

What Happens WHEN LEADERS PRAY?

In a life filled with challenges prayer is essential to our spiritual survival.

BY GAVIN ANTHONY

LET ME BEGIN WITH AN embarrassing confession. When I was asked to go to Iceland as the conference president, I believe a large part of it was because 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 interceding 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’m rather embarrassed even to 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

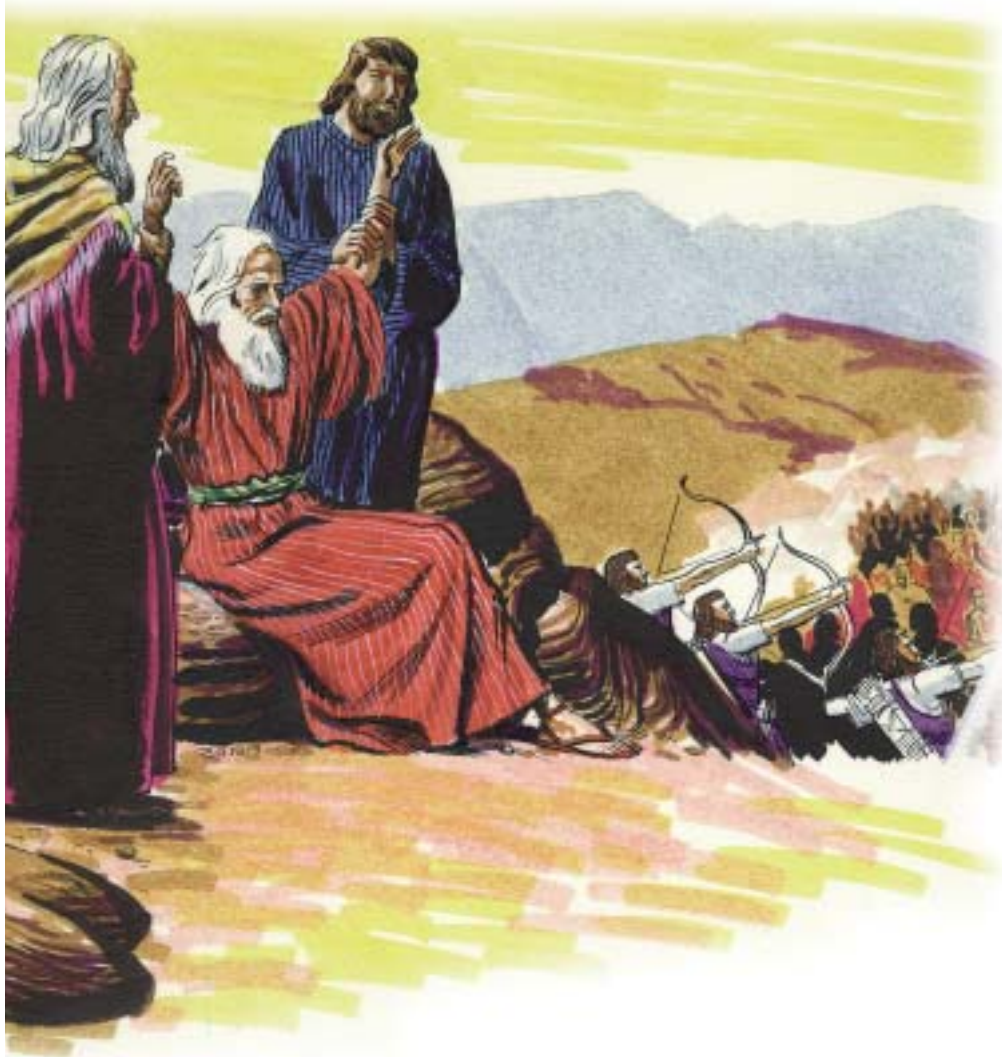


ILLUSTRATION BY DON FIELDS, R&H FILES

tip of my tongue when the story of Moses flashed into my mind. It's found in Exodus 17:8-16 (which you may want to read before going further).

Soon after the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea, they were grumbling at Rephidim about having no water. It was then that the Amalekites arrived to do battle. Moses, along with Aaron and Hur, were standing on the hilltop with the battle raging in the valley. As long as Moses kept his hands in the air, interceding for his people below, the Israelites kept 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," whom 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, such as a pastor or conference president. However, it's just as much a mother or a grandfather, a Sabbath school teacher or a deacon. If you're influencing people for God, then you're His leader. So this story about Moses applies to you, too.

What happens when a leader prays? Let me share six reflections on prayer and your leadership for God:

1. It's 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'" (Ex. 17:9).^{*} 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. Indeed, as we see in this story, praying can be very hard work. 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

Are we spiritual enough to be characterized as people of prayer, or are we just cool and trendy leaders, progressive and intellectual?

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 that someone else is going to do it? If prayer is the key to victory, should I as a leader 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 told Joshua that he was going on top of the mountain to pray (Ex. 17:9). He wasn't in a room somewhere where no one could see him, though he must have done plenty of private praying, too. But when it came to battle, he was praying out there where his people could see him.

And he wasn't there to show off. He was in the open, so as to encourage his soldiers. Are you visible as a leader in prayer?

3. I lead for God because I pray for those I lead—not just because I am nice or skillful. "So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill" (verse 10). Israel's destiny in this battle was not determined just by Moses' being a wise man. Their destiny was shaped because he was praying for them. How easy it is for us to think otherwise—to rationalize other things as more important.

It is very hard to lead for God if prayer does not saturate your life. Are we spiritual enough to be characterized as people of prayer, or are we just cool and trendy leaders, progressive and intellectual? As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon urged: "It is extraordinary spiritual unction, not extraordinary intellectual power, that we need."¹

4. My ability as a leader to intercede so the battle can 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" (verse 12). Moses spoke face to face with God as no other human being has done. But if the praying had been left only to him, the battle would still have been lost. He needed the support of other praying leaders, namely (in this case) Aaron and Hur.

Do you solicit other leaders to join you in prayer? Is your spouse or your fellow church elders with you? Who will support you in prayer when you get tired? Moses couldn't do it alone. Nor can you.

5. The success of the battle was not a result of 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" (verse 12). 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 stopped praying only when the battle was won.

How much time do 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.

6. 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" (verse 13). 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. And no matter how hard we pray, there must be lots of energy and sacrifice in the valley. As an intercessor, are you happy for others to get the credit?

Praying on the Hilltop

The enemy is very large and powerful. He cannot be outwitted simply by new plans and smart ideas. The struggle lies in the spiritual realm, and our combat strategy is prayer.

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 thunder-

bolts flung from Jehovah's hand, crashing through every opposing thing, till they have reached the target aimed at; men impelled by Omnipotence."²

Such leaders are needed today—leaders who would dare to pray on the modern hilltops. They will exert an unparalleled influence and give a witness in our communities and before the watching universe.

*Texts in this article are from the New International Version.

¹In Wesley Deuvel, *Ablaze for God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), p. 17.

²In Deuvel, p. 18.

Gavin Anthony is president of the Iceland Conference of Seventh-day Adventists with headquarters in Reykjavik, Iceland.

