



# **RE-CONNECTING WITH GOD**

**A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES ON  
PRAYER & DEPENDENCE**

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## A COLLECTION OF ARTICLES ON PRAYER & DEPENDENCE

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# BATTLING THE SUPERNATURAL

## *Why human beings need to pray*



Many people have written about the absolute necessity of prayer.

Andrew Murray wrote, “Prayer was never meant to be the incidental work

of God. It is the work.... in all work for God, prayer is the working power of all that God would do through His people.” (Ablaze for God, 22)

Ellen White is clear in her understanding of the necessity of prayer, “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved... Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God.” (Gospel Workers 254)

But why do these, and many others, consider prayer to be of such overwhelming importance?

### **Grasping the big picture**

I think part of the reason relates to something I learnt at the very beginning of my ministry. I was attending a seminar where they were teaching pastors how to communicate the gospel clearly and meaningfully to post-modern people. The challenge today is that many people simply don't know the basic Bible stories that used to be familiar to everyone thirty or more years ago. So if we want to communicate the message of the gospel today, we have to begin retelling the Bible stories.

They showed us that if the Bible is a complete story, there would be five important events that act like hooks on which all other stories hang and find their meaning. These five events are creation—where we are made perfectly and live in God's presence; the fall—where we lose our connection and intimacy with God; the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—where our brokenness is healed and we are

reconnected to God; the judgement—where God is shown to be fair and just in his government; and the Second Coming of Jesus—to permanently rescue us from our brokenness and enable us to live with God, face to face, forever.

However, there is something very important that is missing from this picture. We are missing the larger context of why living inside this story is so hard. So we need to sandwich this five point story with the fall of Satan on one side, and the destruction of Satan, his angels, and sin, on the other. That is the full picture, and as you can see, it is a picture of a supernatural battle.

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*Andrew Murray*

### **Encounters with the supernatural**

The first time I really experienced the reality of living within a supernatural conflict came rather unexpectedly one night. I was fast asleep when suddenly I felt three sharp pokes in my side. Immediately, a hot ripple began to flow down from my head to my feet, and then bounced back up to my head. In my haziness of just waking up, my first thought was that I was being healed, because I had recently been ill. But the moment the hot and very pleasant ripple stopped, there was an intense evil in the room that I had never experienced before. I

was terrified, and lay awake until the sun finally came up—which was when I finally fell asleep exhausted.

Throughout my ministry I have had regular encounters with supernatural evil. I have had the feeling of heavy weights pressed upon me. Once when dealing with a girl who was possessed, a voice told me that they were going “to get me”. At 2am that night I was suddenly woken up gasping for breath as a pressure was being applied around my throat. Once while I was trying to send a book manuscript to the publisher by email, a spirit came into the room and immediately it was as though energy was being drained from my body. When I tried to stand up to run to the phone to ask someone to pray, my legs had become so weak I almost fell over.

I don't believe everyone has to experience things like this, but I have always understood these experiences to be God's reminder to me, that I do not live in this world with only what is visible.

### **Paul's worldview**

What has been impressed upon my mind over and over again is this important statement that Paul makes in the book of Ephesians, “Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:11-12, NIV)

Paul says that the devil is alive and well, and is scheming. A scheme is a carefully thought out plan, which is not made up on the fly. It is a plan that is deliberately targeting you, to ensure that you will never reconnect the God who loves you so extraordinarily, and who made you to live with him eternally.

**Taking a stand**

Three times, in verse 11, 13 and 14, Paul calls us to take our stand against these schemes. The word “stand” is a military term to hold your ground, to stand firm even as the opposition battles against you. It is a tough battle. Paul also uses the word “against” six times just in verses 11 and 12, “take your stand *against* the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not *against* flesh and blood, but *against* the rulers, *against* the authorities, *against* the powers of this dark world and *against* the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

No wonder Paul says that we are in a “struggle” (verse 12)! And the reality is that we are all struggling. Everyone one of us, whether we know why or not, regularly go through times of struggle, tiredness, frustration, opposition, sickness, hurt, and sadness. Paul says the reason for this is because we are in middle of a battle against Satan’s plans to prevent us from ever experiencing the love and support of God.

Because we are all experiencing this struggle to stand our ground, Paul reminds us about a deception that Satan sets us, and a delusion into which we may fall.

**1. Don’t forget – a deadly deception**

Paul tells us to be aware of deadly deception. Paul begins verse 12 with this warning, “For our struggle is *not* against flesh and blood”. In other words, don’t think this battle—the cause of your struggle, tiredness, frustration, opposition, sickness, hurt, and sadness—is people! It’s not people. These things come because of Satan and his angels working through people. But Satan’s purpose is to deceive us into thinking that these problems are not from him, but from others.

Early in my ministry the reality that Satan works through people was forcefully brought to my attention. A woman in my church called me up one morning and unexpectedly announced down the phone, “Well, you probably don’t like us, and we don’t like you!”

As she was a manic depressive, I knew she was not well, so I was as polite as possible and put her comment out of my mind. Or at least I tried to. The problem was that as the day rolled on, her comment bothered me more and more. By five o’clock, I felt

completely terrible. This was so unusual for me that I began to wonder if Satan was directly at work. I was supposed to be leading a prayer meeting that evening, but I was experiencing such overwhelming feelings of despair and heaviness that it was paralysing. It was so bad that I was on the verge of calling to cancel the meeting. As I was driving in my car thinking about what to do, I found

*“Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved... Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God.”*

myself blurting out loud, “In the name of Jesus, get behind me Satan.”

The effect was immediate and dramatic. It was though an incredible physical weight lifted right off me, and I was instantly filled with an incredible joy. It was so powerful, that when I arrived at the house for the prayer meeting, the people were so astonished that the first thing someone asked me was, “What happened to you?!”

Satan was definitely at work, but if God had not led me to think about the possibility that Satan was involved, working both through the person to say those hurtful words and then to stir

them around in my mind during the whole day, I would have begun to feel quite resentful towards that woman and would have missed the prayer meeting.

**The consequences of blaming people**

If Satan tempts to think that our problems come through people, there are a number of unfortunate consequences that lead to the breakdown of our relationships, and God’s purposes for them.

Firstly, when hurtful things are said, we can respond by feeling angry and hurt towards the person concerned.

Secondly, we can feel crushed, persecuted, depressed, or that we are now a helpless victim.

Thirdly, we may be sucked in by the temptation to get revenge. Such revenge could happen in reality, or it may just as easily take place in our minds. Both types of revenge are a poison which damages everyone.

When we respond in these ways, it shows that we have lost our perspective, and it prevents a healing of our relationships.

However, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood...”

**2. Don’t forget – a deadly delusion**

After warning us against this deadly deception, Paul now warns us against a deadly delusion. Verse 12 again, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The great danger is that while we may acknowledge that Satan is at the root of our problems, we delude ourselves into thinking that this is not a big problem. So Paul is listing all these powers who are against us, not to scare us, but to try and force us to grasp the seriousness of the opposition.

Paul wants you to realise that as a human being, you have no hope at all surviving in a battle against such a powerful supernatural enemy. If you don’t have supernatural help, if you don’t get help vertically from God, Satan will use your struggles, tiredness, frustration, opposition, sickness, hurt, and sadness in your life to destroy your hold on God. So Paul is warning us against trying to handle our problems by ourselves. But the Bible is clear: you cannot handle them on your own – if you think you can, you are deluding yourself.

**Much-Afraid's Journey**

In the allegory, Hind's Feet on High Places, a young girl called Much-Afraid is journeying to the High Places of the Shepherd with two companions the Shepherd gave her called Sorrow and Suffering. They face many difficulties on their journey, and a lot of opposition from some of Much-Afraid's close relatives, Pride, Self-pity, Resentment and Bitterness, who follow Much-Afraid in an attempt to capture her and take her back to the valley of the Fearings. As long as Much-Afraid holds onto Sorrow and Suffering, she is safe from her pursuing relatives.

One day, they have been walking along the shores of the Sea of Loneliness. They were all very tired so they stopped to rest. After her nap, Much-Afraid decided to go for a walk—alone. The sun had come out and the sea looked so beautiful. Leaving Sorrow and Suffering, she walked down a narrow peninsula, and to her horror, looked behind to see Pride, Self-pity, Resentment and Bitterness sneaking up on her. Because of all that she had learnt on the journey, she thought she was strong enough to beat them back, so she picked up a stone to throw at Pride. But Pride wasn't frightened at all and just waved a big stick at her. It was only then that Much-Afraid realised she was in trouble, and had to call loudly for the Shepherd to rescue her.

After recovering herself, Much-Afraid asked the Shepherd why she so nearly fell to her enemies, and why they still seemed to be able to threaten her despite her many successes in the past. The Shepherd gave an answer that we all need to hear regularly: when things are difficult, we always feel our need. But when life is good and easy, we relax, and we think we are strong for anything. The reality is that this is when Satan waits until we are self-confident, and when we feel no need at all, he has us cornered.

**Holding on to God**

So how do we keep hold of our grip on God? Paul is clear about the solution, “Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Verse 13)

Paul urges us to get completely dressed up in God's clothes because

only God can give us what we need to hold our ground, “Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6:13-17)

But notice what comes next, “And 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 saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.” (Ephesians 6:18-20)

Five times Paul tells them to pray: “be alert and always keep on praying”. Be alert that you are in the middle of a battle against a supernatural enemy. Be alert that the saints need supernatural strength and protection, and this can only come as we “always keeping on praying”.

*“It would seem the biggest thing in God's universe is a man who prays. There is only one thing more amazing, that is, that man, knowing this, should not pray.”*

*Samuel Chadwick*

**Putting the picture together**

Samuel Chadwick claimed, “It

would seem the biggest thing in God's universe is a man who prays. There is only one thing more amazing, that is, that man, knowing this, should not pray.” (Ablaze for God, 34).

I am not sure exactly what caused Chadwick to write this, but in the context of our supernatural world, we can easily imagine why. Prayer is the only thing which connects us as broken humans—living totally surrounded by supernatural opposition—to the protection and strength of their Creator.

**Prayer is not just talking**

In the context of battling the supernatural, it is perhaps important to emphasise that merely talking to God about the battle will not drive the enemy back, for talking is not the same as praying. The type of prayer that destroys the power of Satan, a conversation with God that is powered by faith.

In the book *Desire of Ages*, Ellen White emphasises this relationship between faith and prayer in the context of this supernatural war. In discussing the disciples' failure to cast out the demon in the young man (Luke 9:37-43), she states clearly that “It is faith that connects us with heaven, and brings us strength for coping with the powers of darkness.” (*Desire of Ages*, 429)

However, the disciple's faith was not enough, because they had failed to pray, “Instead of strengthening their faith by prayer and meditation on the words of Christ, they had been dwelling on their discouragements and personal grievances. In this state of darkness they had undertaken the conflict with Satan.

In order to succeed in such a conflict they must come to the work in a different spirit. Their faith must be strengthened by fervent prayer and fasting, and humiliation of heart. They must be emptied of self, and be filled with the Spirit and power of God. Earnest, persevering supplication to God in faith—faith that leads to entire dependence upon God, and unreserved consecration to His work—can alone avail to bring men the Holy Spirit's aid in the battle against principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, and wicked spirits in high places.” (Ibid. 431)

And today, 2000 years later, it works exactly the same. •

# FIRE FROM HEAVEN

## *Our personal need to pray*



We are living in very serious times, or at least I am beginning to think so.

Recently the BBC reported on a court ruling in Holland. They reported that "A Dutch court has turned down a request to ban a political party with a paedophile agenda. Judge HFM

Hofhuis ruled that the Brotherly Love, Freedom and Diversity Party (PNVD) had the same right to exist as any other political party. The PNVD was formed by three paedophiles in May, prompting outrage in Dutch society. It seeks to lower the age of sexual consent from 16 to 12 and legalise child pornography and sex with animals." (BBC News, Monday 17 July, 2006)

In the same week, a report appeared in the respectable Guardian newspaper in Britain. "When it's broadcast later this year, it is likely to prompt a mass debate. Channel 4 confirmed yesterday that the network has commissioned a documentary about Britain's first "masturbate-a-thon", a charity self-pleasuring session due to be held in London next month.

Andrew MacKenzie, the channel's factual entertainment commissioning editor, said that the film - given the working title Wank-a-thon - would be part of week-long series of "provocative and mischievous" programmes. "Following on from the success of 'Penis Week', we feel this is exactly the type of provocative and mischievous programming that Channel 4 should be covering in the 11pm slot." (The Guardian, July 19, 2006)

The BBC also report how Madonna has been given the privilege of being the first person to make casts of her hands in the pavement for the so-called "Walk of Fame" at the new Wembley stadium. This was at the same time she has been criticised in her latest European tour for staging a mock crucifixion, the BBC including that even the Pope called for a boycott of the Blond Ambition tour, in which Madonna simulated masturbation during her hit song, Like A Virgin. (BBC News, May 24, 2006)

Shortly afterwards, the BBC also reported how the seventeen year old star of the Harry Potter films, Daniel Radcliffe, will soon star in a stage show in London where he will appear naked as a stable boy, and have an erotic relationship with his horses. (BBC News July 28, 2006.)

I am not listing these stories to be sensational. Wicked things have always happened in our society, but what most disturbs me is that this sort of behaviour is no longer at the fringes of our culture, but at the heart of it, where every young person can watch, listen, read, and if they want, participate.

But what concerns me most is how many Christians will be seduced by these things and compromise the high calling they have received from God for holiness.

### **How should we respond?**

The first thought that springs to my mind is how desperately the world needs to see an alternative! How desperately do people need to see the transforming power of God at work. How desperately do people need to know that there is a power at work in our world that can give unrivalled meaning and hope!

So here is a question: do you have this power within you? Are you aflame with this fire of God? The question is not, are you excited or enthusiastic for God? But are you on fire *with a fire from God*?

I think there is such a thing. Benjamin Franklin confessed he went to see the great evangelist George Whitefield preach because he could watch him burn before his very eyes. But what was it that Benjamin Franklin saw? Did he just see an enthusiastic or talented man?

Or how about a young preacher in England who went for an interview to be a pastor. However, he admitted to the board that he was not really the sort of preacher that would catch the Thames on fire (that he was not lively or charismatic in his style). One wise preacher listening remarked, "All I need to know is, if you were dropped into the river Thames, would you sizzle?" What was that wise preacher looking for in that young man?

### **Answers in the Sanctuary**

Both Benjamin Franklin and the preacher recognised that there is a power at work in this world that is noticeably of supernatural origin. More than that, such a power has the possibility to set the world ablaze. But what is it that sets a person ablaze with such a power?

I would like to look for an answer in perhaps an unusual place, in the OT sanctuary service.

The Old Testament sanctuary services were the medium God used to teach his people how to deal with sin and maintain a relationship with God that is pure and holy. But God's ability to deal with the sin relied on two very important things: a sacrifice to be killed and a fire to consume the sacrifice.

But where did the fire to consume the sacrifice come from?

### **Fire from Heaven**

The fire came from Heaven. At Aaron's dedication as a priest at the beginning of the tabernacle services, it says that "Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar..." (Leviticus 9:24) And when Solomon finished his prayer at the dedication of the temple, it says that "When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory

of the Lord filled the temple.” (2 Chronicles 7:1)

This was very special fire. Once the fire had fallen from Heaven on the sacrifice, that same fire was used to light the seven branch candlestick, the altar of incense, and to burn all of the sacrifices.

**An ever burning holy fire**

What is very interesting about this divine fire was that it was never allowed to go out. God made it very clear to the priests, “... ‘These are the regulations for the burnt offering: The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar.... The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out... The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out. (Leviticus 6:9-12) Leslie Hardinge notes that for almost 1000 years, divine fire burned on Israel’s altars.

Because only such divine fire was to be used in the tabernacle, God warned his priests against making their own, and for those who did not listen, there were serious consequences, “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” (Leviticus 10:1-2)

I think we should pause to consider this seriously. God is prepared to destroy those who produce a substitute for his power.

**Holy fire today**

The symbolism of the sacrifice, fire, candlestick and altar of incense should not be missed.

The symbolism initially applied to Jesus. Born of the Spirit, he became a sacrifice, and through this became the light of the world, and now he intercedes on our behalf before the Father.

But most importantly, the symbolism also applies to us. We are called to be sacrifices. As Paul appeals to us all, "I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1). And through such a sacrifice, we are to become lights in a very dark world, offering effective prayers to Heaven for the salvation of men.

But for such a witness to be given and for such prayers to be propelled to the throne of God, there has got to be a sacrifice for God’s holy fire to consume.

**Do you have this fire?**

We must be consumed by such a divine fire. Let me ask you again, are you aware of a fire burning in your life right now? Do you know without a shadow of a doubt that there is a power at work in you that is of divine origin? Remember that this fire is not the same as enthusiasm or commitment. We are describing a supernatural fire that burns within that we are totally confident has been kindled by the Holy Spirit.

Such a fire will burn visibly for God does not kindle private fires. The fire that comes from Heaven does not burn where no-one can see, but is for the sole purpose of attracting

others to its flame. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that *whoever* believes in his should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

Such sacrifice is always for service.

**Keeping the flame alight**

The supernatural fire of God must fall on each of us. In an echo of God’s instructions to the priests, Paul urges the Thessalonians, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19) And then Paul urges Timothy, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God..." (2 Timothy 1:6) To fan into flame is to stir up the embers and rescue the flames that are about to flicker out. So our task is not to look here and there for some trendy programme that gives us the illusion that we are on fire, but to stir up the flame that God has placed within our hearts, his Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps all too easy for the flame to go out, and Ellen White emphasises just how easy this is, “A single unrighteous act of will, or bitterness, envy, jealousy, or evil surmising will quench the Spirit of God and banish from your heart true happiness. One emotion of hatred or ill will or of revenge, or an evil act or word toward one whom Christ calls "the least of these My brethren," gives Satan the advantage over you, makes you a transgressor of God's law, and will surely destroy the peace of the soul, and will stand as an act done to Jesus Christ in the person of His saints.” (21 Manuscript Releases 164).

So guarding the fire within us is a delicate and precious work.

**Renewing the fire**

So what do we do when the flame appears to have gone out? Let me suggest three things.

Firstly, if we want to experience the fire from Heaven and carry a light and a power through prayer that will give honour and glory to Christ, we need to make a sacrifice available. We have to be willing to offer God everything, and keep

offering God everything, no matter the cost.

Secondly, if we are going to offer ourselves totally for God, we will need to exercise faith. If I offer God everything, I have to sacrifice my own ambitions and dreams and allow God’s to rule, even if I am asked to serve in weakness and obscurity, still believing that all things work together for good (Romans 8:28).

Thirdly, if we are to get a faith that will risk everything for God we must pray continually. It is through such prayer that our faith is strengthened so that we may have the guts—the boldness—to lay ourselves out completely for God as a living sacrifice.

**The call to sacrifice**

The call of Jesus to us is always a call to sacrifice. Jesus offers, ““If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34) Jesus was going to Jerusalem. The disciples hoped he was going to glory and were bitterly disappointed when their hopes were crushed. But as they humbled their hearts in that upper room, and became sacrifices for Christ again, fire fell from Heaven and the world was filled with light. •

*“The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out.”*

*Leviticus 6:12*

# A PRAYING REMNANT

## *Three motivations to pray*



Every revival that I know about has been born out of a prayer meeting. When the Holy Spirit came in power, someone, somewhere,

was praying.

During the Great Awakening, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, and some others, held a love-feast in Fetter's Lane, London. It was New Years Day, 1739. What happened is recorded as follows.

"About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground (overcome by the power of God). As soon as we recovered a little from the awe and amazement at the presence of his majesty, we broke out with one voice, 'we praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.'" (Quoted in Revival Fire, Wesley Duewel, 53)

Later that week, these early "Methodists" talked and prayed together until early in the morning and became convinced that "God was about to do great things." What happened later was extraordinary. Many thousands of people came to hear these preachers. At a single communion service in 1742, 30,000 came to hear Whitefield preach. In just two months in 1750, Whitefield preached ninety times to a total of about 240,000 people. The ministry of Whitefield and the Wesley's that followed has been credited by historians as bring responsible for sparing England from the ravages of civil war that was causing havoc across Europe.

But all of this began in a prayer meeting.

And so it was at Pentecost. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem began in a prayer meeting, and I have no doubt at all that the

even greater outpouring of the latter rain will occur for exactly the same reason – because people are coming to God on their knees.

So if it is true that the coming of the latter rain is modelled to some degree by the coming of the early rain, then the prayers of the disciples at Pentecost provide a significant model for us today. So what motivated and drove those early disciples to pray?

### **1. The disciples were motivated to pray because the task God had given them was far too great to accomplish without the intervention of divine power**

I wonder whether we truly have a sense of the enormity of our task?

At the last General Conference Session, we celebrated the fact that we are baptising around 3000 people every day. I have a feeling that we are pleased about this because this achievement sounds very similar to what happened at Pentecost. Then 3000 people were baptised in a day also. But the danger with such a comparison is that we may feel that we are accomplishing our mission rather well.

But let's be cautious with such comparisons. Three thousand were baptised at Pentecost through the ministry of literally a handful of preachers. Today, we are encouraged because we are accomplishing the same growth with over 13,000,000 baptised members. Indeed, I seriously wonder if that very fact is not a reason for serious concern. We do have still have most of the 6,000,000 people to reach with the message God has given us.

So how were just a handful of disciples to take the gospel to the ends of the earth? Jesus had charged them to "tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to

the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) I don't know how far they got with the creation of a strategic plan or whether they were wishing for the invention of satellite TV, but in the absence of these things, they finally decided that the only thing that would really work for them was the intervention of supernatural power.

Such power could only come in one way. Jesus had plainly told them to wait for power, so they did, "They all met together continually for prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, several other women, and the brothers of Jesus." (Acts 1:14) The Bible does not say what they were

*As [the disciples] meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ's character.*

praying for but I think we could guess. They must have been reflecting on how badly that had misunderstood the whole nature of God's kingdom.



Firstly, just before the foot-washing, John tells us that they had just spent time fighting with each other for high positions in the coming kingdom.

Secondly, in Gethsemane, everyone of these proud disciples had run away from Jesus.

And thirdly, Peter—their self-appointed leader—is soon heard swearing that he never knew the man. We could easily imagine that these fearful disciples were very much aware of their own weaknesses.

But astonishingly, in such weakness, Jesus called them to take the gospel to the ends of the earth!

In the upper room where they were praying, they must have spent much time before God repenting in anguish of their foolish behaviour towards each other and to God, and praying that somehow, they would be fitted to fulfil Jesus' last command.

Their obvious weaknesses focused their minds on two things, repentance and the need for supernatural power.

*Prayers of repentance*

Consider Ellen White's comments on their repentance. "As the disciples waited for the fulfilment of the promise, they humbled their hearts in true repentance and confessed their unbelief... They reproached themselves for their misapprehension of the Saviour. Like a procession, scene after scene of His wonderful life passed before them. As they meditated upon His pure, holy life they felt that no toil would be too hard, no sacrifice too great, if only they could bear witness in their lives to the loveliness of Christ's character. Oh, if they could but have the past three years to live over, they thought, how differently they would act! If they could only see the Master again, how earnestly they would strive to show Him how deeply they loved Him, and how sincerely they sorrowed for having ever grieved Him by a word or an act of unbelief!" (Acts of the Apostles, 36)

*Prayers for power*

Ellen White again comments on their recognition of powerlessness. "These days of preparation were days of deep heart searching. The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were

weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls. They realized that the gospel was to be carried to the world, and they claimed the power that Christ had promised." (Acts of the Apostles, 37)

So a recognition of their own spiritual poverty and failings, together with the obvious need for external power, became a significant factor in bringing the disciples to their knees.

**2. The disciples were motivated to pray because they carried a burning boldness to reach the lost**

I always remember a pastors meeting I went to at the beginning of my ministry. We were talking about the need to reach out to people who are lost without Christ. However, most of the pastors in my group admitted that deep down they did not feel such a pressing burden. The problem for me was that I felt the same. It was a very disturbing meeting. If we did not have such a burning desire to reach people without Christ, what was the point of being a pastor? I think more than a few of us went back to our rooms to beg God for a fresh passion to reach the lost.

Reaching the lost had become a powerful motivation for the disciples. We see this particularly in Acts 4 where Peter and John have just been released from prison. Luke writes that "Then all the believers were united as they lifted their voices in prayer" (Acts 4:24)

What do you think they prayed for then? For angels to hide them? For God to punish their persecutors? No, they called out, "And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give your servants great boldness in their preaching." (Acts 4:29)

Not their own security but for boldness to preach the gospel – in spite of persecution – was what burdened their hearts.

**3. The disciples were motivated to pray because they felt a deep burden for the honour of Jesus.**

The disciples' second request in Acts 4 gives us the third characteristic that shaped their intercession. They prayed, "Send your healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:30)

Why did the disciples pray for miraculous signs and wonders? I don't think it was because they were trying to

*The disciples felt their spiritual need and cried to the Lord for the holy unction that was to fit them for the work of soul saving. They did not ask for a blessing for themselves merely. They were weighted with the burden of the salvation of souls.*

be clever or look impressive. Their concern was that the name of Jesus should be honoured. When the Jewish leaders ridiculed the resurrected Jesus, the disciples' hearts were in pain. They wanted Jesus to be honoured and revered.

This ridicule is plain to see in our society today. Richard Dawkins, world famous author and professor from Oxford University, recently gave an interview on Icelandic television. In that interview he said among many other things, "The very idea of the crucifixion... as a redemption of the sins of mankind is a truly disgusting idea", ...and he talked about "that dangerous thing that is common to Judaism and Christianity as well, the process of non-thinking called faith" concluding that "I can't see why faith should ever be a virtue..." [All Dawkins quotes from interview on RUV Kastljós 25 June, 2006, www.ruv.is]

When I heard him speak, I felt very angry that Jesus was being so dishonoured. But he is not the only one. Many people today are proud to scorn Jesus and his gospel.

In the face of this, I personally believe it is time for us as Christians to start taking a much more public stand against such ridicule, that we may uphold the honour and glory of Jesus – in spite of the consequences.

What was the consequence of the disciples' deep burden to reach lost people and to restore the honour of Christ in their community? Luke says that "After this prayer, the building where they were meeting shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. And they preached God's message with boldness." (Acts 4:30)

**Parallels between Pentecostal and Latter Rain praying**

It is my conviction that the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last days will come when we carry within our own bones these same three longings; a deep sense of personal weakness in the face of the task God has given us so that we call out to God for divine aid; a deep desire for boldness to share the gospel with the thousands who are without Jesus; and a powerful yearning to see Christ exalted and honoured in the face of ridicule and contempt.

As I have mentioned, I believe these three characteristics for prayer are a model for us to use today. Let me try and make the parallel a little clearer between the prayers of the early disciples and the prayers of God's people in the last generation.

Consider the content of Peter's first preaching was given under the outpouring of the early rain of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. The people responded to Peter's identification of their sin by asking, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37) Peter replied that they should repent, but Luke also adds, that "Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!" (Acts 2:40)

There are three important details to notice in this text:

First, Peter is personally passionate about what he was doing as it says that he was preaching "strongly".

Second, Peter was pleading. He was "urging", trying to persuade the people to change their minds.

Thirdly, this passionate pleading was regarding a call to be separate, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!" (Acts 2:40) Peter's passionate pleading was a call

to separate and to come out of that "corrupt generation." This was a call to be holy.

Importantly, these three characteristics are seen in the final call to be given by God's people who will take the message to the whole world. In Revelation 18 John writes, "After all this I saw another angel come down from heaven with great authority, and the earth grew bright with his splendour. He gave a mighty shout, "Babylon is fallen—that great city is fallen!... Then I heard another voice calling from heaven, "Come away from her, my people. Do not take part in her sins, or you will be punished with her. For her sins are piled as high as heaven, and God is ready to judge her for her evil deeds." (Revelation 18:1-2,4-5)

This repetition of the second angels' message (that comes after the third angel's message) will echo around the world as a passionate pleading to repent and separate from a generation that is under God's judgement. This is the task that God has given his people to prepare the world for the second coming of Jesus.

I think the parallels between Peter's preaching and the final call in Revelation are striking. But there is something much more important to notice. What will enable the last generation to passionately plead with people to lead morally holy lives, to "come out" and avoid God's judgement? I believe that this will only occur when the last generation shares the same three motivations that lay heavily on the hearts of these first disciples.

**A very disturbing truth**

I am convinced that such praying must be renewed in the lives of God's people today. However, let me share with you a quotation that continues to disturb me. "What we need is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. *Without this, we are no more fitted to go forth to the world than were the disciples after the crucifixion of their Lord. Jesus knew their destitution, and told them to tarry in Jerusalem until they should be endowed with power from on high.*" (1 Selected Messages, 412) Though the disciples had spent three years with Jesus, had preached, healed diseases, and cast out evil spirits, they were not ready to take the gospel to the ends of the world.

Could we be in the same situation? Is it possible that we have been useful to God as the disciples were, but for the message of the gospel to impact the 6,000,000 people around the world, a greater work of the Holy Spirit is necessary?

I would like to suggest that there is a power that wishes to give his people that they have never experienced before. But like the experience of the revival that occurred at Pentecost, and in every revival since, this final outpouring of power will only come when God's people recognise their extreme weakness and come to him as a body, on their knees. •

**Questions to reflect on**

- *Like the early disciples, have we been behaving foolishly towards each other when we should have more important things on our minds?*
- *Have we a clear vision and compulsion to take the gospel to every part of our world, at least to every part of our own country?*
- *Do we feel burdened by our weakness, knowing that our task is not possible for such a few people to fulfil unless God intervenes with divine power to propel his message into the far reaching corners of the world?*
- *Do we have a burden to be bold in reaching lost people for God?*
- *Do we carry such a passion for the honour of Christ, that we will cry out to God for him to be exalted in the face of a culture that scoffs at him?*

# THE INTERCEDING LEADER

## *What Happens When We Pray?*



Let me begin with a confession. When I was asked to go to Iceland as the Conference President, I believe a large part of it was due

to the fact that prayer was such a big part of my life and ministry. However, when I arrived, I found I had “more important” things to do than pray. I was just so busy doing all sorts of good things. Amazingly, after just a few months, I was doing the very things that I had preached and argued against for the previous eight years of ministry.

Don’t get me wrong -- I did pray. But I prayed more to get myself out of trouble rather than praying to intercede for others.

### **A Question For God**

Unfortunately there is only so long you can survive like that, particularly as a leader. It was then that I asked God a question I am rather embarrassed to even mention. “Father,” I asked, “What difference does it make if I pray for those in my care? I mean, I’m just one person. What difference can my prayers for those I lead really make?”

The question was barely off the tip of my tongue when the story of Moses flashed into my mind. You know the story -- it’s found in Exodus 17:8-16 which you may like to read before going further. Soon after the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea, they were grumbling about having no water at Rephidim. It was then that the Amalekites arrived to do battle. Moses, along with Aaron and Hur stand on the hilltop with the battle raging in the valley. As long as Moses had his hands in the air, interceding for his people below, the Israelites would be winning. The moment he put them down, the Amalekites took the upper hand.

As I thought through this story, it struck me as never before just how much depends on a leader’s prayers.

### **Who Are The Leaders?**

But when we say “leader”, who are we talking about? One of the classic definitions of leadership is that “leadership is influence”. A leader is someone who influences others. It may be a formal leader like a pastor or Conference president. However it is just as much a mother or a grandfather, a Sabbath School teacher or a deacon. If you are influencing people for God, then you are his leader. So this story about Moses applies to you too!

### **What Happens When A Leader Prays?**

Let me share seven reflections on prayer and your leadership for God.

**1. It is my work as a leader to pray for my people in battle, not for the people to pray for the leader to fight -- because the enemy is too large,** “Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” (v9) I don’t think we can afford to underestimate the power of this point.

Why was Moses praying when everyone else was fighting? I don’t think it was because he was too old or he wanted a cushy job. As we see in this story, praying can be very hard work indeed. Rather, Moses was praying because he was the leader -- it was his divine responsibility as a leader to intercede for his people. Can you imagine the outcome of the battle if Moses was in the valley and all the soldiers were on top of the hill? The outcome of the battle depended on Moses praying for his soldiers to fight because the enemy was far too big!

There is an important biblical principle that those who are the leaders have the God-given responsibility to be intercessors for those they lead. At the beginning of Acts, the apostles did not have enough time to deal with all of the food handouts for the widows. So the apostles decided to appoint some others for this job concluding, “We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:3-4) For these leaders of the early church, prayer was their highest priority. It was the same for Moses. Prayer for Moses was the key to success and as a leader it was his glorious responsibility to pray.

This really challenges my job description. When I am overburdened as a Conference President, do I give some of my responsibilities to others so I can pray more for those I lead? If not, then who is going to do the praying? Do I just hope someone else is going to do it? If prayer is the key to victory, as a leader should I not be at the forefront of its promotion, revealed through my own example?

Prayer ministry often seems to be sidelined as an “optional add-on” to church work. I believe this is a grave mistake. We need to put it structurally back into the heart of our work for God. The enemy is too big for it not to be.

**2. I lead as an intercessor when I am deliberately visible in praying for my people,** “Moses said to Joshua... ‘Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.’” (v9) Moses tells Joshua that he is going on top of the mountain to pray. He wasn’t in a room somewhere where no-one could see him, though he must have had plenty of private praying too. But when it came to battle, he was praying out

there where his people could see him.

He wasn't visible to show off. He was visible to encourage his soldiers. Are you visible as a leader in prayer? When people see you on top of the mountain, what do they see you doing? Do they see you praying for them? What can you do to become a visible intercessor for the people you influence?

**3. I lead for God because I pray for those I lead -- not just because I am nice or skilful,** "So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill." (v10) Israel's destiny in this battle was not shaped just because Moses was a wise man. Their destiny was shaped because he was praying for them. How easy it is for us to think otherwise -- to rationalise other things as more important.

You can lead, but you can only lead for God if you are a spiritual person. It is very hard to lead for God if prayer does not saturate your life. Are we spiritual enough to be characterised as people of prayer, or are we just cool and trendy leaders, progressive or intellectual? As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon urged, "It is extraordinary spiritual unction, not extraordinary intellectual power that we need." (Deuvel, Wesley, *Ablaze for God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989, p17)).

When I have asked young people today "Who inspires you spiritually?", I am astonished at how regularly they look at me a little confused and answer, "Well, no-one really." Post-modern people are crying out to see authentic spiritual leadership, and I believe this begins when people see the leader praying.

**4. The success of my people in battle rises and falls on my intercession as a leader,** "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning." (v11) I should imagine that the soldiers fighting the Amalekites didn't stop praying until the battle was over. But the outcome didn't hinge on their prayers. The outcome of the battle was because of Moses' prayers. So as

a leader, are you prepared to saturate your soldiers in prayer? Are you prepared to pay the price in time and in the sacrifice of other "more important things" to pray for your people?

**5. My ability as a leader to intercede and thus for the battle to be won, is dependent upon my fellow leaders who support me in prayer,** "When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up -- one on one side, one on the other -- so that his hands remained steady till sunset." (v12) Moses spoke face to face with God as no other man has done. But if the praying was left only to him, the battle would still have been lost. He got too tired praying by himself. So who did he get to help him? It wasn't a couple of intercessors who worked at the sidelines. It was Aaron and Hur -- Moses' top leaders. Are your top leaders with you in prayer? Is your spouse or your fellow church elders with you? Who will support you in prayer when you get tired? You must have somebody. Moses couldn't do it alone. Nor can you.

**6. The success of the battle was not due to the sincerity of an opening prayer that dedicated the rest of the day to God, but of perseverance till the battle was finished,** "Aaron and Hur held his hands up -- one on one side, one on the other -- so that his hands remained steady till sunset." (v12) Even if Moses had prayed for almost the whole day, Israel would have lost. Like Elijah who prayed seven times until the cloud appeared, Moses only stopped praying when the battle was won. How much time to we spend praying for the defeat of the army, or are our prayers just something we do at the beginning of the day to make us feel good? The battle is real, and Satan isn't planning on giving up till it really is over. Neither can we.

**7. Prayer is still the reason for victory, even though other people and other methods may get the credit,** "So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword." (v13) It is interesting that it

doesn't say that Moses overcame the Amalekites with prayer. This highlights the inextricable relationship between hard work and prayer. No matter how hard we fight, God still holds the outcome in his hands as we pray. No matter how hard we pray, there must be lots of energy and sacrifice in the valley. Are you prepared to do a work that few may see as important? As an intercessor, are you happy for others to get the credit?

### Praying On The Hilltops

The enemy is very large and powerful. The signs of his power at work in the world is unparalleled in earth's history, and the fulfilment of prophecy is all around us. Jesus is coming soon. Yet the enemy cannot be outwitted simply by new plans and smart ideas. The enemy is at work in the spiritual realm, which can only be combated as our plans and ideas are saturated, drenched completely, in prayer. But I cannot intercede and overcome the enemy by myself. I need someone to pray with me. Who will pray with me for the defeat of the enemy? The good news is that when God's leaders pray together, the most powerful enemy doesn't have a chance.

Spurgeon once cried, "we need red-hot, white-hot men who glow with intense heat; whom you cannot approach without feeling that your heart is getting warmer; who burn their way in all positions straight on to the desired work; men like thunderbolts flung from Jehovah's hand, crashing through every opposing thing, till they have reached the target aimed at; men impelled by Omnipotence." (Ibid., p18.)

Such leaders, who today dare to stand praying on the hilltops, will exert an influence and witness in our communities and to the watching universe, that will be unparalleled in all of earth's history. •

*"we need red-hot, white-hot men who glow with intense heat; whom you cannot approach without feeling that your heart is getting warmer; who burn their way in all positions straight on to the desired work"*  
Charles Spurgeon

# A PASTOR'S PRAYERS

## *Our priorities in prayer*



Arthur Matthew believes that “The spiritual history of a mission or church is written in its prayer life.” (W Deuwel, *Mighty Prevailing Prayer*, 22) Over one hundred and fifty years ago, the famous preacher, Robert Murray

M'Cheyne, also declared that “What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more.” (DA Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* 16)

Taken together, I would like to suggest that these thoughts lead us to the inevitable conclusion that “what a church is alone on her knees before God, that she is, and no more.” And indeed, I would further suggest that “what a church may become in the future, is dependent on what she is on her knees before God, *and no more.*”

With this in mind, we are going to carry out a simple survey of Paul's prayers, in Ephesians 1 and 3; Philippians 1; Colossians 1; and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. We will look at two characteristics of the way Paul prayed, followed by five priorities that shaped the content of his prayers. By doing this, we hope to understand the priorities that can help shape our own prayers, but more than that, to understand the spiritual graces that God is looking to see growing within his people.

### Two characteristics of Paul's prayers

**Firstly, Paul's intercession was passionate and continuous.**

- Ephesians “...I have never stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly...” (1:15-16)
- Philippians “Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. I always pray for you...” (1:3-4)
- Colossians “We always pray for you...” (1:3)
- 1 Thessalonians “We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly...” (1:2)
- 2 Thessalonians “Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you... And so we keep on praying for you,” (1:3,11)

**Secondly, the reason that Paul's intercession was passionate and continuous was because of he was inspired by the members growth in perfection.**

Let me explain.

There are two notable examples of perfection in the Bible. The first example of perfection is Job. “Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless [KJV, perfect] and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.” (Job 2:3)

But why does God consider Job perfect? Because in spite of the turmoil in his life, Job trusted God completely.

A second example of perfection is the Father. In Matthew 5, Jesus calls us to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48). And why is God considered perfect? Because “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:45) In other words, God loves his enemies as well as his friends.

So complete trust in God vertically, and unconditional love to people horizontally (to even our enemies) are the hallmarks of Christian perfection. With this in mind, notice the way Paul introduces his prayers:

- Ephesians 1:15-16 “Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for Christians everywhere, I have never stopped thanking God for you...”
- Colossians 1:3-4 “We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard that you trust in Christ Jesus and that you love all of God's people.”
- 1 Thessalonians 1:3 “As we talk to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds...”
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3 “Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other.”

As Paul also wrote to the Galatians, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6) The reason Paul is motivated to pray passionately is because his members were demonstrating authentic Christianity, and this authenticity was providing their evangelistic witness. As Paul shares himself, “...Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love...” (1 Thessalonians 3:6)

So when Paul began to define for himself the hallmarks of a healthy church it wasn't their creative and contemporary worship service that caught his attention. It was much simpler. What seemed to be at the forefront of Paul's mind as he knelt down to pray, was seeing faith and love in action.

### Five priorities that shaped Paul's prayers

Now we come to the content of Paul's prayers. What did Paul focus on when he fell to his knees?

**Firstly, Paul prioritises praying for the transfer of supernatural power from Heaven to earth.**

- Ephesians 1:18-19 “I want you to realise what a rich and glorious inheritance he has given to his people. I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him...”
- Ephesians 3:16, 20 “I pray that from his glorious, unlimited

resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit.... Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope..."

- Colossians 1:11 "We also pray that you will be strengthened with his glorious power..."
- 2 Thessalonians 1:11 "And we pray that God, by his power, will fulfil all your good intentions and faithful deeds."

Paul expects two things to happen. He expects God's power to come and make a tangible difference in the people's lives, but he also prays that the people understand this! It seems that without Paul's prayers, the people would not receive the power, and they would also remain ignorant of what was available for them. Paul's prayers would bring both illumination and power.

### **Secondly, Paul prioritises praying for the awakening and growing of the mind.**

I think this is particularly important for us to think about today where our culture bombards us continually with visual and emotional stimuli to get us to respond without thinking so much I think it was probably the same in Paul's day. Paul does not want the mind to become sleepy, so he is praying for his members minds to remain extremely alert, for the mind is where they grasp the great things of God.

- Ephesians 1:16-18 "I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand... hope... inheritance... power..."
- Philippians 1 9-10 "...and that you will keep on growing in your knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters..."
- Colossians 1:6,9 "that very first day you heard and understood the truth about God's great kindness to sinners..... We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom."

Notice in these texts how growth in the knowledge of God, and having the wisdom to know how to apply it, is a supernatural task. Without prayer, knowledge and wisdom would not be available. Therefore a church full of knowledge and wisdom is a church that is characterised by prayer.

### **Thirdly, Paul prioritises praying for the replacement of human nature with the divine.**

Notice how Paul wants the people to be "filled" i.e. he sees that what is already inside needs to be replaced by something from above:

- Ephesians 1:18 "I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light..."
- Ephesians 3:16-17a "I pray that... he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being..."
- Philippians 1:11 "May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation..."
- Colossians 1:11 "May you be filled with joy..."

### **Fourthly, Paul prioritises praying for a growing personal intimacy with Jesus.**

Look at how Paul sees our life as an ever growing experiential relationship.

- Ephesians 1:17 "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better."
- Ephesians 3:16-17 "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."
- Colossians 1:10 "All the while, you will learn to know God better and better..."

### **Fifthly, Paul prioritises praying that Christ will be given honour and glory through his people.**

- Ephesians 3:20 "Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen."
- Philippians 1:11 "May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—those good things that are produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God."
- Colossians 1:9-10 "So we have continued praying for you ever since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom. Then the way you live will always honour and please the Lord..."
- 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 "And so we keep on praying for you, that our God will make you worthy of the life to which he called you. And we pray that God, by his power, will fulfil all your good intentions and faithful deeds. Then everyone will give honour to the name of our Lord Jesus because of you, and you will be honoured along with him."

### **What Paul's prayer priorities reveal**

We have noticed that Paul regularly prays for five things: the transfer of supernatural power from Heaven to earth; the awakening and growing of the mind to be centred on God; the replacement of human nature with the divine; a growing personal intimacy with Jesus; that Christ be honoured and glorified through the life of his people.

However I really believe that if these are Paul's prayer priorities, then they automatically become what Paul would consider to be the hallmarks of a healthy growing church. Today we are often frantically trying all sorts of interesting schemes to assess what a healthy church is, and how to make it so. In this context, I would like to recommend to you Paul's hallmarks for a spiritually healthy church, all of which use prayer for them become a reality wherever you might live:

1. The evidence of increasing faith and love (perfection)
2. The presence and action of supernatural power
3. The focus on actively growing minds
4. The revelation of God's nature through us
5. The openness to intimacy with Jesus
6. The public honouring of Christ

When you pray, what do you pray for? I would like to challenge you to read through Paul's prayers for yourself, and then to pray them, and allow his priorities to shape your own future, and the future of your church. •

# THE INTIMATE LEADER

## *What Happens When Leaders Don't Pray*



In *What Happens When Leaders Pray*, we see the remarkable consequences of a leader's prayer in Exodus 17:8-16, and

how this applies to all of us who want to influence others for God. But what happens when we don't pray?

### **My Background**

When I was a teenager, I attended a prestigious private school. My classmates were the children of diplomats and of the wealthiest people in the country. As a student I won scholarships, was the captain of various sports teams, and won awards for everything. I never failed at anything I wanted to do.

When I began working as a pastor, everything seemed to be turned upside down. Within two years, I went through a gruelling process. After a trip to West Africa, I had to be hospitalised, and as a consequence lost my job. At the same time, due to gossip that seemed to circulate everywhere, I also lost my reputation. Sometime later, the doctors found a problem with my heart that seemed to be the cause of my continual tiredness. Finally, the relationship with my girlfriend of a few years ended. I felt as though God was systematically breaking everything I had to depend on.

### **The Point of Everything**

When everything seemed the darkest, God performed an amazing miracle which completely restored my health and energy. However, some months afterwards I found myself complaining to God about my situation. I knew it was sin to complain when God had been so good to me, but I did it anyway. From that moment on, my energy that God had miraculously given to me, began to seep away.

For two months I was angry. Finally, I complained one day, "Father, this is not fair. You have taken everything away from me -- and I have nothing left!"

I wasn't expecting a reply, but the voice of the Holy Spirit was unmistakable. "Yes," he replied, "That is the point."

I was stunned. God wanted me with nothing?

The reason is very simple, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

If we try to work in our own strength, we don't have a chance against a supernatural enemy. No wonder God wants us with nothing, for he wants to fill us totally with Heavenly power. As this realisation began to dawn on me, my spiritual life was transformed. I found a new intimacy with God which was wonderful.

### **The Move to Iceland**

At the age of thirty-three, I was asked to go to Iceland as the Conference president. Now I was a church administrator. I had lots of important meetings to lead and plans to create. I was busy doing great things, but as I watched, everything that I seemed to try and do began to fall apart. And I personally began to crumple. After a couple of years, I could barely muster enough energy to chair a meeting, and going to church was almost more than I could cope with.

Somehow, I could never work out why. I blamed the pressures -- the gossip and criticism that leaders always have to face. But the pressures only increased and I had nothing more to give.

### **The Breakthrough**

In desperation, I began to study the life of Moses. I wanted to know how he dealt with so much pressure.

One day as I was praying, a voice suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

"The trials of the past few years have not come because the people have been critical or nasty. They have come because you have not spent time face to face with me."

Yet again, I was stunned as the enormity of it all began to sink in. But God had more to say.

"I have allowed you to watch everything fall apart around you, so you will know how strong you really are."

I cried. After learning all these painful lessons years before, how could I have forgotten everything that God had taught me about dependence upon him? To say that this was a humbling experience would be a gross understatement. But God was absolutely right. I had failed to remain intimate with him.

And of course, the cost of this failure was high, both to myself, and to those I had been called to lead.

We don't become intimate with God because we read the Bible or pray, though we cannot be intimate with God without these things. The foundation of intimacy is built on an attitude of the heart which propels us towards the person of God. I believe we as leaders can easily fail because our relationship with God becomes something we squeeze into our diaries, rather than a deep and ever present craving for the living God in the very depths of our souls.

### **Moses' Intimacy With God**

So how do we develop an intimacy with God that enables us to lead with supernatural power? Let me share what I have learned from the story of Moses.

After Israel's spiritual prostitution

at the golden calf, God tells Moses, "Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you... But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you along the way." (Exodus 32:34a, 33:3)

But for Moses, getting to Canaan, even being led by God's angel was not enough. Moses wanted more than that -- much more.

In the conversation that follows, Moses expresses three longings that he has for God. Each longing highlights what it means to hunger for deeper intimacy with God. If we want to truly lead people for God while guarding against doing it in our own strength, I believe these longings should become ours as well.

*"The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'"*

*Exodus 33:14*

### **1. Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes by knowing God himself.**

When Moses learns that God is not going to accompany them to Canaan, "Moses said to the LORD, 'You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favour with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people.'" (Exodus 33:12-13)

Moses doesn't beg for leadership skills and success to take the Israelites to Canaan. He begs God to teach him His ways, that he may know and please Him. It wasn't getting there that counted, but knowing God.

However, Moses is not simply wanting to know about God. In Hebrew thought, to know someone was to have deep and intimate

association, so intimate that this word is also used to describe sexual unity. If Moses is to lead God's people, Moses wants to make it very clear that his ability to lead is dependent on his depth of knowing God.

What is the secret of our leadership? How many of us pride ourselves on getting the job done by hard work or having the right talents and training? When God chose Moses, he chose someone who didn't think he had any skills, and thus felt unqualified when finding himself as a leader. But Moses didn't cry, "Help, how do I lead?", but rather, "Lord, teach me know you!" Knowing God is the source of everything.

### **2. Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes by walking in God's presence.**

In response to Moses desire to know God, "The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'" (v14) God is going to teach Moses how to know him by walking with him. God reveals himself to us not simply in the transfer of ideas from his mind to ours, but as he walks alongside us. To know God is to walk in his presence.

However, as a leader, Moses is not satisfied with God's presence for himself. Before Moses is willing to move out from Sinai, he wants God's assurance that he will also walk with his people, "Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?'" (v15-16)

For Moses, the presence of God was not something that was quietly assumed to exist. It was meant to be the visible hallmark of the community of God's people, and Moses was not going anywhere without it -- even if God was willing to send an angel to get them to Canaan.

What defines success for us? Is simply arriving in the Promised Land our primary objective, or is our focus fixed supremely on the God who has called us to that place? When people look at us and those we lead, is the presence of God the thing that they can't help noticing? Indeed, could there be anything more irresistible to

the watching world than the visible presence of God?

### **3. Leaders hunger for an intimacy with God that comes with seeing God's glory.**

Once Moses had received an assurance that God would teach him his ways, and walk with him and his people, "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.'" (v18)

What do you think Moses expected to see? Moses had already stood face to face with God at the burning bush and more recently in the tent of meeting. Was Moses simply searching for the spectacular?

There comes a point in a leader's life when you realise that all the things you thought you had to offer others are actually worthless. Your greatest efforts and your unique skills pale into insignificance compared to the power of our God. And like Moses, we recognise that if God does not show us his ways and walk with us, we cannot lead -- for we are nothing.

It is then that leaders finds themselves falling on God. The only thing that matters is to see him, because he, as God, is what matters. It is not simply what God can do that counts, but knowing him. I believe that is why Moses dared to ask to see the glory of the Almighty God. He knew that knowing more and more of God was his only hope, and knowing God would come in the supreme and most intimate way, through a revelation of God's glory. Moses longed to see into the very heart of his Creator, and God revealed himself to his friend.

*"No earthly power or skill or learning can supply the place of God's immediate presence."*

### **The consequence of intimacy with God: reflected glory**

When God appeared to Moses -- as to no other man -- it wasn't the brightness of the light that surrounded God that caught his attention. It was God's character that Moses wrote about, "And he passed in front of



Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exodus 34:6)

And this character had a dramatic effect. Having gained another assurance of God's continual presence with himself and his people, Moses treks down the mountain. But "he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him." (Exodus 34:29b-30)

This reveals the inevitable consequence of intimacy with God. Others will see it in our faces, though we will not know it.

Ellen White summarises the importance of this experience for Moses, "This experience, above all else the assurance that God would hear his prayer and that the divine presence would attend him, was of more value to Moses as a leader than the learning of Egypt or all his attainments in military science. No earthly power or skill or learning can supply the place of God's immediate presence. In the history of Moses we may see what intimate communion with God it is man's privilege to enjoy." (4T533)

And this means for us too.

#### Another new beginning

Today, I can so clearly see how my intimacy with Christ is directly and powerfully related to everything I do, and everything I am. I do not pray because it is important. I pray because I am desperate. How can I do anything without the power and direction of the living God? The moment I break my intimacy with my Father, what do I have to offer?

I think I am beginning to understand what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

The good news is that no matter how far we may have drifted in our leadership for God, or how tired we are, intimacy with God can be regained. And as long as we remain in him, we really will bear much fruit. •

## THE EMPTY LEADER

### *How to lead with nothing*



Have you ever wondered why Jesus prayed so much -- sometime even all night? It has often puzzled me. Was it because Jesus had more people on his prayer list than I do? And why couldn't he just have prayed a couple of words to his Father dedicating the next day to God? I don't think I am the only one who has tried to pray as long as possible before giving up and going to sleep.

But it is not just Jesus who has spent much time in prayer. Martin Luther has always been well known for saying, "If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer." (*Quoted in, Power Through Prayer, The Complete Works of E M Bounds, p461*). Did Luther have lots of people on his prayer list too?

But it is Jesus' praying that bothers me the most. If Jesus needed to pray so much, can I survive with less?

#### Redefining the Peter Principle

To help answer this question, we perhaps need to know what Jesus was praying about. To try and understand this, let's first consider a rather amusing management principle called the "Peter Principle."

The Peter Principle cynically states that "people are promoted to their level of incompetence." In other words, people are continually promoted upwards, and only stop when their abilities become less than the job requires. When you think of some of the people you know, you may be tempted to chuckle.

But wait a moment. When God has a work to do, what type of person does he look for? There are lots of interesting case studies in the Bible.

When God called Jeremiah to

work for him, he called a man without experience. As a result Jeremiah complained, "Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." (Jeremiah 1:6)

When God called Moses, he called a man who felt insignificant. Consequently he thought God should think again, "But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11)

*If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer."*

When God called Isaiah, he called a man who was overwhelmed by his own sinful inadequacy. Isaiah's first response when God appeared to him was, "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:5)

And what about the disciples? Did Jesus choose Peter after his thinking was clear and mature? Was Thomas picked after he had sorted through his

doubts? Were the sons of Thunder asked to join the team because they were models of tact and empathy with frail people? Every one of them -- personally handicapped by Jesus -- deserted Jesus in Gethsemane. And even after the resurrection when Jesus instructed his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the power of the Holy Spirit, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' Would you want these ministerial interns working in your church?

When God called these people, he called people with some serious rough edges. Even under the direct teaching of Jesus, the disciple's rough edges lasted for a number of years. But this is not how we normally choose people to work with us. We are looking to use the discerning, the polished, and the mature.

Perhaps the Peter Principle isn't just a funny one-liner, because it seems that God uses it. He specifically seems to call people who don't want the job, those who struggle at doing the job, and those who complain that it is impossible for them to do the job.

#### The leaders God is looking for

Yet in spite of their initial reactions, all the examples we have listed eventually reached a point in their journey where they realised they were helplessness. Like the disciples in the upper room, they felt compelled to answer God's call, but knew they were empty of everything necessary to complete it. Sometimes they reached this point immediately, as when God called Isaiah. Or sometimes it was found after they had made a terrible mess trying to do it by themselves -- and failed -- like Moses.

And so every leader who will truly carry an influence for God, eventually falls to their knees and cries out, "God, there's no way I can do this!" And God says, "Good. That's the response I was looking for." And taking in his hands the very rough, trembling, raw material, he begins to shape and work through us.

#### So why did Jesus pray so much?

Let's return to our original question, "Why did Jesus need to pray so much?" Could it be that Jesus was modelling for us the concept of the empty leader? Could Jesus be modelling the dependency that every

*"[God] does not always bring us to pleasant places. If he did, in our self-sufficiency we should forget that he is our helper. He longs to manifest himself to us, and to reveal the abundant supplies at our disposal, and he permits trial and disappointment to come to us that we may realise our helplessness, and learn to call upon him for aid."*

leader must have if they are to speak the Father's words and reveal the Father's character? Is he telling us that every leader must feel needy and wait to be filled from a supernatural source outside of themselves?

I used to think that the longer someone was leading for God, the stronger they became. I have radically changed my opinion. I now believe that the longer a person is called to lead for God, the weaker they become. That means that as both you and I are called to lead for God in some way or another, the longer we do it, the weaker we will become. Do you think that is strange?

Do you remember when Jesus began his ministry? His voice was ringing out across the hillside declaring loudly to everyone who would listen, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:3,6) Jesus appears to be looking for followers who feel empty inside, people who feel just as needy for his Father as he was. Consequently, everyday, and sometimes all night, Jesus was on his knees with his Father, an empty vessel, ready to be filled from above.

After Jesus, perhaps the greatest leader the world has seen modelling the empty leader was Moses. And Moses modelled this quite literally. When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery, God didn't give him a map and a set of instructions on how to reach the promised land. Every day Moses had to follow the cloud. And even though he was God's leader, Moses began his morning going out for a short walk

with an empty manna basket in his hands.

#### Implications of empty leadership

This concept of the leader with an empty manna bowl challenges a lot of things about the way we live and influence others for God. Here are five of them.

**Firstly, the concept of the empty leader challenges the way we think about ourselves and the work God has given us.** Perhaps you feel totally overwhelmed by the work God has given you to do right now. Perhaps you think that God has made a mistake. Maybe you or others have made bad decisions which have put you where you are. But perhaps not. Perhaps God has deliberately brought you to your level of incompetency, that he may draw you into deeper intimacy and dependence on himself.

Ellen White makes this rather thought-provoking statement, "[God] does not always bring us to pleasant places. If he did, in our self-sufficiency we should forget that he is our helper. He longs to manifest himself to us, and to reveal the abundant supplies at our disposal, and he permits trial and disappointment to come to us that we may realise our helplessness, and learn to call upon him for aid. He can cause cooling streams to flow from the flinty rock. We shall never know, until we are face to face with God, when we shall see as we are seen, and know as we are known, how many burdens he has borne for us, and how many burdens he would have been glad to bear, if, with childlike faith, we had brought them to him." Ellen White, *Rephidim*, (Review and Herald, April 7, 1903).

It does not really matter how you have arrived at where you are today. What matter's is that we hear God's call, God calling us to deeper dependence on him -- so he may become everything we need.

**Secondly, the concept of the empty leader challenges the way we think about spiritual gifts.** There is often the temptation to think that "God couldn't possibly be calling me because I'm not good at anything." But as we have seen in the biblical examples so far, God didn't necessarily call people who already had the right spiritual gifts. He often called people and then equipped them as they began to work with him.

Again, Ellen White makes an interestingly observation, "The divine call to Moses in the desert found him distrustful of self. He realized his unfitness for the position to which God had called him; but having accepted the trust, he became a polished instrument in the hand of God to accomplish the greatest work ever committed to mortals. Had Moses trusted to his own strength and wisdom, and eagerly accepted the great charge, he would have evinced his entire unfitness for such a work. The fact that a man feels his own weakness is at least some evidence that he realizes the magnitude of the work appointed him, and this gives room for hope that he will make God his counsellor and his strength." (Ye Shall Receive Power, 257).

Indeed, thinking you are already equipped can prove to be dangerous. I always remember asking a young theology student why he wanted to enter ministry. His reply startled me. "Well," he said, "I think I have a lot to offer." I wanted to grab hold of him and give him a good shake and shout loudly into both ears, "Who cares what you have to offer! It's not about you! It's about what God can do through you!" Fortunately, I didn't do that, but I have wondered since if I should have. I heard he spent about a year in ministry and then dropped out.

Just because you don't think you are gifted to do a work for God, doesn't mean he is not calling you. We work because God calls, not because we are skilful -- and we leave the equipping to him.

**Thirdly, the concept of the**

**empty leader challenges the way we view others who are making a mess of things.** It is easy to criticise the errors of others. However, may be we are criticising someone whom God has recently called to their level of incompetency. We see weak, faithless, and immature people with bad judgment. Maybe God is overjoyed because he sees people whose deepest desire in their hearts is to work and sacrifice for him. But perhaps in their zeal they have jumped too hastily out of the boat into unexpected choppy water. Our task is not to criticise those who are sinking for their over enthusiasm, but to hold out our hands and pick them up, and in their disappointment set them back on track, with huge amounts of grace.

**Fourthly, the concept of the empty leader challenges the way we plan for the future.** Around the time I was ready to leave college someone asked me what my plans were for the future. I was a little surprised and said I didn't have plans. I just wanted to focus on the work that God had given me for that moment. He obviously felt sorry for me and encouraged me to think about spend some time planning.

As a pastor and church administrator, I know it is important to plan. And having completed a degree on leadership, I have plenty of books that remind me about that on my shelf. I know you cannot lead if you don't have a plan and a purpose, but I can't help believing that true spiritual leadership, true success for God, is rooted more in realising that when you get up in the morning, you know you are empty inside, and you know before you go out of the door, your empty manna basket needs to be filled.

**Fifthly, the concept of the empty leader challenges the way leaders pray.** I think Moses' manna collecting must have affected his praying. If he knew if he didn't collect manna, he would die. With that thought at the back of his mind, he must have prayed hard. I think in the morning as he surveyed the camp and reflected on his influence with his other leaders, and considered the resources required to feed and water such a multitude, and thought about his own capacity to love his enemies, he must always have noticed something lacking. And he

knew that only God could fill his need. As he considered these things, Moses must have realised that only through prayer and a supernatural reply, could his empty basket be filled.

And sometimes, when he realised the greatness of the task and how empty he was inside, I think he must have prayed all night.

**When empty leaders pray**

What happens when leaders recognise their own emptiness, and pray to God lifting high their empty manna basket? I think Paul's own confession sums this up rather well. "When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on the God's power." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

When leaders realise their emptiness, the Spirit of God descends to fill the void. What happens then? I can't be certain what will happen to you. I can see what happened to Paul in Corinth. And I do know that after the disciples tried this at Pentecost, the whole world was turned upside down. •

*"The fact that a man feels his own weakness is at least some evidence that he realizes the magnitude of the work appointed him, and this gives room for hope that he will make God his counsellor and his strength."*

# THE EMBATTLED LEADER

## *Leading under pressure*



I have come to the conclusion that when someone stamps on your toes, it always hurts. I used to think that perhaps the more it

happened, the more I would get used to it and grow a tough skin. I think that was an illusion. It's hard to have someone stamp on your toes without at least a small tear coming to the corner of your eye. Many times there's a lot more that's being choked back.

How about you? As a leader for God, wherever and however you may serve him, how do you cope when people unjustly oppose you?

Numbers 11-20 describes six occasions where the Israelites opposed and grumbled against their leader, and how Moses responded each time. Interestingly, when Moses is opposed, he always reacts the same way (except for the notable time when Moses completely lost it and started grumbling himself -- but that is another story).

Let's consider these six occasions where Moses was in conflict as a leader, observe how he reacted, and discover what we can learn from this.

### **Conflict 1: The people complain that their leader is making life difficult for them (Numbers 11:1-3).**

"Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. (v1)

What did Moses say then? "Yes, you rebels, you deserve what God is doing to you! You should stop your complaining because it is getting really hard to hear this all the time." Actually, he doesn't say that. What the Bible actually says is, "When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down."

God was exercising his justice. I could imagine myself on the sidelines cheering God on. It's at times like this when I am singing along with David, "Send forth lightning and scatter the enemies; shoot your arrows and rout them." (Psalm 144:6)

I want my enemies to perish in God's hands. However, there was something bold growing within Moses that caused him to begin to pray for God's justice to be halted. Moses evidently didn't want these rebellious people to get what God thought they deserved.

### **Conflict 2: The jealousy of relatives irritate their egos so much, they begin to make wild criticisms. (Numbers 12).**

This time the problems are closer to home. The criticism is from Moses' own siblings. Aaron, the soon to be God-chosen High Priest, and Miriam, the inspired one who led the singing of the crossing of the Red Sea. "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" (v1)

Imagine how painful it must have been to hear their criticism and jealousy moving along the family grapevine. It's one thing to criticism from people you hardly know, but hearing it from those closest to you is much harder.

God sent just punishment for Miriam. After God rebuked the siblings, "the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow." (v12) What did Moses do? Did he thank God for his justice? Oh no. "So Moses cried out to the Lord, "O God, please heal her!" (v13) And she was.

Moses is praying for sinful people again. Evidently the compassion of Moses for the weaknesses of sinful

people was a greater drive than his desire to see them punished.

### **Conflict 3: The people are so angry they want to get rid of their leader (Numbers 13-14).**

The group of spies come back with their report that the promised land isn't what they thought it would be. "That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron... And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (14:1-4)

This time, Moses doesn't wait for God to say or do anything. He knows what is about to happen. So "Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there." (v5) As Joshua pleads with the people not to rebel against God for he can easily lead them into this very good land, all the people ignored him and the "whole assembly talked about stoning them." (v10)

As Moses is facedown on the ground in front of this murderous crowd, God promises Moses for the second time, "I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." (v12)

Can you imagine Moses with his face in the dirt thinking, "Yes Lord, how can such a group of people possibly be deserving of your blessings? Do what you did at the time of Noah. Let's start again." Would you be thinking something different?

Moses was. In an astonishing plea, Moses reminded God to remember that he is a merciful God, "slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion" (v18) And though God is going to follow through with judgement, he says to Moses, "I have forgiven them, as you have asked." (v20)

What was Moses thinking? Doesn't he remember that the people

don't want his leadership any more?

**Conflict 4: The assistant leaders gang up against the leader (Numbers 16).**

Moses had just experienced jealousy from his inner family, now he experienced it from his inner leadership circle. Along with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, 250 well-known community leaders rise against Moses, "They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (v3)

What do you do when your family conspires against you? Or your whole church board gangs up together? What do you do when your closest supporters coordinate themselves to replace you?

I'm not sure there is an answer to this exactly. When it happens, it can be so emotionally overwhelming that any solution seems inadequate. But we know what Moses did, "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown." (v4) Whatever the help is, it comes when we are where Moses was -- "facedown", because all hope and help is found in prayer. Despite the army of leaders against him, Moses did not give up. Moses received power when he was "facedown", took hold of God, and spoke his words again.

Even in the middle of this mess, Moses is still thinking about mercy. As Korah and his followers continued their opposition, God declared again -- with a justice that was also righteous - - "separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once." But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, 'O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (v20-22)

I never cease to be amazed at Moses. When we might be thinking about finally purging those people who have been causing us so much trouble, Moses is again praying that they may be spared from God's hand.

**Conflict 5: The people blame the leader for the bad things that are happening.**

You may have thought that God's judgments against Korah and the

rebellious leaders would have had a sobering effect on the people causing them to reconsider their ways. Unfortunately not, because "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. "You have killed the Lord's people," they said." (v41)

God's justice is again announced, "Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once." (v45) Yet again, Moses falls between God's justice and the people, as he and Aaron, "fell facedown" (v45). Moses then urgently commanded his brother to run into the middle of the assembly and begin making atonement for them all, for he knew a plague from God had begun. "So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped." (v47-48)

What a scene. As God's judgments began, Moses and Aaron were rushing to their knees, rushing to be in the middle of wicked people, so that some may be saved. What were they thinking? Couldn't they hear what the people were saying about them?

**Conflict 6: No matter what the leader does, or how much he has done for them, the people still complain (Numbers 20).**

It's astonishing. The sons and daughters of those who have died in the desert are about to enter the Promised Land. After the discipline and judgements of the desert, have they avoided the mistakes of their parents and become meek and eager to learn God's ways? Just as they are about to enter the Promised Land, God decided to test them and find out. The cloud stops in a place with no water. But "They quarrelled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord!" (v3)

The moment the people finished complaining, "Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them." (v6) Again, can you imagine what Moses was thinking? "I have led these people for almost 40 years, and they are no better than their parents. They haven't learnt

a single thing. Why do I waste all my energy on them? I should go and find another job where I am appreciated."

And yes, Moses was angry. After receiving instructions from God, Moses shouts at them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (v10). And rather than speaking to the rock as God had said, Moses hit it twice. Grace pours out for the people, and they drink. But because Moses lost his cool and disobeyed God, he is barred from entering the Promised Land.

It's a complex picture. A leader pleading face down before the Lord, wanting to do the right thing, but finally being overcome by his own emotions. It's a high standard that God expects, and a tough lesson for leaders to learn. Yet in spite of himself, it was because of Moses' intercession that water flowed to quench the thirst of a rebellious nation.

After all the opposition Moses had endured during the years, would you be pleading for such people? Moses did. And when the friend of God died, Jesus came and resurrected him.

**What can we learn from Moses?**

Having reflected on these stories, what can we learn about how to cope with unjust opposition? Let me make just two observations.

**When people oppose our leadership for God, the power and perspective to cope is only found when we are "facedown".**

When those you are trying to lead rebel against you, how tempted are you to fall into deep despair? Sometimes we find ourselves teetering on the edge of desperation, battling the raging temptation to give up and find another job where people will truly appreciate us. But leaving our God-given task is what Satan would like us to do. The ability to cope with opposition does not normally come from avoiding the people we lead. Nor is the solution found in some psychological trick. The ability to cope is a supernatural empowerment that is found only when we are earnestly at prayer before our Lord.

Interesting isn't it? We seem to interact with the world very differently when we are standing up. When standing up we may be tempted to agree with God's justice, or even to call for it. But when we are on our

knees, we somehow gain a different way of thinking. When we are on our knees, we are open to a power from above which gives us new energy and a fresh perspective to lead people for another day.

**When people oppose our leadership for God, we need to learn to value mercy and grace over justice.**

What makes someone plead for mercy for those who are persecuting him? What makes someone who is suffering in front of his most vile enemies cry out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). What makes a man plead for mercy rather than justice, even at the very moment he is being hurt by his enemies?

I am not sure I understand it myself, but I am convinced that the ability to be ambassadors of grace and mercy is only found where Moses found it, time, after time, after time, "facedown" before the Lord.

I still find what Moses does rather shocking. It was noble and inspiring, but still very shocking to my natural inclinations. When coming into conflict with others, I crave justice. I don't want people to be unnecessarily punished, but I want God to give them what they deserve.

But what sort of attitude is that? Perhaps my desire for justice is actually only revenge, dressed up in pious language.

Yes, the Israelites did deserve God's judgements. If God had destroyed them all, the universe would not have imagined that God had compromised his holy and righteous character. But Moses' eyes were not looking for justice. As long as he remained on his knees, all Moses could see was grace and mercy.

**What about us?**

We could summarise Moses' example in the following way: when people oppose your leadership for God, fall to your knees quickly, and pray that those who oppose you may receive grace and mercy. This sort of praying isn't just praying on the run, though we also have to do that. Prayer that enables us to cope with injustice is praying which is done alone with God. Prayer that lays hold of a strength out of ourselves is prayer that is done like Moses, "facedown".

Ellen White states a sober truth about us, "There is no danger that the Lord will neglect the prayers of His people. The danger is that in temptation and trial they will become discouraged, and fail to persevere in prayer." (COL 175)

Has God given you people to influence for him? Don't worry when conflicts arise. Put your confidence in God. Go into his presence and plead for fresh power, and for eyes filled to the brim with mercy. And he *will* lift you up -- *and* -- those you lead. •

*There is no danger that the Lord will neglect the prayers of His people. The danger is that in temptation and trial they will become discouraged, and fail to persevere in prayer."*

## LEARNING DEPENDENCE ON GOD —AGAIN

### *How to avoid crumbling under pressure*



Sometimes I wonder if I will ever learn what God is trying to teach me. Just when I think I understand, it suddenly feels as though I know

nothing at all.

Sometimes this happens to us because we never did understand the lesson in the first place. At other times, these life lessons are like doors into new rooms that we didn't know existed before. When the time is right, God opens the door to show us that there is so much more he wants to teach us.

One of the lessons that God has repeatedly and forcefully brought back to my attention over the last twelve years is the lesson of complete and total dependence on him. As a Christian leader, I feel rather embarrassed even mentioning this again. For each time I think this lesson is forever seared into my experience, I inexplicably begin to behave as though I never learnt anything at all.

But as I don't think I am alone in this, I thought I would share with you my journey.

**Trapped In Discouragement**

God led me through another door

towards greater dependence on him just recently. Our camp-meeting speaker began his Sabbath sermon by announcing that he had suddenly decided to change the topic for the morning, and hoped we didn't mind. He then made a comment that startled me. He told us all that he had been meeting more and more people who were going through terrible discouragement.

I remember what he said quite clearly as I was sitting on the platform with him. I remember how the more he spoke, the further I had to turn my head away from the congregation. I felt completely bruised and broken inside, and I couldn't stop my own tears of discouragement from welling up into my eyes.

You see, for the first time ever in my life, I had been experiencing overwhelming discouragement. This was very new to me. Whenever things got tough in the past, I would wrestle with God and persevere through.

But this year I didn't want to fight anymore. I couldn't. I had nothing inside that wanted to keep going. I had finally recognised that I had all the symptoms of depression, and I didn't know what to do.

I blamed God for turning me into a failure, so I angrily told him I was

going to quit. But then I realised that I would still be me wherever I went next. Somewhat reluctantly, I had to admit to myself that quitting was not going to help.

**Thank God For Peter**

A few days later I met Peter again. This time I met him in Gethsemane.

The Gethsemane story has become incredibly important to me because it describes in considerable detail the reasons why some people crumple under pressure, while others don't. It also describes in a nutshell the issues and circumstances that we will increasingly face as the second coming of Jesus draws nearer.

So why do some of God's most devoted followers crumple under pressure and fall into discouragement? Consider these three possibilities from the Gethsemane story.

**The first reason why we may crumple under pressure is because we underestimate the strength of the opposition.**

The threats we face as God's people are always supernatural and always personal. As Jesus told Peter clearly on the way to Gethsemane, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. (Luke 22:31) This was supernatural opposition, and all of the disciples were targets. The word "you" in this text is plural. Satan wanted to tempt all of Jesus' disciples to prove that they weren't the loyal followers Jesus thought them to be. And God allowed Satan to do so.

This should not surprise us. Many years before, God told Israel he would test them, "For I will give the command, and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, and not a pebble will reach the ground." (Amos 9:9)

But how does God test his people? Like Jesus in the desert before his ministry began, it is often done as God allows us to be exposed to Satan's temptations. As Ellen White notes, "To all, the testing time will come. By the sifting of temptation, the genuine Christian will be revealed." (GC 626) This type of testing was exactly what Peter and the disciples were enduring in Gethsemane. But they didn't fully comprehend the reality and strength of the supernatural opposition.

**The second reason we may**

**crumple under pressure is because we overestimate the strength of ourselves.**

With Jesus' warning of Satan's intentions still ringing in Peter's ears, you might have thought that Peter would have been on his guard. But as soon as Jesus told the disciples that the Scriptures foretold that they would "all fall away" from him (Matthew 26:31-32), Peter replied with certainty and conviction, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." (Matthew 26:33)

So Jesus responds with greater emphasis, "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared even more forcefully, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same." (Matthew 26:34-35)

Wouldn't you like to have people like Peter and the disciples in your church -- determined, enthusiastic, and willing to sacrifice everything? But Peter and the disciples had one problem that completely cancelled out their other wonderful qualities -- they were blind. Peter and his colleagues were totally blind to the fact that under supernatural attack, they were totally powerless.

This problem of blindness is not a minor issue. In Revelation 3:17, Jesus explains that blindness is one of the three conditions that will cripple the witness of Laodicea, God's end-time church.

Fortunately, Jesus goes on to say in the next verse that eye-salve -- a symbol for the Holy Spirit -- is the medication for blindness. But why was Laodicea blind without the Holy Spirit in the first place?

I would like to suggest that the cause of Laodicea's blindness is exactly the same cause as Peter's blindness -- the total overestimation of their own power and ability against supernatural opposition.

The devil doesn't fear talented or enthusiastic people. In the supernatural realm, power that turns the world upside down for God and turns back the tide of evil does not come from having the purest or most noble intentions. Power to transform the world for God only comes from a direct link to the throne of God. So we overestimate ourselves at our peril.

**The third reason we may crumple under pressure is because we often do what feels natural to us.**

It is not surprising that Matthew says the disciples were sleeping "because their eyes were heavy" (Matthew 26:43). Of course, it was night. It was the time to be in bed asleep.

But the circumstances demanded something different, something unnatural, perhaps something uncomfortable. At the very time it was natural to fall asleep, the call was to stay awake -- to "watch and pray." (Matthew 26:41).

Three times Jesus urged his disciples to "watch and pray", and three times they went to sleep. The consequences were of course tragic. Having given in to the natural weight of his heavy eyes, Peter awoke and found himself confused and afraid. As the army arrived for Jesus, Peter inexplicably whipped out his sword and lashed out at the small army standing in front of him. Then as Matthew sadly concludes, "...all the disciples deserted him and fled." (Matthew 26:56)

**Standing Firm Under Pressure**

In total contrast, under even worse conditions, Jesus did not buckle once. Before the footsteps of Judas and his co-conspirators could hardly be heard, Jesus stood up and roused his disciples, "Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (Matthew 26:46) Amazingly, Jesus had found strength to confront his enemies head on.

But what enables people to stand firm in the face of such overwhelming pressure? I think understanding Jesus' call to "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matthew 26:41) is critical.

**Firstly, we will stand firm under pressure when we heed to call to "watch".**

Watch. Watch! "Watch... so you will not fall into temptation." Watch what is happening all around you. As Jesus prays with his face to the ground, he clearly sees what's happening. It is Satan's last stand. "Now the tempter had come for the last fearful struggle. For this he had been preparing during the three years of Christ's ministry. Everything was at stake with him. If he failed here, his

hope of mastery was lost; the kingdoms of the world would finally become Christ's; he himself would be overthrown and cast out. But if Christ could be overcome, the earth would become Satan's kingdom, and the human race would be forever in his power." (DA 687-688)

It is not hard to think of the parallel with today. Satan can no longer derail God's plan of salvation, but he can use his power to try and derail the faith of God's people. Never forget that "He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short" (Revelation 12:12b) And that he is most effective when no-one is watching.

And the disciples weren't watching. They were sleeping in the security of their own enthusiasm and abilities. They didn't see the enemy approaching because they were blind.

So Jesus urges, "Watch!" Understand! Look what is happening all around you!

**Secondly, we will stand firm under pressure when we heed the call to "pray".**

I can't possibly overemphasise the importance of this: prayer is not just a nice activity for good Christians. It is our only secure connection to power from outside of ourselves. How was Jesus so strong under overwhelming pressure? He was securely connected. "Behold the Son of God bowed in prayer to His Father! Though He is the Son of God, He strengthens His faith by prayer, and by communion with Heaven gathers to Himself power to resist evil and to minister to the needs of men." (Acts of the Apostles, 511)

But because the disciples were not watching, they had underestimated the threat and overestimated their own abilities. Consequently they were not praying. Ellen White notes, "They did not intend to forsake their Lord, but they seemed paralyzed by a stupor which they might have shaken off if they had continued pleading with God. They did not realize the necessity of watchfulness and earnest prayer in order to withstand temptation." (Desire of Ages, 688)

As we live within the final hours of earth's history, there is no substitute for prayer. Let me reemphasise, "Neglect of prayer leads men to rely on their own strength, and opens the door to temptation." (The Signs of the

Times, Nov. 6, 1884: 2 Selected Messages, 352)

As we see the gathering pressures around us all, oh how we need the power of God!

**The Rest Of The Story**

Realising that quitting would not help me to overcome my discouragement, God began to use this Gethsemane story to rewire my thinking. My wife and I went to a summer house for a couple of weeks, and I began to pray. Or rather I began to plead, to beg, to wrestle with God for supernatural power.

Gradually, over a couple of weeks of re-learning to exert faith in prayer, I began to experience a new strength building within me. I can't adequately express on paper how dramatically my physical, emotional, and spiritual state of being began to change. I have to call it miraculous.

Yet my experience should not be unusual, "God often brings men to a

*"God often brings men to a crisis to show them their own weakness and to point them to the source of strength."*

crisis to show them their own weakness and to point them to the source of strength. If they pray and watch unto prayer, fighting bravely, their weak points will become their strong points. Jacob's experience contains many valuable lessons for us. God taught Jacob that in his own strength he could never gain the victory, that he must wrestle with God for strength from above." (MS 2, 1903, 2MCP, 454)

**Not A Coincidence**

In case I would be tempted to think that I was imagining this experience, two days after returning home God allowed me to see the same experience in the life of a friend. As my friend and I began talking, I noticed that a great burden creased his whole face. As we talked, my friend began to share with me his profound discouragement. His depression was so strong, he had just ordered some pills from the doctor. Strangely, the more he talked, the more surprised I became. I thought I was listening to myself talking just a few weeks before.

"You know this is supernatural battle," I offered. "How's your prayer life?" He looked down sadly and replied, "I haven't been able to talk to God for a long time."

I began to share with him my recent experience. I hadn't been able to pray either. Sure, I had prayed the "official" prayer for the beginning of each day and a quick one at night, and yes, even some short ones during the day. But these were not prayers of real faith that could heal the aching of my soul. Actually, whenever I thought about praying I would feel paralysed inside, even irritated or angry. This was indeed a strange experience for someone who had been teaching and preaching about the importance of prayer throughout their whole ministry.

We talked about faith and prayer and the restoration of the Holy Spirit. The more I shared, the more I could hear my own voice echoing back to me. Yes, God had sent me to my friend, but God was forcing me to listen to my own words – to remind me that it was he that had been at work these past few weeks.

As I left, my friend said, "I think God sent you to me tonight." And I couldn't help but agree.

A couple of weeks later I visited my friend again. The first thing I noticed when I walked into his apartment was his glowing face. He had been totally transformed.

Down at the end of time, as Satan is preparing his final last stand, Jesus urges all of his disciples again, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Matthew 26:41) •



# SECRETS OF SURVIVING THE STORM

## *What faith really does*



The picture of Jesus fast asleep in the boat has always been an inspiration to me. You probably know exactly the picture I am writing about. The waves were lashing the boat and it was taking on water faster than the frantic disciples could bail it out (Luke 8:23). The howling wind and the noise of the waves crashing were so loud that even the most piercing screams from the terrified disciples did not reach the ears of Jesus. Jesus sleeps on, completely at rest.

### **How did he do it?**

Oh, how I would like to have peace like that. Yet as I look at this peaceful Jesus, the picture seems almost surreal. Is such a restful peace possible for people like me, in the middle of all the storms I face?

The storms we face come in all shapes and sizes, and of course, most times they are not physical. Many of our storms come through people. Antagonism, jealousy, criticism, pride, envy, all fuel the storms. If we are not careful, such storms can easily overwhelm us, for Satan is within these storms.

I have always wanted peace in the storm to be possible, for I long for peace. As a leader, storms can be expected -- they are part of the deal. But for the Christian leader they will always be part of the deal, for we are not living in this world without an enemy. Indeed, from what I read in my Bible, more storms are coming, and they are going to be getting worse.

A couple of years ago I asked God to teach me about how to experience peace in the middle of the storm. I was desperate for peace. Through my years of ministry I have battled many storms and learnt a lot from God, but I always seemed to end up tired and frustrated by them.

One day in my prayer journal I

wrote a simple request, "Lord, teach me how to have peace in the storm." I was excited at the prospect of learning such a secret, yet inwardly dreading what might happen in order for me to learn this lesson. Because as you might know, if God is going to teach you how to have peace in the storm, you need to have a storm.

### **My breakthrough**

I am not exactly sure how it began. I was coming up to a Conference Session where people would be voting to either reappoint me or find a replacement. As a Conference president, I had all sorts of things going through my mind. But one thing I did know: should someone else be asked to take my place, I wanted to leave my post with dignity and peace. I didn't want to become bitter or angry at the outcome. This was particularly in my mind as a friend of mine had been voted out as a president. I know it wasn't a very pleasant experience for him as he knew that people had planned to replace him. Yet when the moment finally came, he said his goodbyes with astonishing grace and a smile.

So in times like these, I want to respond as Jesus would. Yet my ego somehow always threatens to undermine my deep desire to be like him by seducing my pride. When you hear about people plotting to replace you, it does hurt. You often think back over all your mistakes and it's not pleasant. Indeed, people rarely realise that a leader can often see their own faults more clearly than anyone else, and leaders feel the disappointment of failed plans more also. So when you have been working your heart out for God, it's not nice to think that people you know might stand up to criticize your work, before everyone puts up their hands to agree on someone else to do your job.

It was in this context of possible

future storms and many past ones that I suddenly had a blinding flash of the obvious: I realised that I cannot stop these storms. I was driving to the office one day, and as I began to think about this conclusion a large smile spread across my face. Tears of relief mixed with joy rolled down my cheeks as I realised that I didn't have to try to beat the storms any more. For me, this thought was nothing short of being revolutionary.

Let me try expand on this point by describing four secrets for surviving storms.

### **1. You will only gain peace once you realise that you cannot stop the storms from coming.**

Maybe that seems obvious to you, but it came into my mind like a bolt of lightning. I began to realise that as each storm began to rise up on my horizon, I began to try to find ways of defeating it. I'm tough. I'm persevering. I will beat that storm.

But how can I do that? Storms are a work of Satan. He is the one who stokes the storms of disunity, criticism and many others things -- and he's had a lot of practice. How can I, a mere human, stop his storms?

I can't. And here is the paradox: I can only experience God's peace when I finally understand that I can't prevent the storms from coming. We often presume that we will gain peace by preventing or stopping the storms. But this is not the Bible's view. Peace has nothing to do with whether the storms are big, small, or have disappeared. Peace has to do with our faith in Jesus and whether we really believe that he has all power and sovereign control over our storms.

You can see this idea when you look at the conclusion of the story. When Jesus stood up to calm the storm, it doesn't appear that he was intending to set us a model for storm stopping, for the conclusion of the story is a

question, "What kind of man is this?" (Matthew 8:27) The answer is clear: this kind of man has access to all the power in the Universe. And he's with you in your boat.

While the storm was raging, Jesus was peacefully asleep. It wasn't that he was unconcerned. It was simply that the storm did not bother him. He knew he was in his Father's care.

And remember the other storm when the disciples were frantically rowing their sail boat across the turbulent waters in Matthew 14:24. Jesus comes peacefully walking through the storm. Even after stepping out of the boat at the permission of Jesus, Peter is overcome with fear at the strength of the wind (verse 30). But in the middle of the storm, Jesus was not worried.

**2. Faith in the storm is not primarily intended for us to break the storm, but to give us peace when the storm is breaking all over us.**

A further paradox is that God may only be able to teach us how to have peace by permitting storms to engulf us. These storms are God's way of demonstrating that we cannot influence the storms at all. God does not permit storms for us to demonstrate how strong we are in breaking them. God allows us to encounter storms to reveal our weakness and helplessness. He hopes these storms will finally bring us to our wits end, and then to our knees -- not still shouting angrily to him about the storm, but on our knees in quietness and total confidence that he knows all about our storm. In the meantime, while the waves are crashing upon us we are not in danger. Even though the boat may be filling up with water, Jesus is at peace.

You may be tempted to interrupt me at this point, and tell me about faith -- about the faith that Jesus chided his fearful disciples about, just after the storm waves flattened out, and the howling wind became the softest of breezes. "Why are you so afraid" Jesus asked, "Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 8:40)

If you look at this text, Jesus does not say to the disciples, "Why didn't you command the storm to stop?" He asked them why they were afraid. Jesus was not concerned about whether the disciples had developed the power to calm the natural elements. He was mostly concerned about why they were

scared.

It is tempting to think that the faith that Jesus is looking for is a faith that should be calming storms. But I don't think that is the point of this story. I think Jesus is saying that faith is not primarily about breaking the storm, but about having peace -- being fear-less -- while the storm is breaking across our backs.

This perspective on faith bringing peace within the storm is illustrated as Paul is escorted to Rome (Acts 27). Along the way, a storm rises up with hurricane force winds (verse 14). What did Paul do? Do we see him on the bow of the ship commanding the waves to be still? No. But why not? Was the man who wrote the book of Romans unable to muster enough faith to calm this storm?

It was a terrible storm. The storm was battering his boat so forcefully that they threw all the cargo overboard, and then the ships tackle (verses 18-19). Eventually, the ship ran aground on a sandbar, the stern of the ship was pounded into pieces, and Paul and the others jumped off the battered boat and drifted towards the beach in the surf (verses 41-44).

And what was Paul's attitude during this time? "The apostle, though himself suffering physically, had words of hope for the darkest hour, a helping hand in every emergency. He grasped by faith the arm of Infinite Power, and his heart was stayed upon God. He had no fears for himself; he knew that God would preserve him to witness at Rome for the truth of Christ. But his heart yearned with pity for the poor souls around him, sinful, degraded, and unprepared to die. As he earnestly pleaded with God to spare their lives, it was revealed to him that his prayer was granted." (Acts of the Apostles, 442) So in the middle of this terrible storm, Paul's faith kept him in peace.

God works with us in different ways. Maybe he will calm your storm. But maybe he won't. Maybe like Paul, God will allow the storm to break your boat into pieces and you will have to hang onto a plank for a while in the pounding surf. But one thing is sure. God's purpose is always the same: he's allowing the storm to keep you close to him, and even though you are tired and exhausted and are still floating in the water, you can have his peace. As God affirms through Isaiah, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned

you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..." (Isaiah 43:1b-2a)

**3. Storms are not threats but rich opportunities for spiritual maturing**

God could have prevented the storm from battering the disciples. But God chose not to for a good reason, "That night in that boat was to the disciples a school where they were to receive their education for the great work which was to be done afterwards. The dark hours of trial are to come to every one as a part of his education for higher work, for more devoted, consecrated effort. The storm was not sent upon the disciples to shipwreck them, but to test and prove them, individually. . . ." (OHC 56)

John Wesley is an example of a literal storm leading to spiritual maturing. While crossing the Atlantic from England to America, violent storms arose. "John Wesley, brought face to face with death, felt that he had not the assurance of peace with God. The Germans, on the contrary, manifested a calmness and trust to which he was a stranger.... In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'"--Whitehead, Life of the Rev. John Wesley, page 10. (Quoted in Great Controversy, 254-5)

The impression on John Wesley of the German Moravians' calm in the storm was significant. It was ultimately resulted some years later in him attending a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street in London which was where he had his famous conversion, "I felt my heart strangely warmed," he says. "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."-- Ibid., page 52. (Great Controversy, 255) Such was the consequence of Wesley's encounter with the storm.

So storms are not there to break us.

They are there to make us.

**4. When we stop being distracted by the angry storms, we will have more time and energy to make progress in our work for God.**

Since I discovered that I couldn't break the storms and this was something that God would take care of, I have had wonderful peace. I sleep much better. I have more physical energy. And I have stronger emotional and spiritual energy to focus on God's work. You see, the storms are not the distraction that they once were. Sure, they are not pleasant when they come, but now I have more important things to concentrate on. The storm is not my focus anymore.

But that is not the way Satan wants it. He wants us to become seduced by the storms, to be sucked into fighting and wrestling and becoming frustrated and tired with them.

I know I have done this. In the middle of the night when I would lie awake tossing in my bed, I would rage against the storms and preach against the storms. I would become righteously angry with the storms. I would punish those storms. I would humiliate those storms. At least in the safety of my mind, I would have the satisfaction of having revenge against those storms.

However, to be focused on the storm tempts us to return the anger, hurt, or offence, that we receive, and then everyone ends up becoming hurt. But when we are focused away from the storm, we have the time, energy, and determination to become vessels of grace to the hurting, even to those who are causing the storm.

**And the future?**

As we look towards the future, Bible prophecy paints a description of a coming storm that we will certainly not be able to stop, "For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equalled again." (Matthew 24:21) As Ellen White emphasises, "Angels are now restraining the winds of strife, until the world shall be warned of its coming doom; but a storm is gathering, ready to burst upon the earth, and when God shall bid His angels loose the winds, there will be such a scene of strife as no pen can picture...." (Evangelism, 704)

So our challenge today is to learn how to weather the storms because of

the peace in our hearts. This is possible, for when we are at work for God his peace remains with us, because *he* remains with us.

Remember that it was Jesus who first "got into the boat and his disciples followed him" (Matthew 8:23). It was Jesus who "made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him" (Matthew 14:22). And it was Jesus who said "Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar" (Acts 27:24). When Jesus leads the way and gives us a work to do, no storm can stop us completing it.

So don't spend your energy on trying to stop your storm or trying to get even with it. The storm is a work of Satan, and you cannot beat him. Don't even try. Trust Jesus. He has already overcome the storm. We don't know when Jesus will intervene, or how he will. But when we put our faith in him we can have his peace. Even in the middle of the fiercest storm, he is with us. •

