

Missional Prayer: A Mini Series

By Timmy Brister

Provocations and Pantings (2008)

Missional Prayer: Introductory Thoughts

Posted December 10, 2008 by Timmy Brister

Categories: Missional, Prayer

Tags: Missional Prayer

In his excellent book, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, John Piper begins his chapter on prayer saying:

"Life is war. That's not all it is. But it is always that. Our weakness in prayer is owing largely to our neglect of this truth. Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. Prayer thus gives us the significance of frontline forces and gives God the glory of a limitless Provider."

For the past week or so, I have been spending a significant portion of my personal study considering the role of prayer specifically in the context of the mission of God and the advance of the gospel as understood in Scripture. There's a lot of talk these days about being a missional church (most of which I like), but one can quickly discover the thrust of the missional church by how they pray and what exactly they pray for. I'm sure you have heard of the line that far too many prayer meetings are consumed with requests to keep loved ones out of heaven rather than pleading with God that many more might go to heaven (or variation of that thought).

When we as a church began a two-month season of praying about the new church planting initiative, I chose to preach a series on the prayers of Paul as a means to instruct and encourage our members to pray about the kind of things we find Paul, the greatest church planter, praying for. Here was a man who had been abandoned in Asia, beaten several times with whips, shipwrecked, left homeless, stoned, and a host of other incredible things we have never experienced. If ever there was a person to ask for prayer about himself or physical needs, it was him. Could you imagine Paul praying to the Ephesians, "Please pray for my back. I was just beaten in Lystra the other day before coming here." Or to the Corinthians, "My eyes are going bad. Could you pray that I may see better?" Who knows, Paul may have indeed made these requests, but it is no small thing that nowhere do we find such prayers being offered. He was crucified with Christ. He didn't want anyone to bother him, for he bore in his body the brandmarks of Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:17).

Paul and the early church prayed in accordance with the Father's will, for the glory of Jesus, and because, as Piper explained, prayer was "primarily a walkie-talkie for the mission of the church." A church with a domesticated prayer life will inevitably be a church in maintenance mode rather than in missional mode. Simply put, if you want to know if a church is on mission, listen to their prayers and feel their hearts.

Absorb yourself in the prayer life of Jesus and the prayers of Paul for the churches and consider prayer in a new light—not just a spiritual discipline but missional devotion. Our alignment and involvement in the mission of God is governed and guided by the prayer of faith from a fervent heart.

I don't know about you, but I want to have a good handle on this walkie-talkie in the life-long war of proclaiming Christ, rescuing sinners, and building His church! When you give me call, make sure it is about our King and His kingdom.

Missional Prayer: Jesus

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**In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.
Hebrews 5:7**

The mission of Jesus was bestowed upon Him by the will of the Father (John 6:40). He was the one "whom the Father has sent"—a description entitled to Jesus some 39 times in the gospel of John. Jesus said that He did nothing on His own but rather only what He sees the Father doing (John 5:19), for He came in His Father's name (John 5:43). He speaks only of what He has seen with His Father (John 8:38). In sum, Jesus' mission is clearly understood in the context of His relationship with His Father in heaven.

Therefore, it makes sense to see Jesus constantly in prayer. Think of it. If ever there was a person not in need of prayer who would have ever justifiable reason not to pray, it would be the Son of God. Yet throughout His life, and especially in crucial moments in the mission, we find Jesus absorbed in prayer. Beginning with His baptism, Luke records:

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22).

The Father's delight in His Son at the inauguration of His earthly mission came at a time when Jesus had been baptized and was praying (notice the present, continuous nature - "praying"). As Jesus began ministering, preaching, and healing, Mark adds:

35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons (Mark 1:35-39).

The relationship between verse 35 and 38 cannot be overlooked. Here we find the direct relationship between Jesus in prayer and Jesus on mission. The missional engagement was initialized by the priority of prayer. Jesus received His marching orders from the Father (see John's account above), and thus prayer served not only a means of intimacy but also orientation and alignment around the Father's will. The town He visited and the message He preached was derivative of what He received from the Father in prayer. Jesus example reveals that our participation in the mission of God is directly related to our participation in prayer.

Jesus' earthly mission was eventually going to be entrusted to the men He chose to follow Him. Those whom He called was no small matter. Consider Luke's account of His decision-making process:

12 In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. 13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: 14 Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, 15 and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, 16 and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor (Luke 6:12-16).

It was common practice for Jesus to depart and pray to the Father (see Matt. 14:23; Luke 5:16; 9:18; 9:28; 11:1). However, on this occasion, he spent the entire night in continuous prayer because He was about to make one of the most important decisions regarding the mission—the selection of those who would ultimately be entrusted with the gospel message. To what degree is the importance of the mission God has called us? Personal and persevering prayer does not leave you in the closet. It thrusts you out with passion for the mission.

Similar to the occasion of Jesus' baptism, the Father on the mount of transfiguration told Peter, James and John, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). The Father's disclosure and declaration came at a time when "and as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29). The exchange of Jesus in prayer with the Father became an open manifestation of His eternal glory. The Father was listening to His Son, and in turn tell Jesus' disciples to listen to Him!

Apparently the disciples did listen to Him, not only in His preaching and teaching, but also His praying, for Luke tells us that Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Not teach us to baptize, to preach, to perform miracles, but to pray. He taught them to pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This was the mission of Jesus—the will of the Father and the advent of the kingdom of God on earth. Prayer delivers us from our agenda and sets us on God’s agenda, moving us from seeking our will and ruling our lives (kingdoms) to living in light of God’s will and rule.

That is what the Mount of Olives was all about. In the gospel of Luke we read:

39 And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. 40 And when he came to the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” 41 And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” 43 And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. 44 And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. 45 And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, 46 and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:39-46).

It was Jesus’ custom to go to the Mount of Olives to pray. He had his “place” of prayer a stone’s throw away. His short prayer summed up His commitment to the mission of God. Not my will, but yours, be done. He knew He was about to be beaten, whipped, spat upon, crucified, condemned, and cursed. The fulfillment of the mission is at hand, and the temptation was to look for a way out. Yet prayer confirmed the mission of God. Have you ever thought about what temptation Jesus was warning the disciples about? Was it not to do their own will and not God’s? To abort the mission? To deny Jesus? To have a post-confession moment like Peter when Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt. 16:23)? They were sleeping and sinking into an “abort the mission” mentality which left Jesus alone at the cross.

The great news is that Jesus is still praying for the mission. He is our Great High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for His people (Heb. 7:25). He has promised to build His church. Even when Satan sought to sift Peter like wheat, Jesus told him, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32).

I have prayed for you.

That’s Jesus. No one is more committed to the mission than Jesus. No one is more committed to prayer than Jesus. In His “high priestly prayer,” Jesus said to the

Father, “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:9). In that same prayer where He prays for us, Jesus brings the mission to bear on our lives the same what the Father brought the mission to bear on His life. Jesus prayed, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). It is impossible not to see the missional prayer life of the one whom the Father has sent. Jesus was sent, praying, and praying, He was sending.

His earthly ministry began with praying after His baptism, continued with all night in prayer with the calling of His disciples, then on to Gethsemane where His sweat became like drops of blood and ultimately to the cross where His prayers were soaked with blood as He prayed, “Father, forgive them.”

Even now, Jesus is praying for His people, building His church, and advancing the mission. May we join Him in the front line work of the mission that advanced on our knees.

Missional Prayer: Early Church

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When I speak of the “early church,” I am referring in particular to the church in Acts in relationship to the mission and prayer. Jesus, God incarnate, had died, was raised, and ascended into heaven. What now? Where do we go from here? Now that their leader has left the scene, what’s going to happen with the mission? Surely these thoughts had to be going through the minds of the apostles.

They began by getting together and praying. The mission was going to be determined by the their imaginations, their culture, or anything else but God. They were, as Luke reveals, “with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). This began a pattern for the early church. After Pentecost, the thousands of new believers in Christ had “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Furthermore, this church, when their elders were released, prayed together such that “the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). At a later time when Peter had been imprisoned, Luke records that “earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5) such that when he was miraculously released, he found them still “gathered together and were praying” at the house of Mary (Acts 12:12). The church in Jerusalem was a praying church. God had created a culture of His nearness to them through the means of prayer on a perpetual basis.

But how and where does the mission come in the context of this praying by the early church? The first instance of missional prayer was seen in Acts 1 when they were selecting the one who would replace Judas as the twelfth apostle. Luke writes,

And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place" (Acts 1:24-25).

They had learned from Jesus who had spent all night in prayer to the Father prior to the calling of His disciples that they should likewise commit this process first and foremost to God. When problems arose with unmet needs in the church, the apostles clarified their calling to "devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). The office of the deacon was established as the congregation set the chosen servants before the apostles who "prayed and laid hands on them" (Acts 6:6).

From Jerusalem, the next movement of the mission was to be to Judea and Samaria (Act 1:8). As Phillip and other believers began to preach the gospel, Peter and John "prayed for the believing Samaritans that they might receive the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:15). The man whom God would use to continue the mission throughout the Gentile world would be identified as one is praying (Acts 9:11). When the church Antioch sent out the first missionaries (Paul and Barnabas), they commissioned them by "fasting and praying" (Acts 13:3). As they continued on the mission, in every city churches were planted and elders were appointed "with prayer and fasting, committing them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23).

Prayer played a vital role in the mission of the early church. Prayer was instrumental in the selection of an apostle, the commendation of deacons, the commissioning of missionaries, and establishing of elders in all the churches planted. The missional fulfillment of Acts 1:8 was saturated in prayer, whether it was the believers in the upper room at Pentecost, Peter and John with the Samaritans, Cornelius praying, the assimilation and commissioning of Paul, and the future generation of leaders in the Gentile world.

The implications of missional prayer cannot be overstated. If we are going to embrace the mission of God, then we cannot neglect prayer to God. Prayer is not an inner discipline divorced from the outworking of the mission; prayer is the inhalation of God's heart that is exhaled in the mission of God's people.

Missional Prayer: Paul

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In the second installment on missional prayer, I discussed how the early church in the book of Acts understood the discipline of prayer in relation to the mission and progress of the gospel. While Acts provides us with a glimpse in the journeys of the Apostle Paul and how prayer impacted his mission, his letters reveal a powerful exchange of intercession and request among the churches wherein he labored. Before his mission began, you might recall the instruction Jesus gave Ananias, which was to “look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying” (Acts 9:11).

Although his name changed, the fact that he was praying did not. His exhortations to prayer was everywhere. To the Romans, Paul encourages them to “be constant in prayer” (Rom. 12:2); to the Ephesians, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18); to the Philippians, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6); to the Thessalonians, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17); and to the Colossians, “continue steadfastly in prayer” (Col. 4:2). It is evident that the call to fervent, continuous prayer was expected among all believers everywhere, and in no less than five churches, missional prayer was demonstrated in the life of Paul. Let’s consider his letters to the Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

1. Rome

In the introduction of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes “that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you” (Rom. 1:9-10). His desire to come to them not only was a cause of continual intercession for the Roman believers, but also an appeal for their prayers. Toward the close of his letter, he writes,

“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (Rom. 15:30-32).

Paul’s intercession and the grounds of his appeal to the Romans for prayer was for God’s will in his deliverance for furthering the mission and service to the saints. In a letter so filled with the meat and marrow of the gospel, like book ends, these references show Paul’s heart for the mission through prayer.

2. Ephesus

After articulating the benefits, privileges, and blessings of being “in Christ,” Paul “did not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers . . .” (Eph. 1:16) because they had “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him . . .” (Eph. 1:13). His reason for praying for them was motivated by the gospel and their response of faith and repentance. The more the mission advanced, the more he prayed. And this is why Paul also requested prayer from the Ephesians. He requested that they would

“[pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:19-20).

Paul could of requested any number of personal prayer requests, but his requests are exclusively centered on the mission Christ had given Him and the proclamation of the gospel. The requests focused on the proclamation of the gospel, and Paul’s intercession was a result of the triumphs of the gospel.

3. Philippi

While imprisoned, Paul wrote to the Philippians,

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:3-5).

While it was the reception of the gospel among the Ephesians that motivated Paul to pray, for the Philippians it was their partnership in the gospel. They had join him in the mission of both advancing and defending the gospel (Phil. 1:12-18). Following a powerful acknowledge of God’s providence in His imprisonment, he shares his confidence that “through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance” (Phil. 1:19). His understanding of providence as a means for encouraging brothers to be courageous also included the prayers of believers as a means of grace to serve as a cause for his deliverance. Either in prison because of divine providence or deliverance because of their prayers, the mission continues with their partnership in the gospel.

4. Colossae

To the Colossians Paul again intercedes for the believers on the foundation of their reception of the gospel. He writes,

“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in

the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth . . . And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding . . .” (Col. 1:3-6, 9).

Between the two references of continual prayer in this passage is again the gospel and how it has worked in the lives of the Colossians as it has around the world. As he came to the close of his letter, Paul continues to ask for prayer:

“pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak” (Col. 4:3-4).

Paul is starting to sound like a broken record, is he not? Pray for me. Pray for the gospel. Pray for the mission. Pray for an open door for the word of God to advance. This is Paul in prayer. This Paul on mission. But we are not done . . .

5. Thessalonica

In both of his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul is found interceding for them. In his first letter, Paul gives thanks to God

“always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:2-5).

In his second letter, Paul writes:

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:11-12).

The Thessalonians had become an example of what true faith and repentance looked like, having received the gospel with power, conviction, and the Holy Spirit. The good of the gospel was to continue among these believers among whom God would make worthy of being called-out ones, set apart for the glory of Christ and satisfied by the grace of God.

Paul makes two simple requests to these believers. In his first letter, he concludes by exhorting, “Brothers, pray for us” (1 Thess. 5:25). In his second letter, Paul again brings the mission and the gospel to bear in his request. He writes:

“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith” (2 Thess. 3:1-2).

How was the word of the Lord honored among the Thessalonians? They did not receive it as the words of men, but the word of God. It was attended with the Holy Spirit and power, bringing genuine conversion and conviction in their hearts. But more than that, the word of the Lord “sounded forth” from them to Macedonia and Achaia and their faith in God has “gone forth everywhere.” The fruit of the gospel and focus on the mission among the Thessalonians a cause for gratefulness and a call for continued prayer for greater things to be done.

Summary

Having considered Paul’s correspondence, one would not have to ask Paul, “How can I pray for you?” Sure, Paul had a lot of things that warranted prayer—just consider the opposition he faced, the persecution he endured, the abandonment of others he experienced, and so on. Yet his circumstances, pain, and the rest were not matters of great concern for Paul. For him to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Living = Christ, so let’s get on with the mission and the gospel, and if you pray for Paul, make it about those things. In spite of the fact that he bore in his body “the brandmarks of Christ Jesus” (Gal. 6:17), Paul wants to leave a mark for the glory of Christ’s name on the earth. It is evident that this mission would not have been possible apart from prayer, and not just any ordinary kind of prayer; rather, it was grand, sweeping prayers where the gospel transformed lives and the mission triumphed over cities. The reports of these men upsetting the earth and “turning the world upside down” was effected because heaven was being opened through prevailing mission-saturated prayers continually offered according to the will of God. God have mercy on us to so believe, preach, and pray with the gospel and mission as our magnificent obsession.

Missional Prayer: Concluding Thoughts

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To conclude my series on prayer, I would like to take us back to John Piper’s wartime analogy as he explains why prayer malfunctions. If you can remember, Piper stated that “God has given us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world.” We have seen this to be true in the lives of Jesus, the early church, and the Apostle Paul.

And yet.

We are living in a time where it seems that prayer is malfunctioning on a daily basis. Consider what Piper has to say:

“Probably the number one reason prayer malfunctions in the hands of believers is that we try to turn a wartime walkie-talkie into a domestic intercom. Until you know that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for. Prayer is for the accomplishment of a wartime mission. It is as though the field commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (go and bear fruit), handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the General’s headquarters, and said, ‘Comrades, the General has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send air cover when you need it.

But what have millions of Christians done? We have stopped believing that we are in a war. No urgency, no watching, no vigilance. No strategic planning. Just easy peace and prosperity. And what did we do with the walkie-talkie? We tried to rig it up as an intercom in our houses and cabins and boats and cars—not to call in firepower for conflict with a mortal enemy but to ask for more comforts in the den.”

Over the course of this mini series, I have sought to argue the reciprocal natural of mission and prayer. The more we participate in the mission, the more we will realize our utter dependency upon God in prayer and call upon Him for protection, provision, and power to advance the cause of the gospel. The more we participate in prayer, the more mission-oriented and aligned to the Father’s will we will become as the trajectory of our lives is dictated by the glories of heaven, not the realities of earth.

Jesus tell us that problem in the mission is not the harvest but the laborers, and the solution to that problem is not a new recruiting strategy or campaign but rather praying to the Lord of the harvest. He shows, consequently, that prayer is a divinely appointed means of living as “sent” laborers in the harvest field (mission). God will change the hearts of those living in the den seeking more comforts to be laborers on the front lines in the battle, and He chooses to do so with an open ear to the pleading hearts of those asking, seeking, and knocking for triumphs of the gospel in the hearts of men.

May God transform our lives with prayers that transcend our lives. There’s a mission to embrace, a gospel to proclaim, a Savior to treasure. There’s nothing the enemy would want more than for us to use our correspondence with the Father on matters not pertaining to his defeat. Prayers soaked in the gospel and singed by God’s glory cannot but produce a heart emblazoned for the mission of rescuing sinners ensnared by the devil to do his will. Those solemn words, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done . . .” is missional reminder that life is war, and this is, as Piper rightly argued, what prayer is ultimately for.