to do with God's agenda.

We must not assume what God will do when we pray will look like what we envisioned. His ways are above ours, and we would not chose to restrict God to our puny expectations.

Other Spiritual Factors That Can Hinder Our Prayer Lives

This chapter is not meant to be a comprehensive list of all of obstacles to an effective prayer life. However, there are some additional areas of vulnerability that can affect our lives of prayer.

Motive

In keeping with the central emphasis of this book about what prayer really is, motive is especially appropriate. Note 1 John 5:14:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

Prayer as the evidence and expression of our relationship to God implies that we are centered on His agenda, not our own. James 4:3 indicates that if our motive in asking is not right, then we do not receive. We are to align our requests with His desires.

Doubt

Another hindrance is doubt. Hebrews 11:6 states quite clearly that “anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Our faith acknowledges the reality of God, includes His nature to respond and reward. James 1:6 - 7 makes that same point:

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Confusion/Uncertainty

Sometimes the barriers to our prayer lives come from confusion and uncertainty:

What do I pray for in this situation?
How do I pray for an enemy?
Do I pray against an enemy?
What if two people are praying in opposition to each other?
Am I supposed to . . . ?

To treat such issues fairly is beyond the purpose of this book. But this we know: God is not the author of our confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). Make a deliberate choice to disengage from the uncertainty and confusion. Step back and embrace the calming comfort of grace.

A Major Target: Our Emotional Health

Let me state the obvious: our emotional health can impact our spiritual health.

Our emotional capacities came with the blueprints. God has the capacity to love, feel sorrow, know anger, have compassion, and even hate. We were created in His image with the same capabilities. Emotions are a necessary component to being a human being.

Emotions are an integral part of our relationship with God. He even promises that there are joys and pleasures in our walk with Him (Psalm 16:11). The fruit of the Spirit's work in us is a cornucopia of emotions: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22 - 23).

At the same time, God clearly has the capacity to hate:

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him:

haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies,
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.
(Proverbs 6:16 - 19).

When we live in relationship with God and the Spirit is moving us more and more into His likeness, we can experience sanctified emotions. We love what He loves and hate what He hates.

The danger lies with unsanctified emotions. Satan, who seeks for us to live outside of God's authority and thus under his own, can also fill us with love and hate and anger and pleasure. 1 John 2:16 speaks of this.

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.

Our emotional health is a natural, strategic target in Satan's plan to damage our relationship with God and thus create a barrier to a healthy prayer life.

One of the reasons we may be vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy is because we have some lack of clarity about emotions overall. Too frequently there seems to be a failure to distinguish between feelings and emotions and affections.

Dr. Sam Williams, a clinical psychologist and a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, sheds valuable light on the distinction in a paper titled "Toward a Theology of Emotion."

Williams notes that feelings relate to our sensory perceptions and operate as part of the way we react to what happens around us. Life happens, and we feel. We may be sad or happy, or lonely or afraid, all of which can be quite intense. The implication is that our feelings are more related to the surface level or natural part of our lives. They are, of course, part of our general perception of our emotional make up. But in the end our feelings are less reliable as a barometer of our spiritual health.

Williams represents a segment of scholarly study that says our emotions—as opposed to surface-level feelings—engage us at a different level and with different results than feelings. An emotional response involves our thoughts and the things we believe. We are responding to internal or external conditions and assessing what we think of ourselves or our surroundings.

Emotions are motivators. The words *emotion* and *emotive* are obviously related, indicating that the purpose of emotions is to help us respond or be prepared. Our reactions based on feelings would generally be more immediate and passing. Our responses based on emotions that are more intertwined with our overall belief system are more lasting and substantive.

Included in emotions are our affections, yet in notable ways they are also different. Our affections are deeper-level emotions that are in keeping with our moral underpinnings or core values. They motivate us at the level of our will. Responses at the level of our affections are anchored in a need to defend what we believe.

Feelings, emotions, and affections correspond to different levels of our worldview values. *Feelings* relate to our behavior. *Emotions* correspond to the way we place value and importance on things we understand and believe. *Affections* lie at the inner or core values/themes of our worldview.

Please stay with me. We've waded through a few paragraphs that probably made you feel like you needed some academic hip boots, but how well we grasp these distinctions can affect our prayer lives.

The reason to discuss all this is to address the matter of emotion as it relates to our faith. Our faith calls us to a life in which the very nature of God in Christ is shared with us. And our emotional capacities are valid avenues through which we experience and share the power and grace of God.

As human beings, we become somewhat naturally dependent on our emotions. We may assert measures of personal and mental discipline to manage our lives in the arena of reason. But regardless of how successful we may be, we still want to be loved and needed. There is a natural desire to experience the warmth of human touch and companionship. When we experience a deficit of healthy emotional stimuli, the price may be significant, not only emotionally but spiritually.

Clearly our perceptions at the level of our emotions can have spiritual implications. A child who was raised with an abusive father or no father at all may have considerable difficulty processing the idea of a loving Father in heaven. The emotional turmoil when a loved one dies or is no longer present in our lives can create a numbness that hinders our ability to sense the Spirit's presence.

On the other hand, spiritual realities may stand in stark contrast to emotional brokenness or emptiness. Those emotional realities can often provide an openness or readiness to embrace the spiritual realities that contrast with them.

We acknowledge that our emotions are intricately woven into the fabric of our natural as well as our spiritual world. The two worlds are clearly linked as interrelated components of the whole that we experience. We must be discerning and not mistake one for the other.

I have known people who in a moment of intense emotion assumed God was calling them to missionary service, youth ministry, or any number of "callings." However, time revealed the gifts and temperaments were not there. The subsequent years left them wasted, confused and defeated. They were unable to distinguish between an emotional motivation and the deeper, relentless urging of a divine call.

To be sure, we are holistic beings, and one part of us is affected by and responsive to what is going on overall. We are not so dichotomized that spirit and body and mind can always function independently of each other. As a result, we may at times erroneously assume that our spiritual experiences are merely enhanced versions of our natural experiences.

Knowing Christ, for example, is not like knowing your neighbor or even a close friend. We compare the two simply because we need a point of reference to help us understand. Jesus is the Friend in Proverbs 18:24 who is closer to us than any brother.

As powerful as that comparison is, we have to know that in the end it is inadequate. God chooses to accommodate our inability to fully understand spiritual realities. We tend to rely heavily on being able to measure or compare them with something in our mortal frame of reference. To compare what is natural to what is spiritual is at best to compare a shadow to its source image.

As we mature spiritually, we should become aware that all natural comparisons are weak and limited. For example, what we saw as the “real” world when we were five or six years old, was real enough to be sure. As adults we realize that our experiences of life are far more developed and filled with greater understanding than when we were in grade school.

God in his grace understands that as citizens of a spiritual Kingdom, we are still mortal. He knows that we only see in part, like looking into a mirror that is cloudy (1 Corinthians 13:12). By His design, our emotions can serve to affirm our commitment to know Him and embrace His kingdom authority.

Joy and peace or the discomfort of inner conviction may emerge from and reinforce spiritual realities. God allows us to feel sadness and wonder and a variety of reactions, all which can serve to make spiritual realities vivid to our temporal understanding. This is God’s way of accommodating our limitations as human beings still trapped in this world.

This is similar to the way God describes heaven to us. Streets of gold, mansions of many rooms, and gates of precious gems are images that try to give us an idea of something far above such physical elements. What else is there to which He can compare heaven? Heaven is a spiritual reality. I don’t want to disillusion anyone, but I cannot fathom actual streets or gates or even mansions. These are earthly images of things we hold more valuable than anything else. The message is simply that the reality of heaven exceeds what our earthly minds can conceive. Whatever awaits is so far superior to golden streets and stately mansions that we are incapable of understanding.

This discussion of emotions has woven its way through a variety of issues. At times it may seem that we are adrift, even a little detached from prayer and specifically hindrances to effective prayer. Let me begin now to pull what seem like loose strings together.

Regardless of whatever fleeting benefit our emotions may be to our walk of faith, we must be prepared for the inevitable time when our emotional capacity to be aware of God may not be available. That may come as the result of some trauma in our lives that leaves us stunned and wounded emotionally. We may react to events in a way to shut off our emotions for

a time. It is possible for physiological factors like chemical imbalances to throw off our emotional compasses and leave us incapacitated.

We must be aware and accept the fact that emotions are not ultimately sufficient to serve as a reliable spiritual Geiger counter. On the surface, feelings can be downright fickle. The walk of faith is not about how we feel, but rather my conscious assent to place myself in the Kingdom relationship. A walk of feeling will be a roller-coaster experience and has nothing to do with faith.

The deeper emotions and affections can serve at best as temporary support for the things we have chosen to believe. Yet they are incapable of anchoring us to truth and grace. Faith is a choice to embrace what we do not see, and while our faith may have no humanly defined objective proof, it is nevertheless our evidentiary affirmation of what is very real. As such we must guard against allowing our faith to be vulnerable to the shifting sands of our emotions.

The spiritual exercise of prayer can never be about *feeling* God's presence, as enjoyable as that may be. Rather, prayer is my conscious choice to acknowledge His presence even when my emotional capacity does not provide me with a way to verify that. God is present, and I must acknowledge and affirm my choice to believe and trust Him whether emotionally that seems "real" or not.

I know about this from personal experience. For about four to five years after my first wife passed away, I prayed, went to church, sang the songs, shared my faith and even spoke in various pulpits. Yet I had only the rarest emotional affirmation that my prayers were going anywhere but the ceiling. Praise songs that once had moved me regularly left me with no sense of elation. Great truths from the Word or from the pulpit hardly ever gave me any kind of emotional boost.

For all those years, I learned what walking by faith really meant. I offered praise because He was worthy. I prayed because I knew—not felt—that He heard me. I studied because I needed to know more of His will. I assented to truth with my will. Faith, like love, is a choice, not dependent on my emotional capacity. All of my emotional capabilities may fail me at any point, but faith must remain.

Stay vigilant. Your walk is by faith. Enjoy all the joy and elation that comes your way, but do not despair when your emotional life moves in other directions. How you feel must not govern your level of faith. Down times and emotional stresses may even cause you to entertain doubts or fears, even question whether God is listening or perhaps even real. But the stabilizer of your life must be your faith, and real faith is not the absence of doubts, but victory over them.

A stable and mature prayer life is anchored in faith.

The enemy will repeatedly try to lure us into vulnerability under the assumption that some degree of emotional distress is an indicator of a failed faith.

There will always be hindrances to an effective prayer life. The enemy of our souls will never stop trying to interfere with our efforts to embrace grace. In the end nothing he does can succeed unless we choose to allow it.

The choice is ours.

Talking it Over!

- 1) What have been your most common barriers to your prayer time?

What kind of solutions have you tried? How have they worked?
What other options do you have?

- 2) Discuss what “walking by faith” means, but do not use any words about feelings or emotions.

Share with others about the times when you have had to simply keep going by faith, time when you could not rely on how you felt.

What part did your relationship with others play in those times?

Beware the Blind Spot

The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.
—Helen Keller

When living in the Los Angeles area, I had a friend who was color-blind. It never truly registered with me until one evening my wife and I were with him and his wife on a restaurant patio near Marina del Rey. The sunset that evening was especially majestic as it glistened over the waters of the Pacific.

When he remarked that he found the view impressive, I couldn't help but wonder how that could be. I was seeing reds and yellows sparkling like diamonds dancing across the water. The sky filled with long, melting hues of color blended with thinly sprayed streaks of clouds interrupting the show.

When asked what he saw, he spoke of shades of gray weaving in and out of each other. The surface of the water provided a light show in which varying shades of gray and flashes of white interrupted the darkening surface. He was as mesmerized by the designs as I was with the panorama of color. While we were both looking at the same thing, we actually *saw*—that is, understood—something different.

In one sense that may serve to illustrate the idea of worldview. Every people-group in the world has a worldview that they share and makes them unique among the people of the world.

Our Western worldview, however, presents us with one of the most unique challenges we face as Christians. We have inherited the Western *blind spot*.

Of course, while all blind spots are not the same, any blind spot can be hazardous to our health.

Not long ago, I had an up-close, personal encounter with an unexpected blind spot, and it was clearly my own fault. The traffic was actually lighter than normal, but the car in front of me must have had one of those little-old-ladies-from-Pasadena at the wheel. She had apparently found a way to reinvent slow.

So, I started to pull out into the passing lane. The blare of a horn by a frantic driver was jarring. He had obviously been in my blind spot

a few moments earlier. He seemed to take the whole thing a lot better than I expected. For quite some time he just waved and waved even with that injured hand. From what I could see he only had one finger left, the poor man.

As frightening as that kind of blind spot can be, another blind spot is far more consequential. Our ability to grasp spiritual realities is significantly impaired from the blind spot of our worldview. Helen Keller, both blind and mute, understood true blindness. And she is right when she noted that physical sight without spiritual vision is true blindness. "If... the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness" (Matthew 6:23).

Unchallenged, our worldview can be a barrier to our prayer life, because it is a barrier to our faith.

Many Western Christians exhibit a kind of spiritual schizophrenia. Their religious arm attempts to embrace the reality of spiritual truths, while their secular arm is wrapped tightly around a naturalistic worldview. Science provides the truths by which we live our day-to-day lives, and there is little room for anything other than the tangible realities of the natural world.

I know the term *worldview* can sound a bit stuffy, like something that belongs between the ivy-covered walls of academia. So let's take time to define *worldview*.

Ready? Brace yourself. This could be pretty deep.

Worldview is our view of the world.

To be more specific, it is our understanding of how the universe around us actually works.

Everybody has a worldview that for the most part is shared with others in their social environment. I and others like me (more or less) share the same basic set of values and assumptions. Those shared beliefs let me function on common ground with others. We think about the way the world operates in much the same terms, and that gives us the ability to communicate meaningfully with each other.

The term *Western worldview* refers specifically to the way those in the westernized world understand reality. That means that those of us in the West share certain assumptions, values, allegiances, core themes, and related behaviors. As different as we are from each other, we are distinct from other societies around the world because of our shared assumptions about reality.

Until recently the defining characteristic in our worldview has been the authority of science. I said "until recently" because another set of assumptions is emerging that has begun to replace the values of the modern era of science or *modernism*. This new set of assumptions and core values,

all of which have an effect on behavior, comes after modernism, so we unimaginatively call it *postmodernism*.

This shift in our Western worldview is about to change everything. We are moving from “science rules” to “everything rules.” This postmodern perspective says that in the past we accepted science as factual only because of our intellectual environment that told us science was the basis for understanding reality. We formed our body of truths in reaction to influences around us at the time.

Expressions of spiritual truth are viewed as the product of our social influences. If your social environment is different than mine, and our spiritual understandings are different, the postmodern accepts both perspectives as valid. Each “truth” is valid for each person who holds it.

We and our ideas are only the products of the social environment in which we live. The same is true of those living in other social environments. So all of it, everything everyone believes, is indeed true—for them. No one “truth” is to be elevated over another or imposed on others. There can be no objective truth, or as the postmodernist would prefer, every truth is objective to the one who embraces it.

Whew! If you’ve had to stretch a little to get all that, don’t feel like you’re alone. But here’s what that means.

I may be captive to a worldview where modernism is committed to science as the final authority. Or I may be governed by a worldview that rejects any absolutes and embraces everything as equally valid. Either way, as a Christian I am conflicted. One arm is around the claims of faith and the other around a system of thought that opposes my faith.

The science of modernism tells me that my belief in a God as ultimate authority is only a myth. Facts come from science, the final authority. If I am not willing to recognize the authoritative nature of scientific fact, I am labeled as ignorant at best. My faith is seen as disruptive and even a threat to the overall stability of society.

And the postmodernists tell me that there is no absolute truth. My claim to know the truth and to have been set free by the truth makes me someone to be pitied at best. At time, I am ridiculed.

That is a fascinating inconsistency of the part of the postmodernists, however, since they have declared that everything anybody believes is to be respected as equally true. The call is for tolerance for all truths.

But apparently the tolerance preached by postmodernists has its limits. Anyone who believes in an absolute truth just can’t be tolerated. More accurately, Christians are the ones not tolerated, and they are labeled with the ugliest brand available: fundamentalists. Nothing is to be reviled more than the intolerant claim that there is only one Truth.

Strangely, Christianity is not the only religion that claims it has a corner on the only brand of truth. Most religious thought is constructed around the belief that the adherents have a corner on truth and evidence little if any tolerance for other religions. The siren call of the postmodern worldview is an enticement to a collective truth that embraces any and all views of reality, well, almost all.

As strange as it may seem, the blind spot in our worldview interferes with our faith, yet provides us with its own version of faith. Modernism embraces science and assures us that it can provide us with truth and that we can have confidence or faith in its certainty. Postmodernism, on the other hand, frees us from our limited faith in scientific truth and opens us up to truth as a spectrum. We are called to a new worldview of enlightenment in which we discover that all perceptions of truth are in fact valid and to be valued equally. Postmodernism offers us a faith that sees a reality that does not discriminate by preferring and endorsing one truth over another.

That word *discriminate* probably needs some scrutiny. The word has been tightly locked into the political climate that focuses on prejudice and bigotry, but the word without the political overtones simple refers to the ability to discern. Postmodernists see no need to distinguish one truth from another since all are equally valued.

Oddly enough, that is the definition of blind faith, a “faith” without distinction, or in the case of postmodernists, without the need to make distinctions. Yet distinctions are made with the benefit of understanding, perception and discernment.

Ok, hit the pause button for a moment.

I thought the Christian’s faith was disdainfully described as “blind faith.” Are we not accused of failing to recognize that the basis for our faith is a myth, a figment of our wishful thinking, a contrivance to shore up the weak? We are accused of believing without real understanding.

Some may even point to Hebrews 11:1 as proof of blind faith:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Faith in something you cannot see?

To the natural mind, that definition can seem strange, even mystical. It certainly appears to be lacking any kind of foundation or basis on which to stand.

But a closer look proves otherwise.

If you back up to Hebrews 10, the writer is speaking of a past in which there was “a great conflict full of suffering” (v.32). How had the people of God endured such pain and persecution? The answer: confidence in God’s promises (vv. 34 - 36).

But that faith was anything but blind.

This is not some mystical sense of faith. God had revealed Himself through the words of the prophets and the deeds of His power. He had delivered them time and time again. This is the God who gave them water from a rock (Exodus 17). He had provided them with quail and manna from heaven (Exodus 16). His power had caused the sun to stand still in the sky (Joshua 10). This is God who had revealed Himself to Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6).

Blind faith would be like holding onto a rope with both ends dangling loose in the wind. But real faith is securely affixed to the God whose promises, like Himself, do not change (Isaiah 40:8, Hebrews 13:8, Malachi 3:6).

Just because we cannot see with our human eyes or understand with the limitations of human reason, does not mean that we are left with nothing worthy of our trust. Indeed, faith looks for and hopes for what is not yet. But this does not mean that it is some kind of anchorless expectation, left dangling unattached in the winds of chance.

The Christian’s faith stands on the solid ground of God’s choice to reveal Himself and His acts among us in power and grace.

Faith—biblical faith—is not blind.

All of us who have come to know the grace of God can nod in affirmation when we talk about faith. Yet inwardly many of us struggle, however involuntarily, with those times when circumstances give us no evidence that our faith makes any difference. Even though we claim to believe, at times we are left crying out to the Lord, “I believe. Help my unbelief.”

We must allow prayer, as an extension of our relationship with God, to flourish and mature. That possibility is threatened as long as we let ourselves to be kidnapped by the insidious surge of postmodern claims that truth is not absolute. We must resist the allure of the spiritual inclusiveness that comes with a postmodern worldview that distorts the concept of truth and entices us to embrace a nebulous kind of faith built on the marshy mush of a collective reality. We are mindlessly sucked into the vortex of relativity. We are seduced into the siren’s call of a tolerance that sees all beliefs as equally valid.

Such presuppositions reduce the basis of prayer to mere religious imagination at best. In the end, such a view of the world makes prayer meaningless other than a self-therapeutic experience.

So, we ask once again: Why do we believe in prayer, yet fail to find prayer to be a consistent and fulfilling part of our relationship with God?

A significant measure of our difficulty with prayer comes from the influence of a worldview that imposes a blind spot. And that blind spot, at least in part, shuts the window of faith through which we gaze through prayer into the Eternal.

Talking it Over:

- 1) Have you ever been blind for a short time? Or at least had your vision impaired significantly? Try to share what that was like for you? What kind of effect did it have on you? On others?
- 2) Share what you have learned about worldview. Why does worldview affect your understanding of faith?
- 3) Share with the others something for which you are praying and why it may be difficult to believe that your prayer will be answered.
- 4) The whole discussion of post-modern thinking may be a bit hard to grasp, so discuss that part of the chapter to firm up your understanding. What would a post-modern think of this statement and why would he think that way: "Jesus Christ is the only way to God."

PART 3

Discovering Your Ministry of Prayer

You probably have heard the tongue-in-cheek description of a football game. Football is an event in which twenty two men on the field are in desperate need of rest and 100,000 people in the stands are in desperate need of exercise. That certainly has a spiritual parallel in the life of any church. Congregations could often be described in similar terms. A church consists of a handful of people desperately trying to do the ministry and a host of others who desperately need to realize that God never planned for them to be spectators.

Consider for a moment what happens when you watch a football team that you like. Listen to the subtle shift in language. It's quite revealing.

Come on! We're better than that!
Why don't we throw the ball?
We're number One!

Curiously the word *we* shows up all over the place. If the players could hear us, they might be tempted to stop the game, look up in the stands, and say, "What's this 'we' stuff!"

Doesn't that sound somewhat familiar? Ever notice that when people in the pew seem fairly happy with the program, they talk about how *we* do this or that at our church? *We* have great music. *We* have great kids' programs. *We* are community conscious.

Of course, there is always a "they" crowd as well. *They* seemed to have forgotten the music we used to sing. *They* just don't listen to us little people anymore.

They need to hire somebody to . . .

Kingdom life, unlike the football game, was never intended to have spectators. God has designated and equipped every believer to be part of the program.

To discover your place in the Body is a powerful and exhilarating, even liberating experience. Perhaps something in the chapters that follow will awaken the spiritual champion within you to the wonder of the ministry of prayer.

Back to the Basics

I started from zero and went back to the basics.

—Shawn Johnson, Olympic gold medalist

Except for boiling water, with or without a can of soup factored in, the world of culinary arts and its country cousin *Cookin' 101* has and always will be a mystery to me. I get the impression that whoever writes recipes is related to the same people who write computer manuals. It takes about three minutes at the most to discover with either the computer manual or the recipe that certain terms must mean something to somebody but not me.

Let me give you an example.

In a moment of pure insanity, I once decided to make fudge for my wife while she was not home. There isn't enough therapy anywhere to figure out why I thought for a minute that this made any sense. But almost like I had good sense, I waded into the deep end of the pool.

It took me at least three times as long as any normal person to gather and mix the ingredients. I was a little like Santa Claus, checking my list twice, at least. The mixture was supposed to be in a sauce pan, but all I could find were just regular old pots.

I turned the heat on and started stirring. I stirred and stirred and stirred some more. Do you know that the stuff never did turn into a ball?

For all those other guys who don't have a clue what I just said, let me explain. The recipe said, and I quote: "Stir until it forms a ball."

I actually think that the person who wrote that recipe is sitting somewhere in middle America, laid back in a La-Z-boy. At least once a day, she's breaking into an uncontrollable giggle wondering how many people she caught with that little trick.

What a difference a few additional words could have made. Nobody saw fit to include a more detailed set of instructions about dropping a bit of mixture into a bowl of cold water to see if the sample would form a ball. They simply left that little tidbit of information out, and if you ask me, it was deliberate.

I suppose cooking is like any other activity. It helps if you start young and have had time to learn the lay of the land. A few basics go a long way. Shawn Johnson, the 2008 Olympic gold medal gymnast, made that same

discovery. After a series of disappointing performances, she decided to start all over and relearn the basics of gymnastics. The rest is history.

So, whether you are cooking or learning your computer or maybe discovering your ministry of prayer, the basics can make all the difference.

That's why we need to back up one step in the discussion of ministries of prayer and be sure we have a clear understanding of *ministry*. Period!

What is Ministry?

Perhaps one of the most important discoveries needed in the Church is the true meaning of *ministry*.

We often speak of "the ministry." We talk about someone "going into the ministry." In general, we mean the professional ministry. We refer to those trained and ordained or otherwise credentialed by their denominations or churches as ministers.

These are the people to whom the work of the ministry has been traditionally delegated. They are seen as specialists who are assigned to serve the church and the community on behalf of the church whatever the congregations designate.

Sounds a whole lot like that ball team, doesn't it?

For the most part our sense of ministry is woefully inadequate, something carried over from rural America 150 years ago. In fact, if you listen closely you'll hear the musical theme for *Little House on the Prairie* playing softly in the background. The whole image is quite quaint but glaringly unbiblical.

Unless ministry is adequately understood, how can *ministry of prayer* hold any real significance?

Thankfully the sense of ministry in the church has been shifting in the right direction for the last twenty years. Books, such as Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* have helped to focus the conversation on the fact that every citizen of the Kingdom has been designed for ministry.

Another resource that has redirected our thinking about ministry was C. Peter Wagner's classic *Discovering Your Spiritual Gift*. Wagner, along with his mentor Donald McGavran, had birthed a new arena of research called *missiology*, the study of how people around the world come to faith in Christ. Principles of effective cross-cultural ministry were formed based on case studies from all over the world.

In that context, McGavran and Wagner, along with men like Wyn Arn, expanded their interest and applied those principles to churches in the United States. And the Church Growth Movement was born. Wagner's book on spiritual gifts served to awaken believers to the plan of God

for the health and growth of the body of Christ and specifically their congregational health.

Let me inject here, that it is virtually impossible to discuss ministry without discussing spiritual gifts. The two are interrelated, even intertwined. While this is not a book about spiritual gifts, we have to acknowledge that ministry is the arena through which gifts function for the benefit of the body of Christ.

God uses the image of the Body to depict His Church. Each member of the Body has been given a gift or gifts. Fitted together, we are equipped through the spiritual gifts to function as one.

Ephesians 4:12 - 13 reveals that God's plan is for those in leadership "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Older translations of scripture use the expression "equipping the saints for the work of the ministry."

The Message paints an especially vivid image, indicating that leaders are:

[T]o train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

Just to drive the point home with some added punch, the next verse in *The Message* says: "No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up."

Discovering Our Ministries

One of the steps that can help us discover our ministries is to discover our spiritual gifts. There are adequate resources to assist believers in that process. Gift tests provide insight about areas of effectiveness and abilities that believers need to consider as they identify both gifts and ministries.

The discovery process needs to be bathed in prayer. Remember, prayer is the worship encounter that expresses our relationship with God, acknowledging His Kingdom authority over every aspect of our lives. The practice of prayer allows us to sense the heart of God. His

faithfulness to us includes promptings and leadings that enhance our relationship with Him. His plan is for us to grow and become His agents of grace to others.

Part of our practice of prayer is listening to the promptings of the Spirit of God who leads us into all truth. It is the Spirit who distributes the gifts and provides enablings for ministry. He will guide us. And He will alert us when our efforts to serve are effective or when they are not.

We also need to seek affirmation from the body of Christ. It is not enough that we feel drawn to some particular gift or ministry. Zealousness can be driven by a variety of influences. Sometimes zeal comes from a need to be noticed and appreciated. At times zeal may be fueled by a desire to be like someone we hold in esteem. We can even be led in the wrong direction by our desire to be helpful in areas in which we are not equipped. Zeal can in fact come from a carnal urge to be important or measure up to some model of success.

We must not rely on zeal alone. On more than one occasion zeal has lead people to areas of service in which both they and others were affected negatively. One mission director tells of having a couple assigned to the mission. This couple had participated several times as part of mission work-teams and had assumed that the next step must be full-time service overseas. They had been on the field only a brief time when it was evident that this wonderful couple was not equipped for the rigors and nature of the service they faced.

Within a matter of a very few weeks, the stress of living cross-culturally made the husband ill. The culture shock was more than he could handle, and the best action was to release him from his commitment and let him go home to the United States. The mission director bought the tickets for their flight, and within a week his symptoms had all but disappeared. Zeal may be invigorating, but by itself is unreliable.

We need the confirmation of others in the Body. They often can detect areas of giftedness more easily than we can identify for ourselves, especially early in our walk with the Lord. They can more objectively verify the ways in which we are frequently and effectively used of the Lord.

Our sense of fulfilment may also be a significant key to identifying our areas of ministry. When we are engaged in an area of service we find meaningful and fulfilling, we can assume we are in the ministry slot God has planned for us at that time.

Among the varied ministries in the Church, prayer is clearly unlike any other.

Ministry and Prayer

The relationship of prayer to ministry is like a coin with two sides. On the one hand, there is the ministry of prayer; on the other hand, there is ministry empowered by prayer.

The Ministry of Prayer

Often congregations will have a department of prayer ministries with someone designated as the pastor or coordinator. The intent is to emphasize the importance of prayer.

The pastor is, of course, the ultimate prayer leader in the church, but that doesn't mean the pastor has to lead every prayer emphasis personally. Someone else may serve to represent and implement the vision of the pastor. That person may also serve as the pastor's advisor for prayer ministry planning.

In relationship to the church overall, a prayer coordinator may have the task of identifying those who demonstrate a desire to make prayer a personal ministry. Requests and needs are communicated with this prayer team throughout the week. The coordinator will be the primary resource to assist the pastor in finding ways to call the church to a deeper commitment to a ministry of prayer.

The prayer team may meet separately in some cases, even though an open prayer service is held each week. Unfortunately the prayer service often will be the least attended service in the church's program.

Sometimes, the emphasis on prayer can appear too departmentalized. The impression is that prayer is for a select few. And the operative word is truly *few*.

The scripture makes it clear that everyone in the Body needs to be engaged in carrying each other's burdens and entering into prayer for each other. When one hurts all should share the pain. When one rejoices, all should celebrate (1 Corinthians 12:26). Prayer is not the domain of a select team that runs out on the field while a host of others sit in the stands.

To understand prayer as a ministry may require a significant paradigm shift.

Prayer unfortunately has been too frequently and too easily relegated to a kind of spiritual list of chores. Many seem to believe: If I am to be worthy of God's love, I have to do the right things and even do them well enough to deserve His grace. There's nothing wrong, of course, in having a checklist of what we want to accomplish each day. That's just good time management. But the list-of-chores approach, especially as it relates to our

practice of prayer, can easily come to suggest a sense of doleful duty—even outright drudgery.

The first step is to redefine prayer not as an activity in which we engage, but as the extension and expression of our relationship with God. That puts our focus in the right place. Prayer, like any spiritual experience or act of ministry, must never be first and foremost about what we do, but what God does.

To define prayer relationally also helps us realize that the first focus of prayer as a ministry is unto the Lord Himself. The focus of prayer is thus on Him, not us, not others, not specific needs. Rather the intent is becoming one with Him and fulfilling the desire of His heart to walk with us in the cool of the evening. What was lost in Eden is found in the experience of prayer. What is lacking as a result of the fall of Adam is regained.

In John 15, we are, on the one hand, servants (v.15) of God, but it is obvious that God longs for us to be more than His servants. For those who are living in harmony with His purposes, He chooses to call them “friends” (v. 14). Friendship with God is not just for our benefit, but for His as well.

Prayer as an extension of our relationship with Him is nothing less than our ministry to the heart of God Himself. We were created in His image, and by His own choice, His divine design is incomplete in the absence of our friendship.

His purpose is that we should become more and more like Him.

So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image (2 Corinthians 3:18, NLT).

His Spirit enables us to experience a transformation in which we reflect His likeness. This Holy God seeks to share His very nature with us. And it is through prayer that our relationship fulfils the desire of His heart to see His own reflection in us. He longs for us to share with Him life as He intended it to be, in a relationship as friend with friend.

It is in that unique relationship that He shares His perspectives with us. He enables us to exchange the impulses of the flesh for the deeper awareness of the Eternal.

If prayer is to become a vehicle through which we minister to the needs of others, it must first be the vehicle through which we affirm and renew our desire for God to minister to our own hearts and we in turn minister to His desire to be in relationship with us. It is that relationship that provides us with perspectives that are not merely our own. The product of a vital

relationship with God is that we can begin to see the needs of others, as well as our own, through His eyes.

We can hardly stand in agreement with Him, when we have not taken time to hear from Him.

That does not mean that every time we spend time with Him, we are going to receive some special “word from the Lord” about specific issues. But, that time in His presence does allow us to more and more sense His quickening in our spirits that makes it possible for us to share His perspective.

Our walk with Him is a pilgrimage of relationship. As such, we experience an unending life of prayer. Through this relationship we can come to understand and embrace His agenda. It can provide us with an inner urging that is attuned to God’s perspective of the needs to which we are called to respond.

From the impulse of the flesh, our sense of the need can only take the limited form of mere human answers. Have you ever been asked to pray for someone’s pressing financial situation, a family with no job and bills coming due? What is the natural reaction? Lord, how about a job? What about that wealthy church member being moved to give them some money? Maybe an unexpected rebate? And then there is the inheritance solution, only that requires someone to pass away. Not exactly the greatest answer.

I was facing a similar situation several years ago in my own family. Money was especially short. My job had evaporated, and my wife, Dena, needed to get a much needed pair of tennis shoes for Rebecca. None of the solutions I tried to impose on the Lord had materialized, but I was truly not expecting what actually happened.

Dena took Rebecca to the mall with about \$50 to spend, but that money was needed for something else. As she walked across the food court, she noticed something on the floor. When she picked it up, it was a \$50 bill! Of course, after that my natural mind tended to add that same scenario to the options I would offer the Lord to help Him answer our next need or the need of someone else.

I have long ago quit trying to conjure some recommended form of response to my prayers.

I serve our church by responding to the online and e-mail requests that we receive each week. Recently, someone sent in a request concerning their financial stress. I remember smiling to myself as I responded to them with a prayer that highlighted Jehovah Jirah, our Provider. I did not try to contrive some particular way for God to respond.

Within a week the father not only had a job offer, but a sizable advance. His new employer had something like a signing bonus that he didn’t even

g
u
t
t
e
r

know came with the job. I had no idea there were such jobs, except with some professional sports team. It's a good thing the answers to our prayers don't depend on our measly natural perspectives.

Left to our limited human perspectives we can produce assumptions that are actually unbiblical. One widespread example is the way God's blessings are erroneously assumed to be primarily material in nature. Many have fallen victim to the "prosperity theology" claims that God wants everybody rich and comfortable.

Prosperity theologians seem to function with little awareness of a world outside of our Western environment. Christians all over the world are suffering. They go hungry and undergo discrimination regularly. In fact, the history of the Church speaks not of comfort or wealth, but of refinement by the fires of persecution. The Church indeed prospered as the power of grace enriched them with visions of true wealth of spirit.

As we learn to respond to needs through the impulses of His grace and not our fleshly understanding, we can become equipped to participate in the ministries of prayer.

Ministries Empowered through Prayer

Ministry of any kind needs to pass through the gateway of prayer every day. Ministries may and do take many forms. But in each and every one of them, the dynamic of prayer can transform even the most feeble efforts into vessels of grace.

Ministry and prayer must become entwined and inseparable.

I learned a lot about that word *entwined* through one of the most fascinating processes I ever witnessed on the Erave River in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands Province. On many occasions I had crossed the Erave River from the Poroma side to the Yapi region to spend time with the pastors and churches. The only way to make the crossing at that time was at the base of a mountain just adjacent to a high and beautiful double waterfall.

I wish I could tell you that I was aware of the waterfall from the beginning. To be honest, I am not sure that the waterfall even registered with me for the first two or three times I made the crossing. You see, my attention was riveted on the vine bridge.

For approximately 200 feet, the treacherous waters of the Erave were spanned by a bridge made of vines. I don't think I breathed much on my first crossing, because the bridge was about four months old and the vines were beginning to show signs of rot.

On a trek to Yapi a couple years later, that bridge once again had aged. The day after we crossed it, we heard that it had collapsed. I was on one side of the river, and my family was several miles upriver on the other side. But I wouldn't have missed what happened next for anything.

The villagers on both sides communicated through some truly serious yodeling that we humorously called the "bush telephone." They agreed on the day to start the new bridge and immediately began the task of collecting vines. Each of these vines, strong in themselves, only became stronger as they were woven tightly into larger strands that formed the handrails of the bridge.

After the thicker handrail vines were anchored on both sides of the river, each tribe began tying shorter vines to the handrails about two or three inches apart. The shorter vines were looped and weighted down with tree branches on which we could walk.

The relationship of ministry and prayer is like those woven strands, creating a strength that was only possible as they form a single vine. Ecclesiastes: 4:12 paints that same picture:

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

As we will see in the next chapter, all ministries of prayer are ministries of intercession—the multiple strands of which should be woven into the fabric of every facet of ministry.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Define *ministry*. What are some ways to know what your ministry is?

Share with others what you believe your ministry is? As a way of affirming your perspective or gaining new perspectives, ask them, from their points of view, what your ministry might be. What have they observed to give them that idea?

- 2) Take notice of those in your group who feel drawn to the same ministry. Consider setting a time by phone or in person when you and the others could meet for a few minutes to pray for that ministry.

The DNA of Prayer Ministry

Prayer for others...is the very beat of a compassionate heart. To pray is to enter into a deep solidarity with our fellow human beings so that in and through us they can be touched by the healing touch of God's Spirit.

Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Only Necessary Thing (p 145)

The mission with which I served in Papua New Guinea included a medical ministry that was recognized as one of the most outstanding of its kind in the country. Our nurses were frequently sought out by the national health officials for their insight and advice in regard to policies and procedures.

As a result, the national health offices assigned a Papua New Guinean nurse to us—our first. In preparation for her coming to work at the Embi clinic, I transformed a former cargo-storage shed into a small house for her.

What I know about building or remodeling you could put in three pages and have two pages of white space to spare. Fortunately the national church members made the *blan* matting from the *pitpit* cane that was flattened into strands and woven together to line the walls and the floor. But when it came time to wire the house for electricity, that's where I came in.

If anyone who knew me in those days reads that last line, it may take them a few days to quit laughing before they can read the rest of the chapter. I had never wired anything in my life except an eighth-grade science project that needed a light bulb, an on-off switch, and a plug. But I at least knew the theory. First there had to be a power source (that was the station generator). Then power had to flow along a wire unless interrupted (ergo, the on-off switch). And lastly this was the bush country (which being interpreted meant, no building codes to confuse the only other two things I knew).

So on a blank piece of paper, I drew a crude schematic of how I thought it ought to work. Lines ran from light fixture to light fixture. Other lines detoured down the walls to outlets. Then the switches interrupted the flow of power. It only took me a few hours to figure out the idea. (You can stop the laughing any time.)

Then I began running wire, installing wall switches and outlets, and inserting lights. Feeling a bit smug, I put the last screw into the last wall switch cover, then hit the switch to turn on the lights.

Nothing.

I checked the switch box. The wires were connected tightly, but I tried to tighten them up just a little bit more. I flipped the switch again.

Nothing.

What about the light fixture itself? Was anything loose that would break the circuit? I sat in the middle of the floor and tried to think the whole schematic through over and over.

About an hour into this fiasco, I had one of those Aha! moments. The source of the problem was simple. I had forgotten to connect the wiring in the house to the generator. There was no light, because there was no power.

In this chapter and the next, our whole discussion is about prayer as intercession and the role intercession has in relationship to every ministry and every ministry leader. Ministry without prayer is ministry without power.

Sadly a lot of ministry plans and program “schematics” have been carefully designed and installed, but the power connection is weak or missing entirely. Finances are committed, promotional endorsements are ready, kickoff announcements are prepared. Purpose statements, defined goals, and strategic plans are in place. The assumption is that the ministry has all it needs to succeed. But no amount of business acumen or even Wall Street success factors will make a ministry successful.

The power of ministry—any ministry, great or small—is intercessory prayer. And there is no greater ministry than the ministry of intercession.

All Ministries of Prayer are Ministries of Intercession

A prerequisite for a ministry of intercession is the personal discovery that we can bring anything to the Lord.

The Lord has invited us, even instructed us, to bring our requests to Him (Philippians 4:6). Life is full of the stuff of which anxiety is too easily made. Instead of living with worry and fear, we can bring our requests, any request to the Lord.

A well-meaning man once told a group of us that he had never asked the Lord for anything for himself. He went on to say that he trusted the Lord to take care of him, and the Lord already knew what he needed.

I have often wondered if he had read Philippians 4:6 very closely:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving, present your requests to God* (emphasis added).

From this man's remark we might conclude that he experienced little anxiety, and that may or may not have been true. Even if we believe that God will indeed meet all of our needs "according to his riches in glory" (Philippians 4:19 KJV), Philippians 4:6 still has an important message for us. Paul tells us to honor the God we trust by bringing our needs to Him with thankful recognition that He is indeed our *Jehovah Jirah*, our Provider (see Genesis 22:14).

Paul instructed the Ephesian Christians to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people" (Ephesian 6:18). We have the privilege—yes, even the duty—to bring all kinds of prayers and requests to the Lord. And, again, we are to do so with an attitude of thankfulness.

Note what Paul says to Timothy:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people . . . This is good, and pleases God our Savior (1 Timothy 2:1, 3)

God actually takes pleasure when we acknowledge that He is our Lord, that He is the One to whom we readily bring our needs and the needs of others. One benefit of prayer as the expression and evidence of our relationship with God is that we can pray with confidence in His care.

If we only pray for our own needs, however, we fail to grasp the magnitude of what prayer truly is. Someone has said that "if you only pray when you're in trouble, you're in trouble!" In that same vein, if you pray only for your own needs, you probably haven't begun to know how needy you really are.

Our practice of prayer falls far short of God's plan if we fail to respond to the Spirit's urging to look on others with compassion and intercede for their needs. A self-focused prayer life leaves little room to embrace God's redemptive agenda that He wants us to share with Him.

At the same time, if we are to engage in the ministry of intercession, we first need to have truly discovered personally that God is our Provider, that He rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

When the word *intercession* is sandwiched in with words like *petitions*, *requests*, and *prayers of thanksgiving*, there is by implication some

distinctive meaning for each of those terms. In general, the distinction can be said to center on where the prayer is focused, on one's own needs or the needs of others.

What then does it mean to intercede?

The word *intercede* means to stand between one party and another. To intercede in prayer is to position ourselves between God and someone else. This is about representing that person's need before the Lord as well as represent God's perspective and response in the face of that need.

The term has legal implications. An attorney acts and positions himself or herself between the court and the defendant.

I was in a courtroom many years ago when a man announced that he was defending himself. He had his trusty briefcase in hand, a sharp-looking suit, and a noticeable display of over-confidence.

What happened in the next few minutes was brutal. From the moment the judge asked him to enter a plea, the bumbling began. I only stayed long enough to hear the prosecution's opening statement and this poor man's rambling response. I couldn't bear to see any more.

He had no advocate, no one to stand between him and the judge, no one to intercede for him. I had never seen an ego go up in smoke so quickly.

God has painted a graphic image of intercession in Ezekiel 22. The nation of Israel was filled with social, political, and spiritual corruption. Evil was the norm, and God's patience had come to an end. Even then, in verse 30 we find God searching for someone who would "stand in the gap" that existed between Him and the nation. He wanted to find someone who had not fallen prey to the spiritual blight that had swallowed Israel, someone who could stand in His presence and plead for the people.

One of the saddest statements in all of scripture is recorded here:

I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but *I found no one* (emphasis added).

This verse is focused on intercession specifically for those who are estranged from God. But the larger point is simply that God chooses to act in concert with someone who will intercede, someone who will stand in the gap between Him and the needs of others.

God in His sovereignty has chosen to act in concert with His people.

God is indeed sovereign. All power and authority rests in Him. Yet He has chosen to be vulnerable to our willingness to become His agents of grace, to be His hand, His feet, and, in the case of intercession, His heart. Many things about God will remain a mystery to us, but none more

profound than His choice to be dependent on mere mortals. The God of all power and all authority has chosen to be linked with us to accomplish His purpose.

The Bible gives us varied examples of intercessors. Moses filled the role of an intercessor as he stood before Pharaoh. Not once but several times he petitioned Pharaoh on behalf of his people, requesting that they be released from their servitude and allowed to leave Egypt.

Abraham interceded for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He actually bargained with God. But in the end, while those centers of wickedness could not be saved, Abraham's nephew Lot and his family were. Without Abraham's persistence, Lot's family would have perished.

And Christ Himself reflects the very essence of intercession.

Romans 8:34 reveals that Christ is our intercessor to the Father. His place at the Father's side is the seat of intercession. This model of grace elevates the ministry of intercession to a place of major significance for the life of the Body.

The gift of prophesy, elevated among the spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1), declares truth and grace from the heart of God. Likewise in the example of Christ we see the ministry of intercession elevated among ministries as the measure by which the truth of grace is extended into the lives of others. The fellowship God seeks with us evidences a bond that in some mysterious way makes His purpose complete. So the mystery of intercession brings us together with Him to fulfill His purpose of extending and administering the wonder of His grace.

In *Intercessor Prayer* Dutch Sheets reminds us that our intercession is an extension of Christ's intercession. When we forget that, he suggests that the problem is confusing distribution and production.

We don't have to produce anything—reconciliation, deliverance, victory, etc.—but rather we distribute, as the disciples did with the loaves and the fishes (see Matt. 14:17 - 19). . . . We don't deliver anyone, we don't reconcile anyone to God, we don't defeat the enemy. The work is already done. Reconciliation is complete. Deliverance and victory are complete. Salvation is complete. Intercession is complete! Finished! Done!

(*Intercessory Prayer*, Regal, 1996, p.41)

Intercession brings us in harmony with the heart of God in a unique way. We truly become one with the Lord in the ministry of intercession.

We also stand with those in need. As Christ put Himself in our place and took on our sin, we stand before the God of grace and repent with those

who need forgiveness. We cry out for mercy and deliverance with those who are oppressed. We believe with those who wait for healing.

The heart of the intercessor is one with the heart of Christ as well as one with those who seek Him.

Every Believer, an Intercessor (Even without the gift of intercession)

What does it mean to be called to a ministry of intercession?

One of the fallacies of ministry that has crippled the Church for far too long is the erroneous idea that ministry is delegated to a select few. How long have believers seemed oblivious to the charge given to church leaders to equip the saints for the work of the ministry?

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

(Ephesians 4:11 - 13)

God's purpose is that all be conformed to the very likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29), His heart reflected in us, His agenda entrusted to us.

And His agenda is exactly the point.

God's plan does not indicate that only some are afforded the privilege of sharing His agenda of grace. While each of us have a place in the ministry of the Body based on giftings and anointings, none of us are exempt from "gap duty."

Some within the Body have been given a special ability "to pray for extended periods of time on a regular basis and see frequent and specific answers to their prayers, to a degree much greater than that which is expected of the average Christian" (Wagner). The gift of intercession becomes the ministry of intercession, but intercession is not the task only of those with this gift. While God calls many to a concentrated ministry of intercession, intercession is to be a natural part of every believer's life.

Some General Guidelines for the Intercessory Assignment

Stay spiritually alert

As an intercessor your most important task is to maintain a fully focused spiritual life. Your own spiritual health will affect your ability to serve in any ministry capacity, including the ministry of intercession. This is the spiritual equivalent of the flight attendant's instructions for being sure your oxygen mask is in place first before trying to help someone else with theirs.

Spiritual alertness requires listening. If you are an intercessor for a pastor or pastoral staff member, then be attentive to what that person says. Become familiar with his or her vision and passion for ministry. Put yourself in her or his shoes and consider the kinds of issues and pressures, the varied disappointments and setbacks that come with that ministry role.

Listen even more closely to the voice of the Spirit as He prompts you to know how to pray. Your role is to carry those needs to God as if they were your own, because in reality they are. Pray for discernment and wisdom as you intercede for God to bless and enlighten and empower and strengthen and heal and sustain.

Pray with eyes of imagination

Ephesians 3:20 speaks about believing that God will do more than what we ask or even imagine. How sanctified is your imagination?

When we ask the Lord for anything that is in accord with His will and purpose, we are to have faith. The evidence of what we ask is not in any tangible form. Faith is *evidence* of what is not visible otherwise. That is substantive, not just some vague sense of “maybe” (Hebrews 11:1). We see the answer by faith before it can be evidenced in any other way.

Be careful that you do not cross over into a common error. The imagination, even a sanctified one, does not produce the end result. That is the approach of those who practice the occult. They claim that the power of the imagination actually creates what is being sought.

Paul's reference to imagination never takes our attention away from the power of God. When we use our imagination we are exercising the reach of our faith. The Ephesian verse (3:20) defining *faith* concludes “according to his [God's] power that is at work within us.” The power is not our faith nor even faith stretched by imagination, but rather the power belongs to God Himself. Otherwise we have only faith in faith, rather than faith in God.

If we fully understand Ephesians 3:20, we begin to realize that God in His power can do “immeasurably more” than what we ask or imagine. The original Greek words here mean “more than or beyond what is superabundant.”

The topic of our imagination as a factor in extending the reach of our faith could be a part of any general discussion of prayer. But when applied to the ministry of intercession, it takes on added significance. Our intercession affects the effectiveness and extent of ministry of those for whom we pray. It impacts the lives of those whose needs we represent. Each need of ministry for which we intercede will have its impact, like the ripples from a pebble thrown into the water. As intercessors, our faith allows us to share in the effect of that ministry or the provision for that need. Faith with the aid of a sanctified imagination allows God’s power to be released in greater measure in the lives of those for whom God has called us to intercede.

Commit to tenacity

Prayer, including the ministry of intercession, may at times bring instantaneous results. Someone may be healed instantly or be able to sense a moment of deliverance from the enemy’s attacks in a mere moment. Assurance, even tangible evidence, of a miraculous answer to prayer may come with little or no delay.

I do not have the gift of healing, nor have I ever had a sustained ministry of healing. But in obedience to the Lord’s direction, I have not shied away from those times when the doors for healing ministry were made available to me. Some healings, even several over the years, have come instantaneously.

A young girl in Guerrero, Mexico, who had been ravaged with fever for hours was made well within only a few minutes to the amazement of the whole community. On another occasion a man had fallen from a truck bed onto a cement walkway, landing on one of his knees. Instantly the knee was nearly double its normal size. But by the power of God, in a matter of only minutes his knee was as normal as before the fall.

But those examples have been more of the exception than the norm. Prayer ministry leaders consistently acknowledge that answers to most prayers of intercession do not come quickly, let alone instantaneously. Some prayers may require faith and prayer to be sustained for extended periods of time. Some needs, such as job pressures, financial dilemmas, splintered relationships, or the devastation from illness and disease, can profoundly impact peoples’ lives. The hit-and-run prayer fails to provide the commitment

of care and grace that those people need. Many needs are not resolved by a single moment of prayer. Intercession often requires persistence.

Unfortunately Christians from westernized societies have come to want instant everything. When we pray and don't see the answer in a matter of minutes or a few days, we begin to entertain doubt and disappointment. We fail to understand that the ministry of intercession requires persistence.

More often than not, intercession is less like a sprint and more like a distance race.

I was never a runner. That honor was left for my brother, Daryl, who has done a variety of marathons, including Boston on several occasions. The only time he made a distance run in which he did not properly pace himself was in junior high school. He had gone to the high school to watch a basketball game, and for some reason decided to head home on foot. He had intended to run for a while, but as it turned out, he just kept running until he was home.

We lived more than three miles from the high school. The route weaved in and out of the courthouse plaza, through a rather seedy section of town to the residential area in which we lived. In spite of having no experience, his 11-year-old, untrained legs didn't fail him.

Over time as running became a regular part of Daryl's life, he had to learn to pace himself. In his last Boston marathon at the age of fifty seven, his time was 3:30:13. He finished in the top twenty seven percent of all 20,348 runners, and the top sixteen percent of the 2,606 in his own age bracket.

The secret to distance running: find your right pace and persistently put one foot in front of the other until you cross the finish line.

The ministry of intercession needs to embrace a commitment to spiritual tenacity. Persistence seems to be required at times to move the hand of God. We are cautioned in Romans 12:11 - 12 not to "burn out" (The Message), but to be "faithful in prayer" (NIV). God wants us to pray and keep on praying.

But why?

Does God just want us to have to beg him or prove to Him that we really mean it, or really believe? Do we have to pray "real hard," with enough intensity or fervor for God to know that we are sincere enough?

Some point to Luke 11 and the story of the man who called out to his friend for bread so he could be a proper host for a visiting guest.

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother

me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?

¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

(Luke 11:5 - 16)

Somehow these verses are often used as evidence that we need to be persistent in our asking. Actually that is not the case.

There is nothing to suggest that God is like the reluctant friend. In fact from verse nine on, the picture of God is the opposite of reluctance. The lesson: If you can believe that human beings are capable of responding to the needs of a friend or a son, then surely you know that God is even more responsive.

Any suggestion that we need to persevere in prayer because God is arbitrary must be rejected. But there is biblical precedent for persevering.

One possible reason for persistence in prayer is suggested in the story of Abraham in Genesis 18 mentioned earlier. Abraham actually bargained with God for the fate of those in Sodom and Gomorrah, or more accurately, for his nephew Lot and his family. God planned to destroy the cities, and Abraham eventually changed God's mind and Lot's family was spared.

No matter what the experts and scholars tell us, there is no clear explanation about why God would ultimately change His mind. The incident suggests, however, that persistence in prayer may intervene and influence the direction of God's plans but not His purposes.

The story of Daniel points us to another possibility. In Daniel 10 we find the prophet grieving as a result of a vision and the effect he felt the vision would have on the people of Israel. He mourned and fasted for three weeks.

Finally an angel of the Lord arrived and told Daniel that the delayed response was not because of anything unfavorable in Daniel. In fact, he reported that Daniel found favor in God's eyes. The delay came because a territorial spirit/demon that ruled Persia had resisted the angel's mission. If Michael, the archangel, had not come to his assistance, the angel could not have completed his assignment.

Daniel's persistence seems to have been linked to the power needed to prevail in a battle in the spiritual realm.

Part of the mystery of prayer is that the practice of prayer is related to power. It seems obvious from various scriptural examples that some events or changes require more power than others. Prevailing in prayer plays a part in bringing power to those occasions that require it, and in the measure in which it is needed. This means that intercessors need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and keep praying. Often intercessors may continue to pray regularly, even daily, for a particular need until the Spirit lifts the urging or burden for that issue.

In the end the scripture does not give us a reason for our need to persist in prayer. We need to be satisfied that there are some things about God and the realm of the spiritual that are and always will be a mystery. We are simply on the wrong side of eternity and incapable of understanding what later will be abundantly clear. For now we can draw some possible conclusions, but we must be ready by faith to accept that His ways and thoughts are above ours.

As you search for your particular place in the ministry of intercession, the most practical approach is simply to engage in intercession whenever and wherever opportunity is available. It may be for a specific leader or ministry venue. It may be in covenant arrangements or private intercessory time. The Holy Spirit will be faithful to make it clear to you and to the Body what role God has designed for you.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Why does intercession bring us closer to God than any other kind of ministry role?

Think about who God is and what His agenda is. Share with each other any experiences you have had when interceding that you felt especially close to God.

- 2) Why is Luke 11:5 - 16 not about persevering in prayer? What is the lesson there?
- 3) Why did Daniel have to persist in prayer? What does the term *territorial spirit* mean?

Ministries of Intercession

No two snowflakes nor any two sets of fingerprints are ever the same. Variety is planned uniqueness in God's design.

Anonymous

Tucked away in my archive of stuff to be used someday are some morsels that are labeled as “advise to help us get through life.” Here are a few bite-sized samples:

- * Accept that some days you're the pigeon, and some days you're the statue.
- * Always read stuff that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it.
- * If you lend someone \$20 and never see that person again, it is probably worth it.
- * Drive carefully. It's not only cars that can be recalled by their maker.
- * If you can't be kind, at least have the decency to be vague.
- * When everything's coming your way, you're probably in the wrong lane.
- * A truly happy person is one who can enjoy the scenery on a detour.

Such pearls of wisdom may provide some interesting food for thought, but such morsels may not do much to get us through the maze of our days. Most of us know that we need more than a few catchy phrases to work our way through the labyrinth of life.

Advice, of course, is usually not all that welcome. Warren Buffet is an America businessman and investor and one of the wealthiest persons in the world. He cryptically reflected on the dubious nature of advice when he said, “Wall Street is the only place that people ride to work in a Rolls Royce to get advice from those who take the subway.” One unknown source has

said that “we hate to have some people give us advice because we know how badly they need it themselves.”

Being so advised, this chapter and others that follow will not offer advice. Instead what follows will be mere practical observations about how to approach ministries of intercession.

At this point, we need to pause and make a practical adjustment, in this case a simple lesson in grammar. On the other hand, grammar is not always simple. I have had ample evidence of that watching people try to learn English. It’s quite a hoot! The English language, which linguists say is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn, is full of confusing twists and turns and the unexpected.

For example:

If the plural of tooth is teeth, then why is the plural of booth, not beeth?

Then there’s goose and geese? So the plural of moose is naturally meese.

And why isn’t cheese the plural of choose?

Go figure!

Fortunately, for the purpose of this discussion, the grammatical adjustment is about as basic as it gets. So, please note that according to the chapter title, we have shifted from *ministry* (singular) to *ministries* (plural).

So we begin with the premise that intercession comes in a variety of forms. These forms seem to follow types of issues around which intercession is focused:

Times of crises
Financial needs
Spiritual care
The need of salvation
Worship support
Ministry leaders
Social agendas and needs
Personal concerns
Mission-related venues
People-groups and receptivity to the Gospel
Spiritual warfare

And the list goes on.

Most ministries of intercession, however, can be summarized into four types: (1) overall or general intercession, (2) intercession in times of crises or great need, (3) intercession for salvation, (4) personal intercession for leaders and ministries.

General Intercession

General intercession may seem self-explanatory, but there are a couple points to be considered. First, in all probability, general intercession may be an entry point to the ministry of intercession for many. In time, intercessors may find themselves drawn to more concentrated areas of prayer ministry.

Second, general intercession is not always strictly general. At times, it may include attachments to specific ministries within the local church, general church, and parachurch organizations. General intercessors, however, are not primarily focused on the leaders of those ministries. While they may pray for the leaders as part of their intercession for the ministry itself, they center their attention on the ministry and its programs, rather than having a primary focus on those in charge.

General intercessors can take practical steps to be aware of an organization's overall needs. Organizational publications will include ministry news. *Christian Post* is the largest Christian newspaper in the world (Christianpost.com). There is *Christian News Today* (Christiannewstoday.com). If you use any search engine on the Internet and look for sources of Christian news, you will find many that you can follow. Be aware, however, that the best resources are those most closely attached to the specific ministry for which you sense the need to intercede.

Another suggestion is to follow the secular news. Whether it is world news or local news, with the various stories, always ask yourself, "How does this affect the church in that part of the world or city?" This trains you to think of the Kingdom agenda first and can be a great help in discovering areas in which to intercede.

Do not think of general intercession as something less than the more focused ministries of intercession. The Holy Spirit's call to the ministry of intercession at any level is a personal calling that is holy and vital to the Kingdom.

Intercession in any measure evidences our response to the heart of God.

Crisis Intercession

Crisis-oriented intercession most often involves a prompting of the Spirit to pray for unexpected issues, often at unexpected times. Sometimes

a crisis intercessor may not even know what the crisis is. They simply have a burden or inner alert that they need to pray.

During my service in Papua New Guinea, there were numerous times when I faced times of crises. There was the head-on collision in which my motorcycle was no match for the front end of a pickup. One of several bouts with malaria dropped my blood pressure to 52 over 33 followed by three days when my wife and a nurse were not sure I was going to live. Those are just a couple examples. Inevitably, within weeks we would get a letter from someone among our ministry supporters who had felt an urging to pray even though they had no idea why.

This kind of intercession seems to suggest that some intercessors may be spiritually attuned to hear from God in a measure greater than other believers. They may have a particular gifting or spiritual maturity to perceive the urgency to pray for some issues.

Crisis intercessors may also become aware of a pressing need through normal means like the media, or they may be entrusted by the Lord with a supernatural awareness. In any event, their more immediate responses show a kind of enabling from God to react with spiritual readiness.

Intercession for Salvation

Every Christian at some time or another probably senses a special kind of prompting to pray for someone who has yet to discover and embrace the grace of God. Some believers may find this will become the major focal point for their times of intercession. However that happens and in whatever measure, intercession for the lost brings us into a special harmony with the heart of God.

Intercession for salvation could just as easily be called *redemptive intercession*. Perhaps, in the final analysis all intercession is redemptive in nature, but the special focus on the need of salvation for others sets it apart from any other kind of intercession.

An entire chapter has been devoted to intercession for salvation, particularly how to pray effectively for someone's salvation.

Personal Intercessors

Personal intercessors are those who are drawn to pray for specific ministry leaders. Often that will be a local pastor or someone in a local church leadership role. This could include church staff, board members and decision-makers. On a wider scale, it could be denominational, national, and/or international leaders, among others.

Suffice it to say, no ministry leader should be without specific intercessors.

Ministry is never to be a solo. It requires an ensemble both to birth and grow a ministry. Every church and every leader has a priceless opportunity to create a special bond with their personal intercessors.

Each leader should prayerfully seek to identify those in the church who could be their personal intercessors. Ministry teams should do the same. There should not be a single person, ministry team, or ministry venture of any kind that does not have at least two committed, inner-circle intercessors.

As with intercession for salvation, the subject of intercession for ministry leaders also has a separate chapter that examines practical suggestions to intercede effectively.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Share with the group your personal experience of intercession. Can you identify what kind of intercession you experience most often?
- 2) Discuss any steps you can take to be more effective as an intercessor. As a group create a compiled list of resources such as periodicals, websites, contacts, etc. that you can share to enhance your intercessory ministry.
- 3) With what kind of intercession do you identify? What about the others in your group. Take time to discuss this and then supply that information to the coordinator of prayer ministries at your church or churches so they will know who to call for particular kinds of needs.

The Ministry of Intercession: Let's Get Personal

Action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Quite often when I pull keys out of my pocket, I am struck with the realization that all those keys represent something for which I'm responsible, and I wonder when it was that I grew up. My mind often flashes back to when I got my first set of keys and the sudden feeling of coming of age.

Just recently I sold an old car to a young man who is in school to become a mechanic. I saw that same coming-of-age look sweep across his face, and strangely enough I had a brief moment of nostalgia. I had that car for fourteen years, put over 250,000 miles on it, and suddenly the key ring in my hand felt odd, almost foreign to me. How strange it was not to see that vehicle under my carport.

Personal ownership is exhilarating, even empowering.

The new owner of my Impala is busy installing new brakes, putting in a new gas gauge (long overdue), and tinkering to his heart's content. While his dad's car has needed a lot of attention for some time, he has become rather motivated now that he has a car of his own.

In my senior year of high school, I received one of my most memorable Christmas gifts. Unlike the vast majority of my peers, I had no interest in the latest musical fads by the Beatles or Elvis. My taste was classical, and I had been invited to be the tenor soloist at two separate performances of Handel's *Messiah*, one at a nearby university.

On Christmas morning, I found myself at a loss for words, none of which could have made it past the large lump in my throat anyway, when I opened a present to discover a personal director's copy of the *Messiah*. I can remember vividly, even today, the sense of ownership of something that meant so much to me.

The gift that awaits us as believers should send an invigorating but sobering sense of awe through us. God who loved us enough to forgive us and change us into new creations did not stop there. His design is for

us to have our very own place in the family of faith. We actually belong somewhere.

But there's more.

We also have a purpose in the family.

Who wants to be a spectator? Gifts and ministries and blessings and anointings and enablings energize us to get in the game.

Shifting back to the ball-team analogy, we are not on the sidelines. We're in the game.

And the first and most basic role we have at our disposal is the indescribable privilege of prayer as the natural extension of our relationship with the Father. In His Son we have the model of intercession, and nothing shares the heart of the Father more than a ministry of intercession.

How then can we discover our place in the ministry of intercession?

The short answer: we begin with any and all needs at any level when they are made known to us. Beyond that, the Spirit of God will make clear to His people any specific kind of ministry of intercession to which they may be called. Meanwhile we must remain responsive to the leading of God at any given time.

The Spirit who distributes the spiritual gifts also draws, directs, or calls each of us to areas of service. At times there may be ministry assignments with an affinity to our natural interests and experiences. Such experiences can be the tools through which the Spirit enables us to intercede with empathy. Our interests may be used of the Lord to help us understand the arena in which we serve as intercessors.

An interest in model airplanes has become an avenue of ministry for Don Bowman, one of the staff ministers at Grove City (Ohio) Nazarene church. Other people in the same congregations have a real tie to the Upwards Sports activities that are effective means to serve the community. Various folk may be drawn by the Spirit to become regular intercessors for a children's ministry team. Others may sense a real affinity for specific staff members or specific church ministry events.

Common interests with those in your neighborhood can become bridges of relationship. They may well be the point which God's Spirit uses to nudge you toward a ministry of intercession with which you can relate.

But we cannot assume what appeals to us naturally will automatically correlate with the kind of ministries of intercession to which God may call us. Once we are joined with Christ the newly created person we become is not limited to our natural understanding or interests. Our fresh new selves can and will enjoy spiritually enlivened awareness. The Holy Spirit can just as easily use those new understandings and new experiences as the basis on which our ministry of intercession is anchored.

The usual implication of 2 Corinthians 5:17 about old values and allegiances being laid aside and new ones picked up may actually hint at an added truth, at least by implication. Note the vivid wording of the Amplified Bible Version:

Therefore if any person is [ingrafted] in Christ (the Messiah) he is a new creation (a new creature altogether); the old [previous moral and spiritual condition] has passed away. Behold, the fresh *and* new has come!

The new creation we have become will bring with it fresh interests, emerging alertness, and fresh inner awareness.

Our calling is at the Spirit's initiative. We can trust Him to point us in the direction for which we are best fitted. This is true even when, at first glance, we may not realize how we fit where He places us.

A Need for Caution

There is a need to exercise caution and wisdom when engaging in any ministry, including the ministry of intercession. Our participation in ministry must be based on more than mere zeal.

In Acts 18 we find an inspiring story of a man named Apollos, a native of Alexandria who had been living in Ephesus. The record states that:

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and burning with spiritual zeal, he spoke and taught diligently *and* accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he was acquainted only with the baptism of John (v. 25, AMP).

Priscilla and Aquila, two devout followers of Jesus recognized that as cultured and insightful as Apollos was, he had much to learn. They took it on themselves to bring him up to speed. They apparently took him in "and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (v. 26).

This was a man with true spiritual, even anointed zeal, yet his zeal was not enough. With adequate equipping, he became a notable figure in the history of the first century church.

Consider how inadequate and unreliable *fleshly* zeal would be as a trajectory into any ministry role. Deep sincerity alone can be as unreliable and uncertain as shifting sands. Yet, some ministry organizations, especially high-profile television ministries, often project flashy displays of success and appeals based on the pure carnality of wealth and greed.

With genuine but fleshly zeal, many people have been drawn into such environments. They become disillusioned when it is evident that the only wealth they can see belongs to the illustrious leaders of those ministries.

The enemy certainly can come as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). He can entice energetic believers with the anticipation that an avenue of activity will provide them the promise of the ladder of success. In some cases he even uses a person's noble desire for personal fulfilment through ministry or service.

On more than one occasion Satan has used genuine zeal even for spiritual things to misdirect us along paths that are not part of God's plan for us. When preparing for my first term of service in Papua New Guinea, the mission board approached me about changing my field of service to the West Indies instead. I admit I was tempted. I had been in the West Indies twice on mission crusades, and I knew several of the national leaders. But, as inviting as it was, that was not the impulse of God's leading.

Distorted spiritual vision can also lead to misdirection. There are ample examples of people who have launched into some sort of ministry commitment that was never intended for them. I have known countless people who, out of little more than excitement, made impractical decisions about ministry roles in local churches, and I have seen just as many act just as impetuously in pursuing ministries in more exotic places.

How then can we know if the Holy Spirit is calling us to service or we are being drawn and enticed in a direction that is not of God's choosing?

We could choose to rely on the depth of our feelings, but our feelings can be misdirected. When I was asked to change my field of service from Papua New Guinea (PNG) to the West Indies, my feelings were pulled in more than one direction. I remember asking the Lord for some affirmation of His appointment, and only hours later that same day it came from an unexpected source. A member of the mission board approached me late in the evening and expressed his personal sense of peace about our appointment to PNG. He helped me understand the board's reasoning in requesting us to consider a change, but he felt strongly that the board appointment to PNG was the right choice.

We should be able to expect affirmation from those in spiritual authority over us. In 1 Timothy chapter 5, Paul instructed his young protégé Timothy about leadership choices. Men and women with whom God has entrusted the care of the church are there to provide us with wisdom and insight when we seek direction for our lives and ministries.

Unfortunately in any human endeavors we can get inadequate advice even from church leaders. That makes it all the more important to be careful to choose a leader that shows obvious signs of spiritual maturity.

In the end, as helpful as human affirmation can be, we ultimately seek the Spirit's confirmation.

A few years ago, a church hired a young man as their youth pastor. He had the vigor of youth and the kind of creativity that fits the youth ministry, but he had neither the temperament nor maturity needed. The congregation had failed to heed the lesson of Luke 16:10 that indicates faithfulness in small-scale matters is a sign that God can trust us with greater responsibilities.

Ministries of intercession are no different.

After an insightful seminar on intercession, one of the twenty-somethings was wooed by the Campus Crusade organization and made a personal commitment to pray for that group. Within a short time, she approached her pastor, troubled by her inability to sustain her prayer interest for Bill Bright. She followed his schedule and read the literature they sent to her, but with little sense of fulfillment. Wisely, her pastor chose to channel her interest in prayer toward people in that church who needed an intercessor for their areas of service. The shift of venue proved to be a positive change, allowing her gift of compassion to center on those near enough to hug and lavish her attention.

Our motivation for engaging in a ministry of intercession must come from something more substantial than the quicksand of mere human zealotry. Let our passion be born only out of our relationship with God.

Nothing else will last.

Talking it Over!

Be candid. Have you ever experienced a time when a moment of zealotry sent you off in a direction that eventually you discovered was not a good fit for you? How did that make you feel? What can you do to avoid going down the same road again?

The Alignment Factor: Intercession for Ministry Leaders

Brothers and sisters, pray for us.—Paul the Apostle

The terrain was more challenging than expected, and for the last hour I had been struggling to keep up with the local pastor who was leading us to a village we had not visited before. Normally, he was accommodating and would wait for me to catch up, but for some reason, he seemed to have only one speed, too fast.

I stopped for no more than five minutes, but suddenly was aware that nobody in our group was near. Catching up this time was going to be hard, but in only about ten minutes I realized that I was in real trouble.

The path ahead split into two and headed in different directions. I chose the one that seemed a bit more worn and kept going, but the late afternoon rains began to fall like a wall of water.

In just a couple minutes I was soaked to the skin. And, before I knew it, it was dark. I could barely see a foot in front of me, and I was in the middle of nowhere and alone.

I realized that the sound I heard trying to break through the deafening rain fall was my own voice. It sounded strangely strained and with each passing minute like it must have sounded when I was twelve. Panic gripped at me like an unwelcome bear hug.

Fortunately, that's when I woke up.

The years of missionary service included frequent treks to churches, and since there are no road signs or strategically placed markers, a guide to show the way to any new villages was not optional.

In many ways, the same is true in ministry settings here at home.

In my current place of ministry, I am a follower. I work with the prayer ministries at my church, and it is important that I am in step with my pastor. I have a strong affinity with his vision and leadership style, and we have shared a few conversations about the direction of the church.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about having a drop-in-any-time-and-have-a-cup-of-joe kind of relationship. What I have is better than that.

His vision and his steps of leadership have found a real home in my heart. I am one of his intercessors, and praying for him never approaches the level of a duty. I consider it a genuine compliment when on occasion he remarks “You’re tracking with me.”

Tracking and trekking have one major similarity. They require a willingness to follow a leader.

The Leader

Let’s begin by focusing on the ministry leader and what is required of him or her. If you look at the arduous educational path that is recommended, it would be easy to assume that academic credentials top the list. If you sit in on church board meetings as they consider a ministerial candidate, you might conclude that people skills are at the top of the list. Others might consider business acumen as indispensable. Still others want the minister to be a soul-winner or an evangelist or a cool youth man, or any number of other things.

In our focus on prayer and the ministry, a quote from Stan Toler points to a fundamental truth:

Every ministry leader should be humbled that God would use them in his Kingdom. Ministry alignment with people begins with a prayerful alignment with Almighty God. We must humble ourselves and pray if we expect to be effective in ministry.

Dr. Stan Toler
Bestselling Author and Speaker

That quote has one word that is central to ministry: “begins.” The foundation of any leader’s ministry role is “a prayerful alignment with Almighty God.” In fact, pray is the expression of that alignment. Whatever his relationship with God is will be evidenced in the nature of his prayer life, and thus in his ministry role.

The Leader’s Prayer Life

Barna research reveals that the median amount of prayer time for ministers per day is 30 minutes. “During that time, a typical pastor spends 12 minutes with prayer requests, 8 in quiet time, 7 giving thanks, 7 more in praise, and 5 confessing sin” (Facts & Trends 5/6/05).

I am assuming that “prayer time” is defined as what is often called “personal devotions.” Books are laid aside, phone calls are blocked, and the sign on the study door says, “Do Not Disturb.”

Let me suggest that there is more to prayer life. A leader’s dedicated time alone with the Lord is essential, but if prayer is an extension of his relationship with the Lord, then there are other parts of his day that define his prayer life as well. He experiences enlightenment as he prepares sermons or concentrates on issues affecting those in his ministry. His prayer life is more than his planned moments to enter into the Lord’s presence. It also includes those moments all day long when the Lord presses into the flow of his day.

In reality, that is true for all of us. When I am writing, I am aware that my thoughts are coming from the Lord. Any insight is not because I’m so bright, but because He is speaking and I am listening. When I am watching the news of conflict somewhere in the world, the urgent issue in my mind is the effect on the Church. When I take my walk, the cadence of my steps are in response to a hymn or some music from Sunday morning’s service.

My prayer life is more than the time I set aside to come into His presence. It incorporates those moments when He is nudging my thoughts and sharing His agenda with me all day long.

For the ministry leader, however, there is another dimension to the alignment factor: that unique link with his intercessors. An alignment with called and committed intercessors exponentially alters his prayer life.

Let me illustrate. If someone asks me how I am doing, I have two ways to respond. I can focus on the things that relate only to me like my lumbago (if I had lumbago) and my writing routine, for example. That would be measuring the quality of my life by focusing only on myself.

But I am not by myself. I am married and my wife and I are one. The quality of my life cannot be accurately defined without factoring in what we are experiencing in this special union we have. God designed it that way. I am not complete without her, so why would I try to define my journey in life without the alignment I have with her.

Just as marriage is a relationship designed by God for the purpose of bringing two people into a unique alignment, there is also a uniqueness to the alignment that takes place between the leader and his intercessors. Intercession is a relationship prescribed by God, and its purpose is intended to bring two people into a relationship or an alignment that in a mystical way blends two prayer lives together. It is not like human companionship, as close as that can be at times, but rather a divinely orchestrated alignment of faith and relationship. The intercessor stands united with the ministry

leader, shares his vision, carries his burdens, and unites with his faith. This is indeed a unifying alignment.

Two prayer lives are blended before the Lord who calls both the leader and the intercessor to this relationship, chords woven together by God's own design.

I am not overstating this issue at all. Intercession is a ministry that reflects the heart of the Lord Himself, and when He takes our requests and brings them to the Father, He is choosing to align Himself with us before the Father. As we respond to His call to ministry either as the ministry leader or the intercessor, we are engaged in a relationship defined by His model as our Great Intercessor.

The role of the leader is to assume responsibility to provide appropriate information that allows an intercessor to stand as one with him. Momentarily we will look at different kinds of intercessors, but regardless of the level of intercession, the calling is for leader and intercessor to be aligned in the ministry of prayer.

The Intercessor

As an intercessor you are called by God to align yourself spiritually with that leader's ministry and pray for him as if that ministry need is your own. To the degree that you know his needs, your assignment is to give yourself to owning those needs personally.

There's nothing casual or passive about intercession. Your prayer for the leader God has placed in your line of vision should be as if you are asking God for your own enabling. Your faith is to be as lavish for his needs as it would be for your own.

There are, however, different levels of personal intercession. Those engaged in pastoral or leadership capacities certainly have people who pray for them on a regular basis, but not all of them are personal acquaintances. Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse, for example, undoubtedly has people all over the world who pray for him. They sincerely feel the importance of his ministry and are drawn to pray for him often, even regularly. Only a very small percentage of Franklin Graham's intercessors have ever met him or know him on a personal level.

In contrast, a local pastor's intercessory support is made up of people who know him at least to some degree. They may not all be personal friends, but they are at least generally familiar with him and his official roles and tasks. Others may know him on a more active level or even a personal level. The nature of the intercessor's relationship with a leader

has a significant bearing on the kind of intercessory ministry he or she will have.

I remember one class session at Fuller Seminary when C. Peter Wagner had just returned from a visit with John Maxwell. Wagner spent considerable time discussing the intercessory ministry that surrounded John. The whole occasion drew Wagner's attention to the varied kinds of intercessors and the different ways a leader relates to them. Wagner, in his typical analytical approach, began labeling intercessors on an "I" scale (I=Intercessor).

Departing from Wagner's three levels of intercessors, we will look at four levels of intercessory ministry and how they differ.

Let's begin with the I-4 intercessors. This is the most distant in terms of relationship. The I-4s have no relationship with the person for whom they pray, but their faithfulness to God's call to intercede is nevertheless significant. Generally, I-4s provide a broad base of prayer covering for a leader's ministry. Their intercession is based on general and public knowledge of that leader's activities. They pray for such matters as the leader's safety, spiritual guidance and blessing, and overall receptivity to the leader's ministry. This kind of intercession provides a broad but important foundation for that ministry.

In contrast, the I-3 intercessors may be people who have benefited in some specific way from the ministry of that leader. Looking again at Franklin Graham's ministry, I would be an I-4. I have only been to one Crusade and am glad for the experience. Although I have never been personally affected by his ministry, I follow the information about his organization in a general way and pray for their effectiveness.

An I-3, however, will likely have more than a general sense of affinity to that ministry. They may be aware of such things as the ministry organizational structure and general operation, the decision making process, and scheduled events. They probably receive regular newsletters and e-news in which specific needs and plans are shared. They know the names of at least some of those who serve with that leader.

While the I-3s are not personal friends nor have social interaction with the leaders, they may feel a leading of God to intercede primarily for the leader rather than the ministry organization. This may also be the case with a local pastor, a specific local ministry leader in a local church, or someone outside the local church like a missionary or church planter. It may even be the leader of a parachurch ministry.

If the leader's ministry is in a para-church organization like Campus Crusade for Christ or World Vision, for example, it may be that the I-3 intercessors affinity comes from a family member or friend who had been

personally affected by the ministry. They may have even shared in some general short-term service opportunities with those ministry activities.

But few of these I-3s have had any personal interaction with those leaders for whom they intercede regularly. They “keep up” with the general profile of the ministry’s activities more regularly than the general public. They may even sense a connection because of the influence of the organization on their own lives or family.

The I-3’s focus may even be on his or her own pastor or pastoral staff. These leaders’ schedules, service times and general areas of responsibility are known to the I-3, but they know the leader only on a casual basis at best.

A leader may have many I-3 intercessors who are used of God to provide a kind of blanket of intercession that generally affects the leader’s life more directly than the I-4s.

I am an I-3 intercessor for one of the staff pastors at my church. We know each other casually, and because this is a large church, we greet each other only on occasion. I have had lunch once or twice with him in the last 17 years, but otherwise I am not part of his everyday social network.

More than seventeen years ago, the Lord brought him to my mind often, and I began to pray regularly for him. Until about a year ago, he was probably unaware that I had been praying for him in any special measure. Differences in age and interests simply do not lend themselves to any kind of social relationship even today, but my calling has been to pray regularly for him. I am not aware of the specific nitty-gritty issues he faces on a daily basis. I am not aware of any health issues other than what the rest of the church knows. I do not need to be privy to any specifics about spiritual valleys he may be facing. But I do know the nature of his assignment, and I have been in the professional ministry myself, so I am aware of the kinds of stresses he experiences.

Leaders also need I-2 intercessors who know them more than just casually. The I-2s have been placed in the leader’s life as part of the Spirit’s design to bring support and encouragement on a fairly regular basis.

These I-2 intercessors probably see the leader on a fairly regular basis beyond the public ministry role. They may know the leader’s family or have some regular interaction with that leader. For whatever reason they spend enough time with the leader that they have developed some kind of ongoing although not necessarily an intimate relationship.

There will not be many I-2 intercessors. God has provided the leader with this tighter circle of relationship so that when there are personal as well as ministry issues, there will be a substantial base of knowledgeable intercession.

When my pastor went through his rotator cuff surgery, I knew to pray for him and his recover. I could pray for him to have the physical stamina for his responsibilities, but I am not an I-2 intercessor. There were others closer to him, those who go to dinner with him or share particular hobbies or interest with him who probably saw with more clarity the struggle he faced to keep up with his normal schedule.

The leader is comfortable enough and responsive to this level of relationship that he can count on the I-2s to share his particular passion about a writing assignment or a phase of administrative responsibilities that is especially pressing. He can trust them as friends to understand that he is stressed, and he may even provide an email or a phone message to his I-2s with the need for urgent prayer support.

God's role for the I-2s is quite obvious. The leader needs more than the general prayer support for the official needs related to his ministry. The I-2s can respond to many day-to-day matters and stand in the gap for the leader's more immediate ministry needs as well as some personal needs. These may be issues that the leader shares with them or the kind of things they observe through their interactions. God's call to I-2 intercessors necessitates an attentive ear both to the leader as well as to the Holy Spirit.

Next come the I-1s.

Finally there is the inner circle intercessors. Every leader must seek clear direction from God about who should fill this unique and critical role in his or her life. The I-1s have access to the leader on a more intimate basis. The inner circle may only include two or three people. Even if larger, the inner circle is a limited and exclusive group.

These will be people who have been invited into such a relationship. They are the ones with whom a leader can entrust even his or her personal cares and burdens. The inner circle intercessors will be those who understand that confidentiality is never to be violated, and the leader knows that he or she can share almost anything related to ministry as well as personal needs with an I-1.

The only areas that are off limits to I-1s are the ones that are reserved for a leader and a spouse. Next to a relationship with Christ, the marriage relationship and the family ties require the highest priority.

It is not uncommon that most intercessors are women. C. Peter Wagner made that observation as he began to analyze the subject of intercessory prayer many years ago. He reasons that women may have a different degree of sensitivity that allows them to hear from the Lord. This may be something like a spiritual version of "woman's intuition," and provides a different degree of insight. Whether Wagner is right or not about that, the gender factor must not go unnoticed regarding intercessors, and especially the I-1s.

Gender differences in this level of relationship require wisdom. No leader should be in a room or even on the phone with an I-1 intercessor of another gender without a spouse there or on the line. Not only does this honor the relationship with the spouse as the ultimate ministry partner, but it provides an assurance that there is no appearance of inappropriateness in the I-1 relationship.

God's calling to I-1 intercession is totally unique. The I-1s may have a kind of advisory role in relationship to the leader. Their bond with the leader is such that from time to time they may have insight from the Spirit that the leader needs. That insight may be a confirmation of some kind that helps affirm a leader's decision. It may even come as a measure of accountability.

The one constant, however, is that the I-1 is fully submitted to the leader's authority.

But How Are We to Pray When We Do Not Know Specific Requests

As a missionary, we often received letters from people who said they were praying for us. I tried to keep our supporters aware of specific issues. There were scheduled ministry activities and definite responsibilities for which we asked for prayer. And there were leaders who needed prayer for wisdom and protection.

But if the kids were sick, we had no way to notify people that they needed prayer. Those were the days before internet, email, or Skype. Yet we would get letters from people who specified dates and even times when they had felt an urging in their spirits to stop and pray.

There were also details about our ministry roles that were confidential in nature, and not the kind of thing that can be shared with the general public, so we simply had to trust the Holy Spirit to provide the wisdom or strength needed. Yet we would hear from those who told us how they had been led to pray, and although they could not have known, their prayer was in line with those issues.

We just simply do not always know how to pray specifically, so how do we pray when we do not know the specific needs?

Since prayer is the expression and evidence of our relationship with the Lord, we can always begin with the posture of praise and thanksgiving. We can speak words of gratitude for the way God is using someone's life or ministry. We can add our own requests for peace and strength and wisdom and power to rest in fresh measure on that person's life.

There is, however, direction from the scriptures that give some general structure for this kind of intercession. In Colossians 1:9-11 Paul unfolds a pattern of prayer that is always appropriate for anyone.

Let me note a bit of a disclaimer here. The importance of these verses was shared many years ago by someone else, and I have never forgotten them. Unfortunately my notes no longer exist, and I cannot recall who that was. But this passage should prove beneficial, even impactful, for those engaged in the ministry of intercession at any level, but especially for those who are general intercessors.

[The translation of the verses below come from The Voice, a modern English translation developed by Thomas Nelson Publishers that provides what is known as a “dynamic equivalent” rendering of the scriptures. They have carefully examined the scripture in its original languages, noted the intent of the message on the people to whom they were given and then expressed that message in a way that is intended to provide the equivalent image and import to us in our day and age.]

These verses reveal the way Paul was praying for the church in Colossae and the translators of The Voice have inserted a heading in bold font that highlights the nature of the verses that follow.

Since the day we got this good news about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We ask:

This is a prayer for knowledge and insight that only can come from God.

Father, may they clearly know Your will and achieve *the height and depth of* spiritual wisdom and understanding. May their lives be a credit to You, Lord; and *what's more*, may they continue to delight You by doing every good work and growing in the true knowledge that comes from being close to You. Strengthen them with Your infinite power, according to Your glorious might, so that they will have everything they need to hold on and endure hardship patiently and joyfully.

If we break that down to specific prayer points, we can intercede effectively even when we do not know particular needs. With each prayer point, there is a sample prayer provided just to get your own spirit primed to embrace that point as you pray.

We are to pray that the leader will...

... understand God's will

Lord, let my pastor walk close to You today, close enough that Your desires are evident and provide direction. May his mind and heart gain understanding and clarity about what Your word reveals regarding Your divine purposes and desires.

... have greater wisdom and understanding

Lord, I ask that my pastor will enjoy wisdom and understanding this week for the various kinds of situations he will face and decisions he has to make. Give him the blessing of insight to see the issues clearly and to know the steps to take that bring glory to You.

... live their lives so as to be a credit to the Lord

Lord God, please let my pastor be attentive this week to the opportunities Provide him opportunity to honor You and put You on display for others to see. Let others see You and recognize Your grace through his words and actions this week.

... even be a delight to Him

Lord, may my pastor's life and activities this week and every week bring joy to You. May you find delight in the way he discovers day by day how much he depends on You and how he turns to You for his strength and defense and comfort and sense of security.

... excel in every good work

Lord, let the work of his hands this week bring results that go beyond his own expectations. Bring fruit from his labor and no matter what he faces or what task comes his way, may he realize that his efforts are remarkable because You have blessed them to Yourself.

... grow in true knowledge that comes from being close to God

Lord, may this week be filled with an unusual awareness of Your presence and may he discover one more time the wonder

of intimacy with You and the insights and nuances of truth that are made evident from his walk with You.

... be strengthened with God's power

Lord, I ask that a fresh measure of Your power will be granted to him. Let him find new depths of strength for each day, that kind of inner strength that lifts his head high and enables him to stand even when he faces what he knows in his own strength is too heavy.

... and have everything they need to patiently and joyfully endure

Lord, in every aspect of his life and ministry and relationships and dreams I ask that he be filled with a measure of patience and joy to keep him moving forward. Let him not grow weary or impatient with himself, but to realize that Your timing is impeccable and that Your Spirit is attentive to every need he has. Fill him with fresh joy to replace the burdensome matters that may flood in on him from time to time.

You may not be an inner circle intercessor, but there isn't a leader anywhere who would not be blessed to have someone praying this way for him or her every day.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Is anyone in your group engaged in the ministry of personal intercession? In what I-category do they function? Share your experience about how you became a personal intercessor. Share any insights you have gained from this ministry.
- 2) Have you ever sensed a need to pray for someone with no apparent reason? Share your experience about how you knew you needed to pray. Did you have a general impression of what the need might be? Did you ever find out why or what the need was?

How to Intercede for Worship Events

Bear up the hands that hang down, by faith and prayer. Support the tottering knees. Storm the throne of grace and preserver therein, and mercy will come down.

John Wesley

A few years ago, before I started attending my current church, I was in transition and a friend ask me if I would like to go to his church the next Sunday. He was an impressive man, broad shoulders, commanding voice and one of the kindest men I had ever met. His character and spirit was a real draw and I agreed.

He told me to be there an hour early, and I am glad I was “on time” by his plan. This church did something I did not expect. A full half hour before the worship service was scheduled to start, they shut the doors. If you were not inside the sanctuary, you were left standing in the hallways or wherever until they opened the doors again to let you in.

That half hour was prayer time. When those doors shut, all casual conversation stopped. Without a special signal of any kind, people began to pray.

On my first visit, I actually did not do much praying. The atmosphere was charged with the presence of God, and I needed to observe. So while I spent those minutes in the spirit of prayer, my conscious decision to watch and pray was a powerful experience.

Some walked up and down aisles or across the front with hands raised to God. Other bowed at their seats or in the aisle, pouring their hearts out before the Lord. A few even broke out in song, a private song between them and the Lord.

Do I have to tell you what the level of expectation was when the worship service began? Can you imagine what it was like for that pastor to step into his pulpit? His messages were clearly anointed.

But that was not all.

During the service in a room to the side of the platform were a dozen men who spent the entire worship time in prayer. Every part of the service was the focus of intense intercession.

In the last chapter, our focus was on personal intercession, especially for Christian leaders. It may seem a bit odd to say, but praying for a worship event is an extension of personal intercession for the worship leaders and pastors.

Ask any pastor or evangelist or church leader what the most pressing need is in his ministry calendar and whatever his or her response may be, there will be three things that will almost always be mentioned. One will be those times when the leader is faced with moments of confrontation and interaction with difficult people. Another will be time of monumental decisions. And the third will be the worship service. But not necessarily in that order.

The pastor and worship leaders all confess that they long for the worship event to be saturated with prayer. Some intercession for worship events takes place during the week. But the more concentrated and perhaps more effective form of intercession will take place concurrently with the worship event. The half hour before the scheduled worship service in that church I attended for a while was unmistakably a part of the worship event itself, as well as those men praying in the side room.

In a way, these intercessors should be considered as a functional part of the worship team. Just as some lead the music and others preach or highlight the ministries of the church in the coming week, the intercessor who is ministering concurrently with the service is actively engaged in the event, and it is not uncommon that the intercessor may have a special awareness of the mind of the Lord for that event.

This kind of intercession requires real commitment and the ability to pray for sustained amounts of time.

A minister friend once shared that he had looked forward to his visit to a prominent church known for its emphasis on prayer. While there he spent time in their special prayer center and clearly felt a surge of awe and reverence.

He spoke of being lost in prayer for what seemed the longest time, only to discover that a mere twenty minutes had passed. The problem was that the hundreds of regular attenders were still praying, so he waited quietly. The wave of prayer lasted for more than two hours, and he went away with an acute awareness of how impoverished his prayer life really was. He stated that this single event changed his spiritual journey more than any other in his life.

The vast majority of American Christians can hardly imagine praying for two hours, barring some extraordinarily high spiritual moment. So, when they consider praying for the full hour and a half or perhaps even longer during a worship event, the idea can seem genuinely intimidating.

Perhaps part of the problem is our concept of prayer itself. The most common method of praying seems to go something like this: get off in a quiet place, close my eyes to shut out any distractions (except for intermittent moments when I read the scripture or look at my prayer list), and begin working my way through my list of requests.

For the kind of praying that is needed to intercede for a worship event, that model may not be all that productive. A more effective model is one in which the intercessor is a participant in the event.

In my local church, we have a service on Saturday evening and two on Sunday morning. My assignment is to intercede for the Saturday evening worship. That's what I sensed God asked me to do, and with few exceptions that's what I am doing from 6:00 p.m. to about 7:15 p.m. There is a prayer room at our church and the service can be seen on the television screen. Because of some physical limitations for now, however, I am streaming the service over the internet.

Even off site, I am a participant. I may sing the songs, but most of the time I am embracing the message of the music as I pause to add my request that the words would find a place of impact in the lives of all those in the service. As the announcements are made, I am praying that God will touch hearts so that programs and events have enough volunteers or that those that need to be there will be drawn to it. Throughout the service, my constant "amen" is interspersed with more targeted requests as the Spirit impresses me.

I tell you that so you will know that what follows comes from my purposeful observations and practices. Hopefully, as you read you will begin to see yourself taking an intercessory role during a worship event.

Here are some suggestions that will make your intercession during worship more effective.

- 1) Eyes open. Hopefully you will be in or near the worship event and are able to see or at least hear what is going on. Intercession of this kind is best accomplished as a participant, not as a spectator.

The only difference is that your role makes you part of the worship team. Your assignment may not be to lead singing or manage the audio system. But you are there to be part of the connection that the event has with the power and presence of God Himself.

- 2) The music can be sung by others, but you can pray the message of the songs. The words of the worship music should be sung to the Lord, and you can do just that, That is indeed prayer. Not only

are you participating in the worship, but you are honoring the Lord and inviting His presence into your experience as a kind of intercessory surrogate on behalf of all those present.

The joy with which you sing allows your heart to raise to the Lord your desire that those words will ring deeply in each heart and that each will be open to His voice in the message of the songs.

- 3) Announcements and offerings can become occasions of seeking the blessing of the Lord on those who serve and give. Perhaps even more importantly, this is a time to intercede on behalf of those who have been touched by the church locally or internationally. We can ask God to let the seeds that have been sown to bear fruit in abundance for the Kingdom.
- 4) The congregational prayer time provides at least two dimensions of intercession. One is to be the “Yea and Amen” to the prayer being offered in the service. The other is a prayer on behalf of those present that God’s Spirit would minister great grace to each of them. Ask the Lord to touch them at their point of felt need and bless them with receptive hearts during the message.
- 5) During the message, let the intercession include a patterned imaging of the sanctuary. Let your mind visualize each section of the sanctuary as you pray for those in that section to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking specifically to them through the message.

Before you mentally move to another section, begin to listen to the Holy Spirit and ask Him if there is any specific way you should pray. This is a form of a word of knowledge not intended to be shared except with the Lord. You may sense that someone is in need of healing, or in despair and needs fresh faith. As you learn to hear the Spirit speaking to you, you may find that He even brings specific people to mind who need your prayer of intercession.

These are some guidelines for interceding during the extended time of the worship event. But you may become aware of other ways the Spirit will awaken within you to make this time of intercession meaningful.

You will find it useful to have a notebook with you and take notes on any particular insight or sense of anointing you may experience. You can

also record questions that may arise, as well as any distracting thoughts that interrupt your prayer time such as a note to call someone or make an appointment through the week.

If there are specific ways in which you have felt led to pray, record them. This log could be instrumental in documenting answers to prayer at a later time, as well as any debriefing sessions that pastor or pastoral staff might have from time to time.

I have on occasion shared with my pastor some specific sense of anointing or some impression of what God was doing. For example, on one occasion, when the pastor announced his topic, I was suddenly and unexplainably overcome with weeping. His message was directed as the need for us to experience the holiness of God, and apparently my experience was a confirmation of how much we needed to hear that message.

For those intercessors who are not able to be physically near or in the worship event, make use of the imaging idea during the time of the event. Find a worship song that invites the Holy Spirit into the moment or a praise song that is especially meaningful to you and begin your intercession in a spirit of submission to the Lord as one standing in for the congregation. Visualize the sanctuary and speak blessing and anointing, and again listen to the Spirit's voice. Keep notes as well. You may not be there to hear and see the event, but your ministry of intercession can be every bit as effective and meaningful as that of those who are present.

Intercession in Preparation for Special Worship or Evangelistic Events

The focus for these paragraphs is on those events that have special or distinctive objectives to minister to the community at large. This could be a seasonal event at your local church or an evangelistic outreach event or even something like a Billy Graham crusade. Such ministry occasions have great potential to grow the Kingdom, but without deliberate intercession can all too easily fail to achieve their purposes.

Intercession of this kind is often called *warfare prayer*. The intent is to intercede for those in the community who have yet to discover the wonder of grace. Their daily lives are resistant to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and indeed many may actually have such little spiritual light that they live in virtual ignorance of God and his love for them.

The purpose of intercession here is to prepare the way for the message of hope and grace. Prayer strategies for these events will vary, but in all cases the intent is to intercede for the receptivity level of the community to measurably increase.

There are many available sources for prayer strategies. I have only listed a few with minimal explanation.

Neighborhood prayer walks

Neighborhood prayer walks can be part of corporate plans for prayer emphasis or just as easily be a personal ministry strategy. Marion Conning, a lay person at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene with a heart for prayer, decided that since she already walked her neighborhood for exercise, she would intentionally pray for each home as she walked. In a relatively short time, the Lord seemed to engineer divine appointments with neighbors who would be outdoors as she walked by. She would greet them and promise to pray for them, especially for issues that they had shared. Eventually some even began attending a Bible study in her home.

Prayer Canvassing

Prayer Canvassing is similar to the neighborhood prayer walk, except that this is usually a planned strategy with people assigned to certain blocks. The goal may be to canvas an entire target town or select sections of town. No one walks alone, but the target area is to be covered by teams of two or three. Hopefully at least one of them has the gift of discernment, but even if that is not the case, they can learn to hear from the Spirit as they walk.

What they are trying to discern is the dominant sin or sins of an area. This reveals strongholds of the enemy that can then be targeted by intercession teams to break strongholds and increase receptivity in the area.

Prayer mapping

The goal of prayer mapping is to glean from the demographics of an area the spiritual needs and strongholds. Teams gather historical information as well as current business profiles, income levels, crime rates, and educational and employment data.

Historical records may provide information that can reveal residual spiritual issues that may not be evident anymore. If a section of town has had a significant presence of prostitution in the past, there may very well be a stronghold of low self-worth and

immorality. Areas of Los Angeles, for example, had historically been strewn with gambling facilities, and one mapping exercise found that there was still a residual spiritual stronghold of greed. A history of the occult, lethal criminal activity, or political corruption (just to name a few examples) can signal residual spiritual influences that indicate strongholds. The same is true of current activities, current educational profiles, and any other current characteristic.

This particular approach may seem a little sophisticated until you begin to realize that the Spirit of God is the one who will make all things clear. This does not require special educational credentials or investigative skills, because God can bring to light the spiritual profiles that are needed by the church to pray effectively for any events planned there.

Unity prayer campaigns

One of the most powerful ways to change the personality of a neighborhood may be the dynamic of unity among believers. This may be especially true where racial tensions are particularly strong. As the Church demonstrates that believers of different ethnic origins can come together in genuine acceptance and love, the strongholds of hatred can begin to melt away and spiritual receptivity increase.

Such campaigns should be highly publicized, and hopefully be an ongoing part of the Body Life in that area.

Let me add that any of these or other prayer strategies should take place under the spiritual authority of those who are leaders in the Church or any given segment of it. Laity who catch a vision for this should consult with their pastors or prayer ministry directors in their churches. Mapping may uncover much that needs the benefit of leadership perspectives and oversight in order to respond effectively.

In addition, the nature of mapping strategies can expose participants to the influences and attacks of the enemy. For that reason, participants need to be under authority and in many cases have intercessors to provide spiritual cover for them.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Discuss the possibility of interceding for a coming worship event in pairs or teams within your group. Choose one service a month for a while. When you've done that, journal your thoughts including any difficulties you may have experienced. Talk about those at some point when your group meets and get suggestions.
- 2) There are many good resources about spiritual mapping that you might consider for your group. Target a neighborhood and commit as a group to intercede for that part of town.
- 3) Pray as a group about becoming a partner with another group from a church that is racially or ethnically different than yours. Let your plans include some public events that allows the community to see unity at work.

Keeping “The Main Thing” in Sight: Intercession for the Lost

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing

—Stephen Covey

Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* has become a virtual classic in contemporary Christian literature, so much so that comparatively few people are aware that before that book, he wrote another, *The Purpose Driven Church*.

Warren is not the only person who has focused in on the purpose of the Church. Several years earlier, a notable missiologist named Charles E. van Engen authored *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church*. About that same time, Mike Nappa gave us *Who Moved My Church: A Story about Discovering Purpose in a Changing Culture*. And almost 20 years before Warren’s explosive appearance into Christian writing, one Charles Swindoll (later shortened to Swindoll) provided *Church: Purpose, Profile, Priorities*.

The focus on why the Church exists and what its mission is supposed to be has been explored by many in a variety of forms. The reason should be obvious. The Church seems all too prone to getting sidetracked. A Stephen Covey quote from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* needs to be plastered on the walls of every church and hung around the necks of every member:

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

Of course, that begs the question, “What is the main thing?” The main thing for God’s people is the same as it is for God:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9, emphasis added).

Can there be any doubt that redemption is the agenda of eternity? God loved so much that He gave His Son to die for the sins of the whole world (John 3:16). And the Son Himself participated willingly in the plan, giving Himself (1 John 3:16).

How can the Church have any different agenda?

Almost involuntarily, my mind makes a mad dash back across the years to that personal evangelism class and the witnessing plans, including the Four Spiritual Laws. And how could we ever forget the dreaded mandatory door-knocking known as soul-winning assignments each week.

Apparently, Paul knew God's eternal purpose, yet his instructions related to that purpose don't seem to mention soul-winning.

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. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

Paul wants us to realize that it is God's purpose that everyone knows the truth. His truth leads to holy and godly lives. The strategy to accomplish His purpose is for us to pray in harmony with His redemptive purpose.

Clearly these verses highlight those in authority, because they affect social order. Part of our prayer for a peaceful, holy life includes praying for those in leadership to foster the kind of social directions that make peaceful living possible.

Romans 13:1 tells us that "there is no authority except that which God has established." His intention has always been for authorities to govern in a way that is consistent with His purposes. Yet history is replete with examples of those who have acted outside of God's desires.

Paul says we are to pray for leaders so that we can live peaceable lives. He was well aware that there are times when that will not happen. After all, he was beaten and jailed by ruling authorities who did not embrace the truth of Christ. Yet we are to pray for those in leadership that God's redemptive agenda will nevertheless influence them and their decisions. The Nebuchadnezzars of the world can still be instruments of God to accomplish God's purpose.

As important as that is, we are not to get sidetracked here. The whole discussion about society and its leaders serves as the background for understanding the need for everyone to live as God intended. The central

message of this passage is that our prayer is to be in harmony with God's redemptive agenda in our world.

The most important part of this message is the link between peaceful living and quiet lives on the one hand and godliness and holiness on the other. As God is allowed to share His holiness with us, we are then able to experience wholeness. Peace (i.e. shalom) is not merely the absence of conflict, but the authentic experience of grace that restores us to a place of completeness which was lost in Eden.

This chapter is about being intercessors for the salvation of those who have not yet come to know the life-altering grace of God. Romans 10:1 gives us a glimpse of how the Apostle Paul worked that out in his own life:

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.

Bob Huffaker, the former pastor of Grove City (Ohio) Church of the Nazarene, had a signature motto: Lost people matter most. The church that is truly one with the purpose of God will make redemption their signature banner. The believer who shares His redemptive agenda will have indeed become transformed by truth.

Again, prayer evidences and expresses our relationship with God, acknowledging His Kingdom authority over every aspect of our lives. Therefore, a prayer life that does not include intercession for the lost would be a complete anomaly.

How then do we intercede for salvation?

Focus on the Urgency of the Harvest

I can think of no place better to start than with Matthew 9:37a - 38.

The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.

How vivid an image these words paint! Unfortunately the true sense of the harvest process is lost on many who have never been closer to a farm than the freeway that cuts through it.

The reference to harvest implies that there has been a growing season in which planting and caring filled each day. Every task was performed with anticipation of a mature crop and the celebration of the harvest.

When the time was right, the farming community often came together. Unlike the sowing and tending of the fields, the harvest was especially labor-intensive. The crop was collected, winnowed, and bundled. Last, the product was prepared for market.

Nothing could cause more concern than to have too few people for the harvest days. There was the risk of grain rotting, uncollected in the fields or of gathered crops left unattended.

Jesus uses that picture to call for us to ask the Lord of the harvest for sufficient workers for the enormous task that the harvest represents. His instructions are especially significant in light of His own intentions recorded in chapter 11 to send disciples out into a harvest of their own.

There was another occasion in which Jesus directed His followers to be engaged in the harvest. Those words are found in Matthew 28:19b - 20a.

[M]ake disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

I suspect someone is saying right now, “Wait! What happened to the command to go?” Actually the word *go* is not in the grammatical form of a command. More literally, those words in verse 19 are best translated “in your going.” The commands are *make disciples*, *baptize*, and *teach*. Note that *make disciples* points us to the harvest itself, and the other two commands indicate the post-gathering activities that come with harvesting.

Engel and Norton in their book *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest* note that churches seem to have lost the ability to harvest. In a notebook from my seminary days, I have what is called the Engel Scale. He defines evangelism as a process on a scale that starts wherever a lost person may be in his or her understanding of the Gospel. The scale moves closer and closer to the encounter with the Cross, the point of decision. It then moves right through the harvest point, to the post-gathering tasks of orienting people to their new life, incorporating them into the body of Christ. Finally it helps them to grow to the point they are part of the reproductive process. Any kind of harvest that does not include these post-gathering matters falls short of genuine evangelism.

So, as God's people who share His redemptive agenda, we are to pray for laborers for the harvest.

Pray for Receptivity

In Luke 8:5 - 8b we find another agriculturally-oriented parable. This time the farmer is not harvesting. The focus is on the other end of the process.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

Jesus went on in verses 11 - 15 to explain the parable to His disciples, noting first that the seed is the Word of God. The issue is what happens to the seed once it is sown. Farmers walked the field, tossing the seed along the way. While some of it fell on good soil, Jesus wants us to know that not all does.

The enemy comes to some people and prohibits the truth from even being around long enough to start taking root. Other times, the truth even begins to settle in on someone, but when some rough times crowd into their lives, they fail to invest anything in the process. So truth just dies from neglect. Then there are those on whom truth has had at least an initial impact, but worry and distractions, including the allure of pleasure and convenience, choke out the truth.

This is all about receptivity. Whether we are talking about people-groups around the world or your neighbor next door, receptivity is a major factor influencing the measure of the harvest.

The natural tendency is to have more interest in ministry environments and mission endeavors of high-profile activities that report how multitudes are coming to faith in Christ. Financial support is clearly easier to garner when the investment is showing a return. The same is true for enlisting people to pray.

Think about it. People will still faithfully pray for the mission organization that reports a full schedule, multiple programs, and a healthy staff, even when the target group is only modestly responding. But let reports pour in about a great move of the Spirit and a growing number of believers, and the interest intensifies, because there is a natural interest in success.

Note that I have referred to *natural tendency* and *natural interest*. But for our discussion of intercession, this cannot be about what comes naturally. The ministry of intercession is not acting in the natural but the supernatural. A heart to intercede comes from the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

It may not be the most natural thing to do, but it is entirely possible that the planting and tending part of a ministry needs special commitments of intercession in which we pray that what hinders receptivity will be removed.

Paul spoke in 2 Corinthians 4:3 - 4 about the hindrance of spiritual blindness.

If there is anything hidden about our message, it is hidden only to someone who is lost. The god who rules this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers. They cannot see the light, which is the good news about our glorious Christ, who shows what God is like (CEV).

One of the ways we can intercede for the lost is to pray that their spiritual blindness will be ended.

Physical blindness is commonly thought to be a condition of the eye. That is called *ocular blindness*. The eye is damaged and does not process light as it was designed to do.

But not all blindness is an eye issue. Some blindness actually is a problem in the brain. This is called *cortical blindness*. Cortical blindness is a dysfunction of the cortex in the brain. The eye can actually be totally healthy, but the occipital lobe of the cortex that processes vision may simply not work.

The dysfunction of the occipital lobe may come in one of two forms: acquired or congenital. Trauma caused by outside forces or disease can result in the occipital lobe losing its ability to do what it was designed to do. Thus the condition is acquired. On the other hand, the congenital form is something passed on at birth.

Spiritual blindness is congenital in nature. From our original parents we inherited our spiritual blindness.

Acquired cortical blindness may only be temporary. A traumatic thump on the head has been known to restore the ability of the brain to process vision.

That is not the case with congenital cortical blindness. There is some conjecture in medical research that brain mapping could eventually evolve

in a way that might prove beneficial to this form of blindness. Short of a divine miracle, that condition is incurable.

The spiritual application needs to begin with Ecclesiastes 3:11.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

I admit, for a long time I read this verse, and it seemed to be three almost disconnected statements. If you change the order of those thoughts, however, you get a whole different look.

- 3) No human mind has the capacity to understand what the hand of God has put in place. ("No one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.")
- 2) Yet, He wants us at least to see the beauty of His handiwork. ("He has made everything beautiful in its time.")
- 1) That is only possible, because God placed something within us that awakens us to what He has created. The sense of the eternal enables us to see the beauty of His handiwork and recognize the reality of who He is. ("He has also set eternity in the human heart.")

The Apostle Paul points to the same truth in Romans 1:19 - 20 when he speaks of those who attempt to crush the truth with their wickedness:

They know everything that can be known about God, because God has shown it all to them. God's eternal power and character cannot be seen. But from the beginning of creation, God has shown what these are like by all he has made. That's why those people don't have any excuse.

That tells us that we have to have spiritual eyes to see truth. But the sinful condition with which we come into this world is like the congenital cortical blindness. This will not be changed by anything less than the miraculous work of God Himself. When His grace and power touch our spirits, we are enabled to perceive what the eyes of our hearts have been able to see all along, only we could not understand it.

As intercessors, we have the privilege of praying for all people to be healed of their inner blindness. Our prayer is that what God gave them

spiritual eyes to see will in fact be seen and recognized. We pray for an awakening, the kind that accelerates receptivity.

Pray Persistently

In chapter 9 the idea of praying with tenacity was mentioned briefly, but this is a point that is worth revisiting.

Interceding for someone's salvation may require persistence. If experience teaches us anything, we should realize that the Holy Spirit is faithful and persistent in His pursuit of us.

Nevertheless, human beings under the influence of the enemy are resistant to grace. Stephen encountered this resistance as he stood before the religious council:

You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? (Acts 7:51a, NLT)

The battle for our souls is at the very heart of the conflict between God and Satan, and nothing is of greater importance than the outcome. There can be no question that the Holy Spirit is both patient and persistent in His effort to bring us to salvation.

As intercessors we will certainly be led of the Spirit to persist in our desire to see the salvation of those for whom we have been entrusted to pray. Jesus once told a parable in Luke 18 about persistence in asking. The point of His story was that our human requests at times fall on deaf ears as evidenced by the judge who was not responsive. Notice that even on the natural level we assume that persistence pays off.

The point is not that we have persuaded God, but rather that God is not at all like the resistant judge. When we ask, we must realize that He is not resistant to us.

Many things remain mysteries to us, and this is one of them. If God is not resistant to our requests, then why is there a need to persist? The answer: There is an enemy who persists in trying to defeat us and interfering with the purposes of God.

The Prophet Daniel's prayer for the future of the nation went unanswered for three weeks. The messenger of the Lord had been dispatched the very day Daniel began to pray, but the angel ran into resistance.

Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer. But for twenty-one

days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the archangels, came to help me, and I left him there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia. Now I am here (Daniel 10:12b - 14a, NLT).

This was no small battle. It required the archangel Michael to run interference. The territorial spirit that ruled over Persia was powerful enough to block God's messenger for a while.

We will need to persevere because the battle is still being waged. As agents of God's grace, we are a part of the Spirit's persistence to bring people to a new allegiance to God's kingdom authority.

Talking it Over!

- 1) Discuss the statement "Lost people matter most." What does that imply? What kind of changes would that require? Finish this sentence: Lost people matter more than....
- 2) Share as a group the people that you know who need to embrace God's grace. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being the most distant from grace), can you discern how resistant those on your list are to the grace of God? Commit to pray for evidence of greater receptivity.

Ministries of Prayer— Ministries of Power

Part 1: The Problem with Power

...listening for an answer and hearing only an echo....

Nancy Gibbs

“The Message of Miracles”,
Time Magazine, April 10, 1995

The topic of power and its relationship with prayer has been explored by many. There is no question that one is entwined with the other. We use such expressions as *prayer power*, *power of prayer*, or *power in prayer*. Since prayer is defined as our relationship with God, the power of an omnipotent God should flow as naturally through prayer as a stream yields to the pull of gravity on its way to the sea.

In many ways, prayer and power are symbiotic. There is, however, at least one distinct difference. Start a discussion about demonstrations of power, and the conversation will be invigorated and may even draw a crowd. Announce a prayer meeting and the response will be considerably less energetic.

The lack of interest in prayer belies the fact that we fail to grasp the true nature of it. As long as we fail to truly grasp what prayer is meant to be, we most certainly will not understand the relationship of prayer and power.

God is sovereign and all power resides in Him. Where He is there is power, and when we experience His presence we encounter His power. Because prayer expresses our relationship with Him, it is the means by which His power is available to us. To pray is to avail ourselves of His presence and His power. Remove power from the discussion of prayer and you are left with a religious practice produced by mere human effort. Remove prayer from the equation, and you are left without the relationship through which His presence and power are expressed through us.

In the pages that follow, the focus is going to turn toward power. This is not a detour from prayer ministries, but it is necessary to examine our

perspectives on power if we are going to understand how power and prayer are interlinked.

Let's begin by acknowledging that God's power is great enough to heal and deliver, to restore and renew. His power has made blind eyes see, lame legs leap, mute tongues cry out in praise. His power even replaced the hand of death with the breath of life. All of these events are recorded in scripture.

The problem is that we find it difficult to believe that the same things can happen today. Christians in the United States and the rest of the westernized world have been raised with the humanistic worldview, leaving little if any room for miracles or the supernatural. The brief Nancy Gibbs quote in Time Magazine (noted at the beginning of this chapter) reflects the disappointment of many who search for miracles.

As believers we try not to listen to the humanists who want us to believe that Lazarus was just in a coma while we stretch our worldview to accept the biblical record of miracles. But when we hear someone talk about miracles taking place today, we are less accommodating. We instinctively view such claims as dubious, mere exaggerations born of religious fervor. If a miraculous event is documented well enough to be undeniable, the best we can do is assign it to the same mystical realm of all things ill-defined and nebulous for now.

As Christians living in the westernized world, our understanding of God's power is often anemic.

Yet we want to believe. We struggle to realize that our relationship with God has opened the door to discover the reality of His power and be agents of His grace and power.

The struggle with the sense of the supernatural is also a significant barrier to experiencing the wonder of prayer.

By nature we are nevertheless fascinated by claims of power, especially the more "spectacular" ones. That fascination can make us vulnerable.

There is no lack of those who will provide us with a steady diet of the spectacular. Some televangelists and church leaders who model after them have built empires of temporary fame and fortune with audacious displays of what passes for faith and piety. They prey on those who, driven by a nearly insatiable thirst for the next thrill, will flock to anything that has the label "Spirit-anointed" pasted across the marquee. Their displays of ready power fill the need for something on which many hang their frail faith and feeds their illusion that one day they too can command authority to assure that the glitter of success adorns their lives.

Over time when the sensation ebbs, the crowd is off in search of the next wizard.

If that sounds a bit harsh, I do not apologize. Time spent warning of the detours and dangers posed by religious charlatans is time well spent. The tendency to chase the latest and most captivating ministry spectacle distracts from the true value and purpose of ministries of power as well as the ministries of prayer.

Even worse, it exposes a truly pagan mentality.

Power and the Pagan Way

In the Old Testament, God clearly directly His people to be different than the nations around them. One of those distinctions is noted in the story of the Exodus, or more precisely the preparation for Israel's exodus from Egypt.

God displayed His power in a series of plagues designed as evidence to Pharaoh of His authority. Each plague came with the demand to let God's people leave Egypt, and each was met with belligerence.

That changed when the angel of death passed over the land bringing death to every firstborn son in Egypt. His hand would have touched every household in the nation including those of the Jews, had God not provided a way for His people to be spared. Each Israelite home had to have lamb's blood applied to the doorframe of the home. When the angel of death saw the blood, he passed over that house, leaving its household untouched (see Exodus 12:1 - 13).

In verses 14 - 28 we have a record of what God wanted this day to mean in the life of the nation. Every year from that time forward they were to remember and celebrate the "pass-over" night. The celebration would serve as a reminder of God's mercy to those who were there that night. Even more, this celebration was a means of declaring to future generations what the power of God had done for them (see verse 25).

Hold that thought for a moment and let the scene shift to the nations who were all around Israel. They too had their histories and their celebrations. They too looked back at what had taken place. They kept tabs on how the infant mortality rate compared last year to the year or two before. They kept count on how many cattle died or how many calves were born or when they had the last bumper crop. They were endlessly obsessed with identifying the trends.

But there was more. They compared the trends with the kinds of festivals or celebrations they had at the good years. During the years when the harvest was so bountiful, they would recall, for example that there had been a festival dedicated to the Baal of the Valley. That same year they had

also joined with two other neighboring tribes for a celebration to the Baal of Stoney Mountain. What a great year!

We have to do that again, they reasoned. The exact same festivals and celebrations in the exact same way.

Why were they so intensely fixated on the past? Because, if they could re-create the same celebrations to the same gods in the same way, then the gods would be obligated to bless them with the same results. The attempt to manipulate their gods required reviewing their history to identify what they had done that forced the hands of the gods.

Flash back with me now to the nation of Israel.

Remember Exodus 12:25 - 27a.

When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” then tell them, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.”

Note the difference. Israel was to remember their past, but they were not to tell the generations yet to come what *they* had done, but what *God* had done in their midst.

An alarm needs to be sounded in the church today. We need to be warned that there are those who have adopted the way of the pagans. They stand and declare that all you have to do is give our “seed money” to their ministries and—voila! —health and prosperity will be ours. Want a bigger house? Give more money. Want a better job, or better yet, wealth that makes the job obsolete? There’s a formula for that. Just follow these steps and happy days are just ahead!

For those who are drawn to displays of power, it is easy to be sucked into the way of the pagan and think that God is a celestial genie. Just do the right things. Do them enough times. Do them well enough. Then you will be able to lay hands on people, and they will be healed or delivered or blessed in any variety of ways.

Brace yourself. God is not obligated to do anything based on your performance. Obedience aligns you with His desires, not so you can qualify for a blessing, but rather to let your choice to be a blessing to Him. He blesses you because He loves you. Any demonstration of His presence and power is based on His grace that showers you with evidences of His pleasure.

Our lives are about embracing Him, not manipulating Him. We are to be responsive to His desires and so reflect His love, rather than trying to earn it.

Those that chase spectacular gifts and ministries have failed to discover the real purpose of the power God desires to display in and around us.

Understanding Signs, Wonders and Miracles

Splashed across the airwaves and scattered across the pulpits of the nation, there is a brand of faith that is fixated on miracles. The content of nearly every message or teaching session is geared to the expectation of evidences of power: Just believe and every disease will vanish. Plant your financial seed, and watch your wealth grow. The message is always the same: anticipate a miracle as the norm. Of course “miracle” is too frequently understood as self-serving.

Nothing could be more convoluted.

In Acts 2, we find Peter’s address to the Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This was not the Peter who had been impetuous and later cowardly. This was the Peter who along with the rest of the 120 in the Upper Room had been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This multitude had come from a variety of places on the map. There were Jews who lived and even had been born outside of Israel. Some were from families who had been exiled generations earlier when Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, had conquered Judah and destroyed the Temple. Others were families who over time had migrated to various countries for purposes of commercial trade.

On this day the descendants of those families were hearing the disciples speaking the praises of God in the languages of their home countries. Two things were out of place, however. First, these were uneducated Galileans who would not have known those languages. Second, they were declaring praises to Jehovah, but not in the Hebrew language that was used when speaking of such holy matters. Only drunk men, they assumed, would be so out of control that they would speak of such things in languages that for religious purposes were profane.

That’s where Peter enters center stage. He quotes from the prophet Joel who declared about 900 years earlier that a day was coming when the Spirit of God would be poured out on God’s people. Then they would declare the will and purposes of God.

Peter then adds:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know (Acts 2:22).

Signs, wonders, and miracles were given by God to make Jesus' message credible. That is what makes the sinister choices of the religious leaders so astounding. They knew Jesus could not do what he was doing if the Father had not sent him. Nicodemus let that proverbial cat out of the bag in John 3:2b.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” (Emphasis added)

Yet, to hold on to their power and position in society, they chose to reject and even put to death someone they knew had come from God.

Throughout the Book of Acts, the disciples declared the message of salvation. The record shows that their message was also validated by God through the presence of signs, wonders, and miracles. Later Paul writes to the Thessalonian believers and reminds them that his gospel came to them “not simply with words but also with power” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

It should be clear that the declaration of the Gospel of grace needs the validation of power. The sermons and books about the Gospel are just words to the carnal mind. But when power provides authenticity, the message is much harder to ignore.

In contrast, the “name it and claim it” gospel message declares that we are to pursue miracles as evidence of personal blessing. Yet the true purpose of signs, wonders, and miracles points us to the validation of the message of the gospel.

There is clearly a need for caution. Many claim to be agents of God's power, but their claims are often misleading. We need to be discerning about those who lift themselves up by displays that appear to be coming from the power of the Holy Spirit. In truth, they are preying on emotions and the incessant hunger to experience the spectacular.

When I was only a teen, a faith healer came to my hometown. The tent meetings drew large crowds, and each night people came for healing. A lady in my home church went nearly every night. One evening the crowd was so large she felt faint from the heat and close quarters. She left the tent and returned to her car to rest before the service began.

She noticed that some people were going into a smaller tent off to the side. She assumed that they were working with the ministry in a volunteer

capacity. Later during the service, she was surprised to see some of those same people being ushered up on the stage, only now they were on crutches or in wheel chairs. And behold! They were healed!

Apparently this faith healer felt that seeing is believing, so he made sure there was something to see. I have no idea how much of this kind of deception is taking place, but where there are millions of dollars at stake in some of these “ministries,” it is entirely appropriate to be suspicious.

Thankfully there are true signs, wonders, and miracles from God. And I believe we have a right to expect God to validate His message by whatever means He chooses. It is His gospel, and He wants to affirm the claims of the Gospel with evidence of His power.

The problem is our unbelief. We tie God’s hands and limit the power of God from operating freely through us and among us. This was Jesus’ experience when he went home to Nazareth. The record tells us that he could not do many miracles there, “because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58, KJV).

Where there is true unfettered faith, the power of God will be evident, but always in His own time and way, not in some kind of cookie-cutter displays.

A Balanced Approach to Ministries of Power

Prayer is the dynamic that enables ministry to be effective, and ministries of power are no exception. The unique relationship between ministries of power and ministries of prayer will be examined later. But a clear perspective of power ministries will make the relationship more meaningful.

So, let’s start with the obvious question: how can we know the real from the contrived?

First, we can listen to the Spirit of God within us. It would be nice if we all had the spiritual gift of discernment, but we do not. That is not to say, however, that we cannot all be discerning. Just as there is a spiritual gift of giving, yet all of us are to give, so we should all seek God for discernment while rejoicing that there are those in the body who have been gifted in special measure with discernment.

Second, beware when the claim is made that everybody should be healed and only their unbelief hinders their healing. John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, was a man whose ministry was blessed with power. For years, he was used of the Lord in a variety of healings and other miracles. Yet in an interview with *Christianity Today* in October 1996, he observed:

Some Christians believe we should never struggle with doubt, fear, anxiety, disillusionment, depression, sorrow, or agony. And when Christians do, it is because they're not exercising the quality of faith they ought to; periods of disillusionment and despair are sin.

If those ideas are true, then I'm not a good Christian. Not only have I suffered physically with health problems, but I also spent a great deal of time struggling with depression during my battle with cancer.

One year after that interview on November 17, 2007, Wimber's battle with cancer came to an end.

Every illness is not healed. If it were, none of us would ever die except from exhaustion. Every financial woe is not remedied with extravagant wealth. Every difficult situation at work or in our social lives is not replaced with everybody raising laudatory banners on our behalf. Not every sorrow is replaced with laughter or every bout of depression dispensed with near-manic happiness.

Good people suffer. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was mentioned in an earlier chapter along with God's reminder that grace was all he really needed. When we face times of suffering of any kind, we need to find our strength in the assurance that what grace can accomplish in our lives is greater than anything that in our limited perspective we would define as wholeness.

Third, beware of ministries in which the displays of power are always accompanied by emotional bravado. Wimber once remarked that during times of prayer for healing, he always wanted emotional displays to be "dialed down." He added that those praying with someone for healing need to realize that emotional prayers rarely if ever help bring about the healing they seek.

In Wimber's 1997 interview with *Christianity Today*, he also noted:

I don't have any objection to phenomena, per se. However, I think if it's fleshly and brought out by some sort of display, or promoted by somebody on stage, that's abysmal. But if God does something to somebody, that's between that person and God.

It is not possible to be a seeker of phenomena and a seeker of the God of truth and power at the same time. True and God-breathed ministries of power come from seeking His presence (rather than some sort of phenomena) and trusting God with how He chooses to make Himself known.

Talking it Over!

- 1) What is your reaction to the assertion that some prayer is more pagan than truly Christian?
- 2) What is God's purpose for signs, wonders and miracles? Do you think there is the same need for them today as in the days of the New Testament? Why or why not? Have you ever witnessed signs, wonders, and miracles for yourself? If not, why not?
- 3) In light of the issues addressed in this chapter, can you see why the introductory quote from Time Magazine was included?

Ministries of Prayer— Ministries of Power

Part 2: Staying Authority Centered

The core of all prayer is...obediently standing in the presence of God.

Henri J.M. Nouwen
The Only Necessary Thing (p.82)

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles is a full-blown case study in signs, wonders, and miracles. Beginning with the Day of Pentecost, the first century church was no stranger to the presence of power.

The purpose of such displays is clearly to validate the Gospel. The claim that a Judean carpenter was crucified and then came back to life was a real stretch for anyone to believe. If that were not enough, there was the claim that this itinerate prophet was the long-awaited Messiah and the Son of God. Such bold assertions would certainly have lacked credibility except for one significant factor: His acts of power.

The commissioning of the first century church had as its marquee event the coming of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by power. Subsequently in the ministries of the apostles and the life of the Church, there were signs and wonders and miracles.

The whole idea of Jesus' followers exercising spiritual power, however, did not start in the Book of Acts. In Luke 9, the apostles had been sent out with the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick, and the outings did not go unnoticed. But in the very next chapter, Jesus send out seventy two unnamed believers and commissioned them with power as well.

As the story of Acts unfolds, the focus is not primarily on signs and wonders. Rather, the focus is on the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the Church, especially the missionary nature of that growth. The initial cast consisted of about 120 people, including the eleven remaining apostles (Acts 1:13-15). In time Stephen, as Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and others

became major players, two concurrent themes in the Church's early history emerged: the primacy of prayer and the validating presence of miracles.

Prayer and power. One does not exist apart from the other.

In Acts, we find the Church praying. Follow chapter by chapter and you will discover that prayer was a shared constant in the life of the believers. The Church prayed and Peter is miraculously delivered from prison. The critical issue of choosing leaders was preceded by the Church praying. The missionary enterprise of the early Church took place when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned after the Church prayed.

Even before the Holy Spirit came on the scene and filled them with power, the believers gave themselves to prayer and the apostles' teaching. One of the very first orders of business in the Church was to set apart the apostles for prayer and the ministry of the Word.

The reality is that the very fabric of the Church was woven with the chords of prayer. Acts 1:14 discloses that as the believers gathered in Jerusalem following Jesus' instructions, they were "all joined together constantly in prayer."

It is important here to examine the word *church*. Our English translation of the New Testament uses *church*. Oddly enough *church* might have better been an applicable translation of the Greek word *kuriokos* that scholars tell us means "that which pertains to the Lord." After all, the Church is His Body. But the New Testament Greek word being rendered as *church* is actually *ecclesia*.

Before we look specifically at the word *ecclesia*, let's hit the pause button for a moment to talk about the process of translating. The translator's task: examine the original message, understand its intended meaning and impact on the original audience, and put that idea into the language of the target audience. The idea is to assure that the intended audience is impacted with the same truth fitted into their cultural context as the original audience had been in their cultural setting.

One such example would be the need to translate Proverbs 3:11 - 12:

My son, do not despise the Lord's *discipline* and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in (emphasis added).

The reference to a father who delights in and disciplines his son would make no sense in some tribal societies if the word *father* only referred to the biological father. In some cultures, the biological father's role is to dote on his son and respond to him in tenderness and encouragement. In those settings the discipline to correct the son comes from the uncle. In fact, the

uncle is considered one of the boy's fathers who raises the child along with the biological father. Both men "father" the boy but with differing roles.

In translating that verse so it makes sense in that setting, *father* meaning "biological father" would actually fail to convey what the scripture means. God does not simply dote and cuddle. His discipline out of a heart of love is more adequately conveyed by the term for *uncle-father*.

Now let's come back to the choice of the word *church*.

The term *ecclesia* literally means "the called-out ones." It was used of the assembly of Greek citizens who were called together by civil authorities. Such an assembly was held to address community issues and even exercise decision-making power. In a general sense, *ecclesia* was *community*, a word that still related to governing. The community in Greek culture was a body with full governing authority. Representative leaders called the community together and recognized the authority of the assembly to make decisions that the leaders themselves were bound to follow.

What application does all that have for our current discussion?

We are talking about the Church, who we could also be called the Community. They were assembled by the One whose Kingdom was no longer a future reality, but was present among them.

That was not missed by the governing authorities of the day. In Act 17:7 there is an incident in which the local authorities reacted to the gathering of the assembly of believers. The authorities accused them of "defying Caesar's decrees by saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

The record of Acts reveals a Church who through the practice of prayer discovered their place of spiritual authority in the Kingdom. When they exercised that authority, signs and wonders and miracles took place, and the civil community knew what the implications were. Those events represented an authority unlike any other.

The Authority of the Church

The correlation of power and prayer could not be more evident. The believers understood power, because they understood prayer. Prayer to those in the first century church was not a ritual. They were not engaged in a spiritual chore. Nor were they following some kind of assigned routine designed to obligate God to act as they wanted.

Prayer as practiced by the Church was an experience through which they extended their relationship with the Friend who walked with them and taught them. This was a real and vibrant relationship. Prayer expressed the nature of a relationship with the One who had promised that they would receive power (Acts 1:8).

Just as prayer had a unique meaning to them, so did the concept of power. The word for power is *dunamis*, which can be translated as *power* or *strength* or *ability*. Our English words dynamic, dynamite, and dynamo are derived from *dunamis*. Beyond these surface meanings, this word carries a deeper significance of inherent power, a power that derives from the very nature of a thing.

Whether they truly knew it or not at the time, the promise of power was an indication they were about to undergo a distinct transformation. This transformation came as a result of their relationship with Christ and their obedience to wait as He had instructed.

This was the “Called Out Assembly” of God’s kingdom. Christ’s direction to wait in Jerusalem may have been an initial stage of being called out, but when God’s power fell on them, they became a transformed assembly. They were distinctively changed into a Community invested with authority, Kingdom authority. The Assembly of the Kingdom had been given full Kingdom authority. More than ever, what Jesus had already pronounced as a fact in Matthew 18:18 had become a full reality:

Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there (The Message).

Discovering Ministries in the Body

As the Church grew numerically, they also were growing in their understanding of Body life. Through the Spirit, the apostles taught about spiritual gifts and ministries, revealing that every believer has a place in the Body to serve the welfare of the Church.

Through the later history of the Church, the teaching of the gifts and ministries seemed to have all but disappeared. In the last four decades or so, the reemergence of Body life has reintroduced the Church to the reality of the Spirit’s strategy for the Body.

Gifts have been distributed by the Spirit so that every believer can contribute to the health and care of the Church. With each gift there will be ministries through which the gifts can function, and these too are under the direction of the Spirit.

Various gifts can function in various ministry environments. For example, the gifts of healing would certainly be a part of ministries of

healing, but the gift of faith could certainly function in the arena of healing as well.

Our focus here is narrowed to the ministries of prayer and the ministries of power. As we have seen, prayer and power belong in the same sentence.

Just as with spiritual gifts, some believers may find that the Spirit has assigned them more than one ministry. In many cases, the multiple ministry roles overlap and function as a single venue. Someone with the gift of giving may also have the gift of compassion, and they can function as one ministry. People with the gift of teaching may also have the gift of prophesy and, thus, have a single ministry focus.

Again, as with gifts, so it is with ministries. One may have a ministry of prayer through which a gift of faith is expressed. At the same time, that ministry may function alongside a ministry of power through which both gifts of faith and compassion may be at work.

This discussion is important, because it is sometimes assumed that ministries of prayer and ministries of power are virtually the same thing. But even when they function together, they are distinct ministries. Those believers with ministries of prayer will exercise faith, share words of encouragement, and even believe for the power of God to be evident. Yet they may not have a ministry of power, or put another way they are not active participants in the demonstration of that power.

This whole conversation of prayer and power warrants a reminder of something noted earlier. Inevitably some are enticed by a fleshly desire to pursue the spectacular.

There is a kind of spiritual tabloidism that draws people to demonstrations of power as a means of personal validation. Being there, and especially having some kind of role in the moment of a miracle, is thought to provide some measure of spiritual stature.

Sadly, some may even align themselves with prayer ministry functions to get close to the action. When the dust settles, they become aware that a prayer ministry is a commitment to extended periods of time, often out of sight of others. Gradually, they become disinterested and move on.

The second word of caution is to those who have become aware of the Spirit's direction that the venue in which their gift or gifts should function is the ministry of prayer. They must guard against the assumption that their ministry of prayer is an automatic assignment to serve as the agent through which power is displayed. There are those who have public assignments and those whose assignments are less public. They may intercede for someone in need of healing, but they may or may not be the ones the Spirit assigns to act as an agent of healing or deliverance.

When the distinction between ministries of prayer and ministries of power is blurred, there can be a failure to be sensitive to the working of the Spirit in our lives.

My own experience may serve to illustrate this point. I have witnessed a variety of signs and wonders and miracles. While working overseas, I shared with national church leaders a variety of occasions when the power of God was evident publically. My ministry years here at home have included specific occasions when miracles were undeniable.

On some of those occasions I was both the intercessor as well as the one who by the Spirit's leading was on hand to administer the moment of power. By the prompting of the Spirit, I have laid hands on people who needed to be healed and they were made well. But, even though power can and does flow through any of us as we respond in faith to the prompting of the Spirit, I have had no consistent role in the more public display of miracles. I know some who have such roles, those who have regularly acted in concert with the plan of the Spirit to administer moments of power, but I am not one of them.

Unfortunately, not everyone who cries out "Be healed" is acting by the prompting of the Spirit. The search for the sensational can lead to acts that have the appearance of being Spirit led, but are actually generated in the flesh.

This is a detour from the ministry of grace that is front and center in the life of the Church. Such fleshly demonstrations are more about experiencing moments of power and thus affirming a kind of spiritual status than about affirming the truth of the Gospel. In the end, the spirit of pride contaminates the Church.

Remember the Stephen Covey quote earlier?

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

His business-oriented caution would serve us well in the Church. The Church exists to bring grace to the world and the world to grace. The agenda is not our own, but God's.

When our natural desires to experience miracles—and the more spectacular the better—is what motivates us, we are assuming that such experiences are evidences of spiritual exceptionalism. Those who function in the realm of miracles are thus considered more spiritual than those who don't. Or those who experience more miraculous events are viewed as more spiritual than those who have seen fewer such events.

This is a clear distortion both of ministries of prayer and ministries of power.

Spiritual Authority and Ministries of Prayer and Power

In Luke 9 and 10 Jesus sent his disciples out to heal the sick and deliver from the bondage of Satan. He had given them authority to act in His name. And when they came back, they were amazed that even the demons recognized the authority they were exercising.

In the book of Acts, it seems evident that the Church truly understood what God wanted to do in their midst. After Pentecost, they went forth speaking and acting with the assurance that the same Spirit who had filled them was at work through them validating the message of grace. They ministered the same way they prayed: with expectancy.

Both “ministry in the name of Jesus” and “the posture of expectancy,” need some clarity. Erroneous ideas have seeped in and risk contaminating what should be powerful and exhilarating truths.

Ministry in the Name of Jesus

Colossians 3:17a says “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” In Acts we see the name of Jesus being used to describe how sermons were delivered, how new believers were baptized, and how people were set free from demonization. Even earlier we find Jesus’ own instructions about asking in His name. In John 14, 15, and 16 we are told in various ways that, if we ask anything in the name of the Son, the Father will grant our request.

Those may be some of the most invigorating and empowering passages anywhere in scripture, but they are also some of the most distorted.

“In His name” has become a virtual catch phrase for waving some sort of spiritual magic wand. We have people who spout “in the name of Jesus” as if the very words are spiritual fairy dust that materialize whatever they have spoken. There are far too many who have been led blindly down a mystical path in which their faith rests in the “magic” of those words.

Whether they are aware of it or not, those who take that path are operating from an ego-driven posture. The extreme examples come from the prosperity prophets who literally dangle the image of riches and luxury in front of their followers. Stories are told of how someone prays for a new car “in the name of Jesus,” and they now drive a Lincoln or a Corvette. Need a house? “In the name of Jesus” and you can move into Beverly Hills. If you think those are exaggerations, you probably haven’t been listening closely enough.

Obviously not everyone is so crassly carnal. Yet they still approach their needs with the assumption that if they ask for a mountain to be

removed “in the name of Jesus,” they will get what they want. They assume that the magical act of declaring the name of Jesus makes it so.

Again, we encounter a kind of spiritual tabloidism in which people not only seek sensational experiences, but they revel in being right in the middle of such experiences. Listen to them long enough and you hear in various forms the tinselly tones of ego-centered assertions of “Wow! Look what God did through *me!*”

In Acts there is vivid evidence that the New Testament Church actually condemned such a thing. In chapter 8, Simon the Sorcerer thought he could slip the apostles some cash and get in on the power game. The apostles called it for what it truly was—a figment of his own ego.

To avoid this detour through the minefield of apostasy, we need a more adequate understanding of authority, especially the royal line of authority. All authority in a kingdom rested with the king. He authorized others to act on his behalf. As they settled issues, collected taxes, handed out favors, or negotiated a settlement, they acted in the king’s name. In other words, they acted under his authority and conducted these affairs on his behalf. They knew the king’s mind on these matters, and any latitude they had would have been minimal in most cases.

To speak or act “in the name of Jesus” is to do so on His behalf and with His authority. His authority is exercised. His wishes are acknowledged. These requests and actions are at the impulse of God’s own heart. We need to spend time in His presence and allow Him to put into our hearts what is on His. This makes it possible for us to act as His agents (i.e. in His name) to affect the needs of others.

To ask according to His will and purpose is to stand in agreement with Him. That is in stark contrast to the attitude that seems to suggest that if we only say this or do that “in the name of Jesus” God will agree with us.

We must never forget that on this side of eternity we see spiritually in the same way that a human eye may peer through a smoky glass. We may not understand clearly, but God is not limited by our lack of understanding, nor is it our understanding that He seeks from us. Rather He desires our fellowship through which we come to recognize His handiwork and sense His heart as well as His promptings.

Ministries of prayer and ministries of power are rooted in submission to the authority of the Father Himself. Note the words of Christ in John 5:19 - 20:

The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.

Whatever we do, we are to do it as His representatives under His authority. It is that authority that links ministries of prayer and ministries of power.

Authority, Expectancy, and Faith

Nearly every book on prayer includes the call to pray, expecting God to hear and answer. But the concept of expectancy may not mean the same to everyone. Perhaps for many, expectancy is summed up in terms of faith that is strong enough or simply having enough of it.

We can certainly agree that, if we pray but do not believe that God is in the business of answering prayer, probably nothing much is going to happen. Note the word *probably*.

Ken Blue wrote *Authority to Heal*, one of the best books on healing I have ever read. In it he told of a young local drug dealer with whom he and his wife had spoken several times about Jesus. The man made no response until one day he showed up with an injection site on his arm, swollen and red. They prayed, admittedly a half-hearted prayer. Considering the circumstances, they had no expectation that God would do anything. To their surprise, within five minutes his arm was almost normal.

So why did God choose to heal him? It surely wasn't because Ken had "enough" faith. In fact if you define faith as the strength of your will to believe, Ken nor his wife had any faith at all.

Ken Blue's incident would indicate that faith must certainly be something that comes from a source other than human will. Expectant prayer is not about praying with *enough* faith. Defining faith in terms of *enough* or some measure of sufficiency of the will to believe reduces faith to what you or I can produce.

Expectant prayer relies on a faith that is fully and uncompromisingly aligned with the authority of God and His authority alone.

In my book *Restoring Those Who Have Fallen*, I described faith as a matter of spiritual alignment:

Years ago John Maxwell, in one of his early books entitled *Your Attitude, Key to Success* (Here's Life Publishers, 1984), told of going for a ride in a small plane with a friend in southern California and learning about the "attitude" of an airplane. I remember smiling when I read that, because I had nearly the same experience a few years earlier in Papua New Guinea where I was serving as a missionary. Our MAF (Missionary Aviation Fellowship) pilots all flew Cessna aircraft, and as one of the

bigger passengers I nearly always sat in the seat up front opposite the pilot.

Like John, I was curious about all the dials and gadgets, but in my case it was a practical curiosity. If our pilot ever had trouble over the mountainous bush country in which we lived, I thought it might help to know something—anything!—about the plane. In retrospect I am not sure that any of that information would have made me feel any better if we had been crashing, but at the time it seemed prudent in some strange way.

Anyway, I remember asking about the dial with the little airplane wings wobbling back and forth, and the pilot told me that was the indicator of the plane's attitude. The straight unwavering line on the dial was called the "horizon" and the wings indicated our relationship to the horizon. The best position for those wings was to be parallel to the horizon. If we were ever in the clouds or a storm and the real horizon was not visible, we could always know the attitude of the plane with that dial.

The alignment of the dial to the line representing the horizon is a clear illustration of faith. My expectations when I pray must be firmly aligned with the heart and purposes of God. If they are not, my sense of expectation is little more than trying to put God to the test: Will He do what I ask Him to do? Will He answer just because I deserve it?

Expectant faith or praying with expectancy is centered in our trust that God will act as He knows best.

Once again remember Paul's request that his thorn in the flesh be removed. In fact he asked three times, and what did God reply? In effect His answer was "Why do you think you need that when you have my grace?"

Why did God answer that way? Is he a capricious God who responds whimsically? Or does He choose to be less responsive when He wants to teach us a lesson? Maybe He simply has others that deserve His healing grace more? Is He waiting to see if we can muster enough determination to persist in our request?

None of the above!

What then does God want from us?

I contend He wants us to trust Him. Does He not know all things? Does He not know what lies ahead, what the turn in the road will bring? Does He not see the end from the beginning? And does He not promise that He will not withhold any good thing from us?

We stumble over our limited perspective. Our feeble understanding of “good” is measured in mortal terms. Only He who is truly good (Psalm 107:1) and sees with eternal eyes can declare “it is good.”

Can I not trust Him to know what is good even when I may never know how or why? Why did my first wife die of breast cancer when a covenant team stood unified in our request for healing? Why did my current wife’s first husband die when prayer for his healing was offered? Why did diabetes take its course on my friend Herman, but another in my church was healed of the same disease?

This is not some kind of spiritual cop-out so we can have a way to explain what is often called an unanswered prayer. This is about trusting a sovereign God to act in a way that He already knows is good.

We sometimes seem to forget that there is a great cosmic battle taking place. We are on the stage of history, and our lives are the evidence of God’s sovereign grace. Job was the object lesson to prove God’s Lordship in his life, but not as evidence to those around Job. Rather, he was God’s evidence to Satan himself that Job chose to trust God in all things.

Job was not responding to God because he believed God would eventually lift the suffering off of him and then restore all his wealth and health to him. He even declared that if God chose to slay him, nothing would change his choice to trust God.

What is the purpose of our lives? Is it not to glorify God? I know from God’s Word that I must live in obedience to Him and be subject to His authority over my life. But, in the end, it is not up to me to determine how He is glorified in me.

The word *glorified* comes from the Greek word *doxa* or glory. It was a word commonly used when referring to the effect of someone’s influence. For example, if you were to visit the Greek senate but one of the senator’s chair was empty, you might speak of sensing his *doxa*. This was a recognition of his stature or importance. Although he was not physically present, he was a man of such renown that the sense of him was as real as if he were present. His aura was as real as if it were something tangibly present and substantively detectable.

Our lives are to produce a sense of God so much so that others who come around us become aware of how real He is. They are to discover the reality of God through us. That is what it means to glorify God. It is to be the evidence of who He is, and though unseen, nevertheless detectably real.

My assignment is to be clay in the hands of the Potter, to do as He wishes. I do not command Him to do as I wish or as I perceive is best. I am to trust Him to do what He alone knows is best for the Kingdom.

That is the true faith: trusting that what God chooses to do, although not discernable by human means, is still substantive evidence of who He is.

To live centered in His authority is the very essence both of the ministries of prayer and ministries of power.

Talking it Over!

- 1) What does the expression “authority-centered” mean? Why is being authority-centered important? How does expectant faith relate to being authority-centered?
- 2) Discuss the implications of the illustration about the airplane and the alignment with the horizon. Think about the varied components of your life and consider how that concept would help you.

The Last Word

From the beginning of *Connected* the focus has been on redefining prayer strictly in terms of our relationship with God. In the chapters that followed, whether we were looking at the reason we fail to pray as we should or examining the issue of prayer as a ministry, the intent has been to bring the relational nature of prayer to bear on those discussions.

When I thought about how to bring this journey to an end, the oft used expression about the church being a “house of prayer” seemed the most fitting. To be candid, more often than not, the focus of this last chapter was the first discussion in the classes I taught on prayer at the Grove City Church of the Nazarene.

Be prepared to look beyond the obvious. The true impact of those words reveal that the theme of relationship is deeply embedded at the very core of what it means to be a house of prayer.

Becoming a House of Prayer

It is written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer.'

– Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 21:13)

How often have pastors and other ministry leaders issued a clarion call for their congregations to become houses of prayer? The hope is that the church members will sense a fresh calling of the Spirit to be a people committed to prayer.

The common assumption is that being a house of prayer is all about how many and how much. Unfortunately, the number of people who attend prayer services regularly in many churches is embarrassingly small and, in most cases, noticeably older.

If you ask any pastor or ministry leader what church would serve as a model for being a house of prayer, the significant number would include Brooklyn Tabernacle at the top of the list. Jim Cymbala, the lead pastor, has a story with a simple beginning with a handful of faithful members. If you visit their Tuesday evening prayer service, come early or you'll have to stand. His people are filled with obvious joy and the spirit of celebration at—of all places—a prayer meeting.

Brooklyn Tabernacle has developed a culture of prayer. People have discovered the sense of fulfillment in exercising a ministry of prayer, and their spirit is contagious.

Certainly in these kinds of environments, larger numbers of people pray and considerable more time than average is dedicated to the ministry of prayer. Such congregations wear the label “house of prayer.”

At the risk of causing spiritual indigestion, I assert that the numbers and hours those churches engage in prayer are not what qualifies them to post over their doorways “House of Prayer.” As we explore what this expression means, it will become evident that they can wear that label for an entirely different reason.

The expression “house of prayer” is found in an event recorded in Matthew 2. The occasion: Jesus had come to the Temple, and was incensed that it was full of booths in which animals were sold to be used in sacrifices.

In addition to the vendors themselves, there were also the money changers. In that day and time, the currency of the temple was different

than the currency used in the market place. The money of the street came in the form of Roman coins that were not accepted in the Temple. The Temple had its own coins. When people came to the Temple to offer sacrifices, they either brought their own lambs or doves or they could buy them from the Temple vendors.

But there was a catch. They had to change their Roman coins for Temple shekels.

The exchange rate was known to be, shall we say, a little bit exploitative. The money changers were the Temple bankers with their own rules about exchange rates. As a result when a lamb or fowl was bought for a sacrifice, the public was generally the ones being fleeced.

In Matthew 21, we find Jesus coming into Jerusalem. He knows exactly what the next few days will hold. But for this day He is acclaimed with hosannas and palm branches as the crowd acknowledges Him as a King. Although we know how fickle the people were, at least for that given day, He was their King.

That's the backdrop against which we see Jesus arriving at the Temple. He encounters the money changers and the commercial enterprise that fill the outer courts of the Temple, and He is filled with righteous anger. The scripture tells us that He drove the commercial vendors out and toppled the tables of the money changers. He shouted at them, "It is written, . . . 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers'" (Matthew 21:13).

Curiously enough John records a nearly identical event early in the ministry of Jesus. In John 2:15, after the record of the first miracle, John indicates on that occasion Jesus actually makes a whip and scatters the commercial activity of the Temple. In this instance, John does not indicate that Jesus uses the expression "house of prayer."

Some try to tell us that this is the same instance as the one in Matthew 21, but there is no reason to play hermeneutical gymnastics here. It is not unreasonable to assume that at the outset of His ministry, Jesus is indignant at the long-established practice taking place in the Temple. And it is not unreasonable to assume that He comes to the end of His ministry and sees that the same contamination exists. Again in righteous anger He has a similar if not the same reaction. The difference is that in the Matthew account, Jesus' reaction includes the expression "house of prayer."

But wait. The incident in Matthew's record is also found in Mark 11:17 but with one change that on the surface seems fairly innocuous. Here Jesus is recorded as using the expression "house of prayer for all nations."

From where do those three little word "for all nations" come? And what difference does it make?

This reference comes from Isaiah 56, and those words uncover one of the most powerful messages in all of scripture. In fact, the message most certainly would have been on the mind of Jesus as He was bringing the plan of God to completion and extend the miracle of grace to a world in need of it.

Let me suggest that as you read look for a common thread that is woven through these verses.

¹ This is what the LORD says:

“Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.
Blessed is the one who does this—
the person who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keeps their hands from doing any evil.”
Let no foreigner who is bound to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.”
And let no eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”

For this is what the LORD says:

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.
And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations.”

Few passages hold the potential impact of these verses as they declare that the day of salvation is coming, but its message includes the unexpected. Salvation or righteousness has a different tone. The focus is on maintaining justice, doing what is right, especially keeping the Sabbath.

The reference to keeping the Sabbath is often treated by commentators as referring to the actual Sabbath that then spins off on the subject of observing the Lord's Day. In fact, Sabbath here is actually referring to a lifestyle in which God and His ways are honored, a way of life in which evil has no place.

And here is the surprise!

What God is talking about includes foreigners and eunuchs. Those two terms speak volumes.

The two references actually point to the same thing: Foreigners were not allowed to worship Jehovah God. In order to be Jehovah-followers, they could become *gerim*, or proselytes. They had to step away from their culture, jump the cultural fence, go through circumcision, and become a practicing Jew. The law gave them full rights as one who was born Jewish, but socially they were always considered second-class citizens.

The reference to the eunuch emphasized the point that those who have been excluded from being part of the worship experience were now to be included. The Jewish mind could adjust their perspective and accommodate, with some difficulty, the idea that non-Jews might be included in God's great plan. But God knows the degree of their prejudice, so he puts an exclamation point on the subject with the reference to eunuchs.

Eunuchs were by Levitical law prohibited from participation in any part of the religious life of the Jews. While Jews might accept Gentiles once they had changed and became like Jews, a Eunuch can't change. His emasculation created a condition that disqualified him from ever being allowed in the Temple. He was forever excluded from the opportunity to become a follower of Jehovah God officially.

The bottom line is that the “house,” meaning the Temple, was the place where God's presence rested. Therefore, it was to be a place where all *ethnos* (people groups) were welcomed on equal footing.

The offer of grace is to all people, regardless of how far removed they may have been from the truth. Everyone who embraces the practice of God's presence will have a heritage of grace.

A heritage was one of the most significant blessings that someone could ever have. The abundance of children was considered the best heritage of all, and to experience grace brings its own kind of heritage, a heritage of holiness. That is why the scripture says of the eunuch that he will be given a heritage that is far better than having children. He will be part of the family of grace.

Perhaps the incident in Acts 8 will take on new meaning now. Philip was told to go down to the south road where a chariot approached in which the Ethiopian eunuch was riding and reading the scripture. This eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was an educated man because he could read, but he couldn't understand unless somebody would take time to explain it to him. Still, he was a eunuch and, thus, excluded. Philip's special assignment was in and of itself a demonstration of grace. Again, God's message through the act of the Spirit singles out the eunuch in a kind of in-your-face message that grace excludes no one who seeks it.

Now we come to the expression "house of prayer." Why is it not a house of worship, or in the case of the Temple, a house of sacrifice?

For our answer, we have to go to 1 Kings 8, when Solomon stood before the Lord to dedicate the Temple. This passage is quite long, but would you do yourself a favor and read each word? Let me suggest that you pause, take a breath, and relax, and read it out loud.

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven and said:

"LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it—as it is today.

"Now LORD, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done.' And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his

plea for mercy, LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

"When anyone wrongs their neighbor and is required to take an oath and they come and swear the oath before your altar in this temple, then hear from heaven and act. Judge between your servants, condemning the guilty by bringing down on their heads what they have done, and vindicating the innocent by treating them in accordance with their innocence.

"When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you, and when they turn back to you and give praise to your name, praying and making supplication to you in this temple, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to their ancestors.

"When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because your people have sinned against you, and when they pray toward this place and give praise to your name and turn from their sin because you have afflicted them, then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Teach them the right way to live, and send rain on the land you gave your people for an inheritance.

"When famine or plague comes to the land, or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers, or when an enemy besieges them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, and when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel—being aware of the afflictions of their own hearts, and spreading out their hands toward this temple—then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with everyone according to all they do, since you know their hearts (for you alone know every human heart), so that they will fear you all the time they live in the land you gave our ancestors.

"As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this

temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

“When your people go to war against their enemies, wherever you send them, and when they pray to the LORD toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name, then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause.

“When they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to their enemies, who take them captive to their own lands, far away or near; and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, ‘We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly’; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their captors to show them mercy; for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace.

“May your eyes be open to your servant’s plea and to the plea of your people Israel, and may you listen to them whenever they cry out to you. For you singled them out from all the nations of the world to be your own inheritance, just as you declared through your servant Moses when you, Sovereign LORD, brought our ancestors out of Egypt.”

When Solomon had finished all these prayers and supplications to the LORD, he rose from before the altar of the LORD, where he had been kneeling with his hands spread out toward heaven. He stood and blessed the whole assembly of Israel in a loud voice, saying:

“Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in

obedience to him and keep the commands, decrees and laws he gave our ancestors. And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, that he may uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. And may your hearts be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

Were you able to see a recurring image or message?

Notice that Solomon does not speak primarily about this Temple as a place of sacrifice, but rather a place of prayer. Even when people simply pray in the direction of the Temple, he asked God to hear them.

What then is the true purpose of the Temple? *It is to be a place where people seek to affirm a relationship with God.*

So what does "house of prayer" mean here and now?

For the moment let's think of our places of worship. We want to post the banner over our doors "House of Prayer." Why does the Brooklyn Tabernacle qualify to be a house of prayer? Because it is a place where the strangers, foreigners, insiders, outsiders, and even the social outcasts can come to seek the Lord.

But we must take this one step further.

The expression "house of prayer" is not a reference primarily about our places of worship. Rather, it is about us. We are His temple. I am and you are. Even more importantly this is about us together as a Body, the Church. *We* are that temple.

Do we as a group of God followers exude a sense to those outside the church that this is a safe environment in which to seek the Lord? Or do we evidence a culture of exclusion to any who are not like us? Do we project a message that anyone can come among us as long as they can become like us?

Or are those outside of our "Israel" welcome to seek the Lord among us?

To become a house of prayer is not primarily about the prayers of God's people but rather about the prayers of those who seek to find Him.

* * * * *

We have now come full circle in a sense. The first part of this book focused on forming a definition of prayer that was tethered to a relationship with God. Prayer is the expression of life lived in that relationship.

Any definition of prayer that fails to incorporate the concept of a grace relationship has reduced prayer to little more than a ritual or a religious exercise. Whether we are new to prayer or have practiced the discipline of prayer for years, we must be aware of the danger of prayer becoming a mere means by which we seek what we want. They may even be good and noble things, such as healing and deliverance and answers to life's dilemmas. But in the end prayer is none of those things. Prayer must be driven by the reality of our relationship with the God whose mantle of grace is spread over us and makes His desires evident.

Prayer can and does incorporate those things, but prayer, absent of a heart that seeks to warm itself at the fireside of His presence, is reduced to an empty practice not unlike that of any other religion. Prayer that attempts to manipulate God to do the things we want done is on a par with rituals of pagans.

When prayer is about His presence, then His desires well up within us, and we experience grace. To be a house of prayer, then, is to be a place that is defined by the presence of God, and even more precise, defined by God's eternal agenda. We are to be the Temple to which any and all know they can come to experience the presence of the God whose grace they seek.

This must be the cry of our hearts. It is too easy to be preoccupied with the business of maintaining ourselves organizationally. We can become distracted with the pure busy-ness of programs. We may even become consumed with the desire for miracles and to experience displays of God's power. We may seek all of these things and more, yet fail to be the house of prayer as God intends.

When the mantle of His presence rests on us, such an anointing becomes evident to those around us. And as men seek Him, they will turn to where His presence is found.

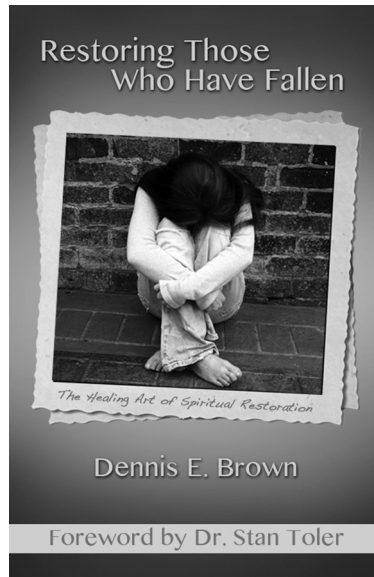
Let us be the light that beckons others to discover the God of grace.

Also by Dennis E. Brown

The Embrace of Grace
(<http://theembraceofgrace.org>)

The Embrace of Grace is a devotional blog designed to celebrate and affirm the wonder of grace.

Restoring Those Who Have Fallen (The Healing Art of Spiritual Restoration)



Restoring Those Who Have Fallen sounds an alarm to the church about a neglected ministry. It calls us to a dynamic plan of action to provide spiritual restoration to those who have “fallen away from grace.”

Restoration as a vital ministry of the church is too often non-existent, haphazard, or—worse—devoid of grace and healing. These chapters transform church discipline from punitive and harsh to positive and healing. Discipline as a grace-filled act of discipling can restore lives and invigorate the church.

Available from: DustJacket (www.dustjacket.com) and Barnes and Noble.

Renewal Ministries

Renewal Ministries provides seminars, workshops, training sessions, as well as sermon series that have been a part of my ministry in a variety of forms for many years. The following are special areas of concentration:

The Primacy of Prayer

This focus on prayer comes in part from *Connected! Unlocking the DNA of Authentic Prayer*. The series centers on redefining prayer in relational terms. The purpose is to launch a true transformation in the personal prayer life of believers as well as discover the depth of renewal when a ministry has prayer woven into its very fabric.

Moving Beyond the Basics

Perhaps more than ever, believers need a fresh and focused look at Hebrews 6:6. What happens when a church delves into the real depths of what it means to hunger and thirst after righteousness? How does the life of a congregations change when above everything else its members together truly seek the authority and righteousness of the Living God.

Moving beyond the basic tenets of our faith opens the door to become a people who can hear the voice of the Spirit and calls the Church to the richness of divinely appointed relevance.

Breaking Down Barriers to Effective Ministry: Confronting Personal and Corporate Strongholds

Anyone who walked with the Lord very long at all knows that the Spirit faithfully wants us to go on to maturity. The difficulty comes when we find ourselves faced with areas of our lives in which old habits and vulnerabilities become apparent. A heart of holiness births within us the kind of spirit that God Himself models for us, and we are grieved when we stumble or in any way fail to display His likeness.

Every believer has to deal with “spiritual baggage” that they carry with them into their Christian walk. Growing into His likeness requires each of us to face the pruning of the Spirit as he reveals to us along the way those

weaknesses that need to be turned into strengths and areas of vulnerability transformed into boldness and victory.

This series will include those areas where Satan has infected the family lives and social experiences through which we have traveled. Identifying any residual and unresolved factors that often have laid buried is the first step to being free of them. Issues like previous relationships with cultic and occultic activities, participation in masonic rituals, relationships that have remained unhealed, curses spoken against someone, as well as intergenerational curses, fears, etc. are just some of the residual dynamics that provide the enemy with access to establish and maintain strongholds in our lives. There is freedom from all the strongholds of the enemy.

Preparing for Supernatural Growth in Your Church

This special series is not your typical “church growth” seminar. An initial session will include some basics about how churches grow, but moves on to the more in depth times to examine the limitations that are hidden to most believers. There is considerable effort to face the demanding task of taking an objective look at how our faith is hindered and our understanding of spiritual realities is stunted.

Other areas include:

Reaching Outside the Church Walls: Making friends for Christ

Stretching Beyond Cultural Boundaries: Communicating grace across cultural barriers

Experiencing the Spirit of Power: A balanced and biblical approach to power ministries

Discovering the Heart of Worship: It’s not all about the music.

Contact Dennis Brown

Dbrown1046@yahoo.com
[Facebook.com/dbrown1046](https://www.facebook.com/dbrown1046)

