

The Praying Leader

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Leadership is the runaway hot topic for our generation. Books about how to be a great leader just keep rolling off the presses: several of those books I have read, and several are staring at me from the shelves in my office. But it is difficult to find modern advocates for the type of leadership that is described in the first six chapters of Acts. Those chapters tell the story of people who are not great leaders, but who are empowered to lead because they have “devoted themselves to prayer.”

The apostles were clueless about how to carry out Jesus’ commission, but they knew they were supposed to wait in Jerusalem. They had not proven themselves to be outstanding entrepreneurs or charismatic leaders; they did not have graduate degrees in theology, but there was one thing they had learned thoroughly from the Master—they got the waiting right. They were unified “with one mind, continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14).

This is more than what our generation calls spiritual formation. Each individual in the upper room was about to be radically transformed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and each of the Twelve had been through the spiritual formation boot-camp of three years with the Lord Jesus. There is no denying the formative power of their discipleship to Christ Jesus; but when we look at what they *did*, it was the united prayer of the apostles for direction and for spiritual breakthrough that became their leadership hallmark throughout the rest of their lives.

These men devoted themselves to prayer when they were just a handful of disciples and were still devoted to prayer when they numbered one hundred and twenty (1:15). When three thousand were added to their number in one day, the new members learned the lifestyle of the apostles “and they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (2:42). Their miracles were accomplished in passing while on their way to prayer (3:1; 16:16); their initial reaction to persecution was to pray together (4:31); in the face of overwhelming work and responsibility they re-dedicated themselves to prayer (6:4). It is not only that they were praying men, but that they prayed together and that they brought others together to pray—this was the secret of their leadership.

Identifying our greatest need

In the face of great and pressing need and explosive numerical growth, they understood what we do not: more than anything else our people need from us our united prayer for them. What is the greatest need in your church and in your community? Isn't it the need for repentance, for spiritual hunger that only Jesus can fulfill, for changed hearts that result in changed lives, for restored marriages and families, for spiritual revival? I have come to realize that all of the things my people need most, only God can provide.

This is not to say that we can do nothing to help people. Most of the affirmation I receive from people results from a word of instruction or counsel or from a plan that they can implement or a project that they have participated in. I love this affirmation and secretly covet it and I deceive myself that since this is what they say they appreciate about my ministry, then this must be what I am doing right. But the words and the plans and the projects are meaningless unless the Holy Spirit is at work to convince the world of sin and to purify for Himself a people. He provides the life and the spark. People need His Word not mine, they need not my ministry but His, and this is the truth I must keep constantly fresh in my mind. But what a great joy it is when His ministry comes to them through mine!

Actually this ministry of the Spirit is not only what my people need most, it is also what I want more than anything. My greatest desire for my own children is that they walk with Christ; my greatest desire for the people in our church is their sanctification; my greatest desire for my community and my nation is spiritual awakening and revival. These are works that only the Holy Spirit can accomplish, and I participate in His work through prayer. Christ Jesus directly disciplined and equipped twelve men over a period of three years, but His ministry of intercession has spanned twenty centuries and has been effectual for hundreds of millions. What my people need most and what I want most will be accomplished by following Jesus' model of interceding for the saints according to the will of God.

Do we have ambitions to minister to greater numbers of people? Then let us ask ourselves whether we are able to make more disciples than did our captain Jesus. Do we desire our churches to grow? Then let us ask whether we are interceding adequately for those He has already entrusted to our care. The servant is not greater

than his Master, so if we are Jesus' servants then let us imitate Him by discipling a few and praying for them much.

To invite this lesson deeper into our hearts, let's take a brief Bible quiz. Who was the greatest preacher in the Bible in terms of conversion ratios and numbers of converts? We have almost no information on the size of Paul's churches or numbers of conversions, but we know that the apostles had 3000 conversions from one sermon—that is a productive day by any measure. But it would be hard to beat Jonah, don't you think? Every person he met during his ministry was converted including the sailors on the ship and the whole city of Nineveh with its population in excess of 120,000 (and by some estimates close to a million). And it wasn't just the people who were saved but the king ordered even the livestock to fast and wear sackcloth, and the Lord counted the livestock in His deliverance (3:7, 4:11). You have to admit, that is a pretty impressive result: a one hundred per cent conversion ratio, plus all the animals!

So if Jonah is the champion, who would you say is the least successful preacher in the Bible in terms of conversion results? Almost all of the faithful men of God whose stories are told in the Scripture had pretty slim results: Jesus' "Bread of Life" sermon took Him from a congregation of more than five thousand down to twelve men in a single day; Moses discipled Joshua and Caleb while losing an entire generation; Noah rescued three sons and their wives while losing the entire population of the world! But the all-time record probably goes to Jeremiah, because not only did he fail to convert any of the people he preached to, but even he himself was kidnapped and taken to Egypt in defiance of the word of the Lord (Jeremiah 42-43). Moses, Noah and Jeremiah could not point to spectacular numbers, but they have this witness that by faith they pleased God.

Brothers, if our primary goal and desire is large numbers of people, then we have Jonah for our model, a man with a hard heart and one miserably self-centered prayer. If our primary goal is to please the Lord Jesus, then we have the Lord Himself for our model and all the apostles and the prophets, and if He is our model, then we must become people of prayer.

A natural overflow or disciplined work?

Jesus taught us to pray to our Father in heaven and to approach Him as a loving Father who wants to give us our desires. Some believers who have enthusiastically embraced this picture, find it difficult to understand the need for discipline in prayer or the need for investing large amounts of time. They recall childhood conversations with their own fathers that were brief, single-topic exchanges and then it was off to the next thing. Those who are new in Christ pray just this way, in snatches and exclamations that are entirely appropriate and beautiful; we love to see their childlike faith in action. Even those who are maturing in Christ should come to their Father with childlike faith, bringing to Him what is most on their hearts without feeling the need to frame a prayer as though it were an act of Congress.

But as sons mature and begin to enter the family business, they will have more intense discussions with their fathers, and many of the discussions will involve mutual interests that run much deeper than the self-centered monologues of a toddler. It is not that mature sons stop talking with their fathers about their own problems and joys, but they become capable of understanding things in their fathers' world—they are able to “be about the Father's business.”

Jesus modeled this on the first full day of Peter's discipleship when He got up “a long while before daylight, and went out to a solitary place, and there He prayed” (Mark 1:35). Peter and all of the inhabitants of Capernaum had plans for Jesus to get right to work meeting the needs of hurting people, but Jesus pursued the discipline of taking time with His Father in discussions about the family business. By the time He was ready to begin the workday, He had a very clear agenda—He told Peter that instead of meeting all the needs in Capernaum, they were going to go out into the surrounding towns, because that was the plan most consistent with His mission.

Do you imagine that Jesus needed daily “staff sessions” with His Father in order to know what He was supposed to do? I don't believe it. While He emptied Himself of the privileges of godhood, He never ceased to be God. He would always have behaved godly, and He would always have known what would please the Father in every situation. Jesus spent time alone in prayer because He loved

His Father. Whereas being with the disciples and the crowds was draining, being alone with His Father was pure pleasure; it was exhilarating, refreshing fellowship. Prayer for Jesus was not a discipline like deprivation dieting and calorie-burning exercise are for us; the discipline was not a painful exercise but a regular carving out time for enjoyable fellowship.

In my present ministry, the Lord has surrounded me with partners, men that I respect and love. My senior pastor comes by to visit me, often for thirty minutes or more, every day that we are in the office together. Those visits and conversations are often the highlight of our day. We don't spend most of our time "getting on the same page" or going over details, mostly we are just sharing our lives with one another. But it is a discipline for both of us, in that we need to take the time away from the press of daily business to carve out time for fellowship. Likewise prayer is not a sweaty exercise, *but it is a discipline*.

Not *usually* a sweaty exercise, we should say, because one night prayer was precisely that for our captain Jesus. He said to Peter, "Are you still sleeping? Couldn't you stand watch for one hour? Stand watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation!" (Mark 14:37) On that night prayer was hard work for Jesus, work that was exhausting for Him to do alone; but when He most wanted prayer partners, they let Him down. They did not have a very mature view of prayer even after three years of training.

During those three years, Jesus had taught them not only how to come to God with childlike faith, but also how to pray adult prayers. In the Majority Text reading of Matthew 17:21 He taught them that there are demons who can only be cast out by prayer with fasting. He surely did not mean that they should have begun to pray and fast when the demonic confrontation occurred (He Himself did not model that!) but that prayer and fasting needed to become part of their discipline if they hoped to be able to do battle with such powerful demons. In Luke 11 He told them not only to pray to God as their Father but also to ask and keep on asking like a man pounding on a door at midnight who refuses to accept "no". In Matthew 6 He told them that they should not make lengthy, drawn-out prayers since the Father already knows every need, but in Luke 18 He told the Parable of the Unjust Judge to teach them "that men ought always to pray and not lose heart." Is prayer a natural outflow of a living relationship with the Father? You bet. But for adult children it is also a discipline.

My dad lives three time zones away in North Carolina, and we rarely get to see each other. He is also not much for computerized communication. If we are going to stay in touch, it has to be by telephone. So I block out an hour every two or three weeks to talk with my folks. It is enjoyable, the conversation is natural, it is not hard work, but the time needs to be taken or we will never talk until an emergency occurs. I want a deeper relationship with my dad than just a few sentences during crisis times. Now that I am an adult I am capable of understanding his world in a way I never could as a child or even as a teenager. Now we can talk about the stuff he is doing, and it doesn't have to be all about me. Now there are even times when I can enter his world as a partner.

This is the absolute icing on the cake for the believer who has cultivated an adult relationship with the Father. Jesus tells us that we should keep our eyes open and when we notice that the fields are ready for harvest, we should beg the Father to send out workers into the field (Matthew 9:38). It is not that the Father doesn't know the state of His own harvest, but He desires to include us as adult children in His great work. Imagine being so up-to-speed with the Father's business, that we can mention to Him the signs we see of people who are ready to enter His kingdom. Has it begun to penetrate our hearts what it is to be a co-heir with Christ Jesus? In eternity we are going to share with Jesus the whole kingdom! If we, then, are heirs of the family business, do we have no part and no interest in building the business today?

There is a measure of mystery here. Since Jesus made the complete and sufficient sacrifice and did all the work of redemption, and He is doing all the work of salvation, and it is all by His grace apart from any work of ours, anything we try to do to help will in fact ruin His great work. Since it is all by His grace apart from any good we can do, where could we ever get to contribute, to play a part in the harvest? This is the point at which a properly reverent Calvinism has sometimes been taken to its illogical extreme and has become fatalism; however, Jesus taught us that we could play an important part if we would be willing to discipline ourselves to pray. His work of atonement is complete but His work of intercession goes on, and He deeply desires that we would join with Him in it.

An audit of my ministry hours.

Personally, I don't need to be convinced that prayer is my primary means of entering into the work that God is doing in the world around me. The apostles are my example; men who shared their leadership responsibilities with others so that they could invest their days in the main thing: "we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). But am I the only minister who has wondered what this looks like when it is lived out? I know that I spend about 12 hours per week in the study of the Scripture and about five hours in discipling and teaching people to do all that Jesus has commanded. An audit of my ministry hours easily verifies that I am being faithful to this commitment. But I am reticent to make an audit of my prayer time. For one thing, I don't like to feel that my time with the Father is work. More than that, I don't want my praying to be quantifiable, because it seems sacrilegious to measure worship by the clock. Also, I don't want to publish my audit in case another minister stumbles into competition with me or lest I begin to think too highly of myself. However, I am seriously deceived if I think there is much danger of that; far more likely is the embarrassment that I will feel when it becomes obvious I am a laggard compared to the truly spiritual ministries of the mighty men of God during reformation times and the Great Awakening.

E.M. Bounds is a great one for reminding us that those mighty men disciplined themselves by making audits of their hours. He tells of Charles Simeon, John Wesley, John Fletcher, Martin Luther, Ken Leighton, Adoniram Judson, Samuel Rutherford and Robert Murray McCheyne. When they audited their hours every one of these men was spending between two and four hours a day in prayer, and it is Bounds' conclusion that two hours of prayer is a minimum daily requirement for any conscientious spiritual leader.

The missionary who most gives me pause though is David Brainerd. His praying lit the fire of the first Awakening in this country and his praying has been an inspiration to generations of spiritual leaders, but *Life and Diary of David Brainerd* is excruciating to read because of his melancholy labor in prayer. When I first read the *Diary* I determined that his was one example I would not emulate, because he was so driven, so obsessive about the discipline of praying. But it is wonderful to follow Brainerd as he begins to associate more and more closely with the Indians as his people: his prayers become more intercessory and less self-aware, and prayer becomes a joy to him. That is the kind of missionary I want to become.

Well, I am still reticent to publish my ministry audit for all the reasons already mentioned and for the further reason that we have each been called to unique ministries. My partner and senior pastor spends more time than I do in study, because his primary ministry to our congregation is to preach the word. My primary ministry is the pastoral care and discipleship of our adults and of our missionaries, so I have more people that are my prayer responsibility. When you and I give our accounts before Jesus' bema, each of us will stand or fall based on the evaluation of our Master who gave us our individual assignments. And we will certainly stand, because God is able to make us stand.

However I have come to agree with E.M. Bounds that two hours of prayer is the minimum requirement to fulfill my responsibility to intercede for the people Jesus has already entrusted to me. I would be embarrassed to ask Him for more people and more responsibility until I am able to meet this level at least. And since my overarching prayer for the ministry He has given me is revival and awakening in America in my generation, then it is simple common sense that I should follow the example of the mighty men God raised up to lead America's previous awakenings.

I am offering you my conviction regarding the time I need to be spending in prayer. Let me also confess my true state: I have not been meeting this level of discipline over the past three weeks or more. But I can say that I am praying with joy in the Holy Spirit, and it is not a sweaty exercise! So with integrity and candor let me share what I have learned about praying for at least an hour a day with both discipline and joy.

How to pray for an hour a day without getting stale.

Having already confessed that two hours are a minimum for the work God has called me to, I could wish that I were already laying hold of this minimum. Actually, I have a very effective idea in mind about how to get there, but it would not help anyone. The natural disposition of my personality is to set out a goal and to "gut it out" until the goal is achieved. What a travesty of prayer that would be! How could I imagine that my Father would be blessed because I am able to force myself to endure two hours in his presence? It is against duty-driven people like me that God said, "Couldn't one of you just get up and shut the door to prevent this useless kindling of fire on My altar?" (Malachi 1:10 paraphrased).

Do you feel that your regular scheduled prayer time is stale and useless? Does it ever occur to you that maybe God feels the same way about listening to your stale praying? How can we balance the spiritual discipline of prayer with the vibrant give-and-take of a personal relationship?

The answer is in the tension between the Scriptural injunction, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and Luke 11:1 where Jesus prayed until “He ceased.” The principle that the apostles taught and practiced was a life oriented toward God in prayer, but Jesus by His own example showed that there is a way to pray through to a conclusion and there is no need to pray beyond that conclusion. In fact, He specifically instructed His disciples against empty repetition beyond the logical conclusion of our praying—that is what pagans do because they think that there is merit in long hours of time and large numbers of words (Matthew 6:7). This kind of praying by the clock harms our relationship with the Father, because it perverts our fellowship with Him into a human work and His gracious attention to our requests into the merest magic.

However it is quite possible to keep a regular prayer time without turning it into a work. One way is to include variety. My ministry partner hates to pray from lists, so instead he associates his daily prayer requests with his various daily activities. There are some needs he prays for in the shower, some needs he prays over at mealtimes, and some needs he prays for while he is brushing his teeth. I have never been a multi-tasker, and this method does not work for me at all; but I did learn an important lesson from a chance comment by Charles Swindoll when he said that the first thing he does when he opens his eyes in the morning is to begin thanking God. What a great idea! In the two minutes after the alarm goes off and before I get out of bed, I thank God for another day to serve Him. Without any effort at all I also thank God for the good gift He has given me in my wife who is still asleep next to me. This has become a habit of life, and one that has added grace to my days.

There are probably dozens of ways to add variety to our praying and to intersperse prayer throughout our daily lives. Each of us will discover ways that keep us sharp and interested. This year my primary praying takes place in the morning before I leave home, and during the first hour that I am in the office, and during the half-

hour after lunch. In the morning I am confessing my sin and inability and begging God to help me; in the office I am interceding for the people, and after lunch I concentrate on the needs of a handful of people for whom I have long-term commitments to intercede.

While my wife is getting ready for the day and preparing our breakfast, I have about fifteen minutes of quiet in which I can't help but review the plans for the day and the worries that are at the back of my mind crying out for attention. Jesus is teaching me that I don't need to be anxious but that He wants me in everything by prayer and supplication to make my requests known to Him. Please don't imagine that I am vigorously praying through a list of other people's needs before 6am! This is much more like a pre-combat confession, where I am reviewing the specific things that are staring me in the face and am telling my Captain that I feel inadequate in myself but that I trust Him, that He has made me an able minister of the new covenant.

When breakfast is ready, I wake the boys and we *do not* pray over our meal. Instead we sing a song or hymn that is really a prayer set to music (eg. "O God our Help in Ages Past" or "There is a Redeemer"). We don't have great voices at that hour of the morning but it helps our family to pray together in a meaningful way. Then after we eat, we read a chapter from the Bible and take turns interceding for others. This whole breakfast mini-worship service adds about fifteen minutes to our morning preparation time but it is probably the most significant daily leadership role that God has given me. Becoming a praying leader must begin at home.

By the time I arrive in my office, I have already been in communion with God for at least half an hour, but because the prayer styles are varied and interspersed with other activities it feels as though I have been praying without ceasing from the minute I opened my eyes. It is 7:30am and the office building will remain dead quiet for the next hour. I could get a lot done in that hour! I could study my text for the message I am preparing or I could work on the newsletter that needs to go out tomorrow or I could reply to missionary correspondence that has been piling up lately...

Brothers, this is the moment of my day when prayer becomes work, proper work. There are people in my congregation who will be interviewing for jobs today and they need their pastor praying for them. There are men and women who are being bullied and intimidated in their witness; some feel hopeless about their marriages or their adult children; some are just beginning the journey of discipleship and will certainly come under spiritual assault. Now I am armed for spiritual battle, and now I ignore the red light that tells me I have phone messages and the crowded calendar and unfinished business, and I partner with the saints to do “the work of the ministry.”

But it is just at this point when the multitude of other important tasks clamor for attention. John Donne was amazed at how easily he was distracted from his prayer ministry by a buzzing fly or a carriage passing by in the street. I am more easily distracted by the myriad of things I need to be doing as soon as I get finished with praying. O how slow of heart! As though what I think I need to get done today is in any way more important than what God intends to do—what He intends to do with me and through me. As long as I am in the body, I will probably always struggle against this liability to distraction, so I have decided that when a thought comes into my head about something that needs to be done, I will write it down on my to-do list immediately. Then I will pray about that specific task. And then I will go back to interceding for my people. Somehow I know that God will “take care of the shop” until we are done.

Forgive me, I don’t mean to leave the impression that I regularly intercede for the needs of the people for a solid hour every morning. When I get tired or run out of requests that seem urgent, I review Scripture or get a cup of coffee or even check my inbox for new prayer requests, and then return to intercession. By 8:30 I’m ready to tackle the list of today’s projects.

Another discipline that I learned from my ministry partners is that when we hear a prayer request, we pray for it immediately. This means that all morning long as we receive email, we are pausing to pray for the needs that people are mentioning to us. When a phone call comes in, whichever pastor takes the call prays with the caller. Often these prayer times over the telephone accomplish far more than the caller expected, and God (not the pastor) receives the glory.

Besides the needs of the congregation and our missionaries there are a handful of people that I make a commitment to pray for on a daily basis. Usually these are the men I am discipling or the couples I am counseling. I pray for them during the period just after lunch when I find that I have a limited capacity for creativity or imagination. I pray for them down the list of requests that I know are the biggest needs in their lives, and they know that I am praying for them every day at lunchtime. Am I getting drowsy or unable to concentrate? Then I read a chapter in a devotional book (this month it is Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*), and then return to the business of praying. Many times these disciples will call during their lunch break with fresh prayer needs, and I am pleased to be able to tell them, "I was just now praying for you!"

These times of solitary prayer lay a foundation for an even greater variety and fellowship in our prayers with others. This year the Lord has gathered a missionary prayer team that meets to pray with me every Thursday at noon for the specific needs of our members overseas. There are two very small groups of disciples that meet with me each week, and we place an emphasis on praying together for one another. We encourage our congregation to write their prayer requests and place them in the offering on Sunday, and each week when our elders or pastors meet together we take the requests and pray out the needs of our people before the Lord. I am a prayer partner for two missions that our members have launched and so I meet with those prayer teams once per month. There is also a prayer team that meets in our home every Sunday evening. Each of these prayer groups has a different focus and a unique flavor and composition. We are learning that it is possible to pray without ceasing and never to be bored or disinterested.

How to bring others with you.

It is possible to live a life of prayer and never become bored or boring, but it is also quite possible to get into a rut. We know from painful experience that prayer meetings can be dull, and even the most fervent prayer teams can degenerate without spirit-filled leadership. How can a praying leader ensure that his group stays on track?

The most common cause of this degeneration that the leader must guard against is staleness and sin in his own life. When the leader shows by his attitude and actions that he feels capable in his own strength to carry the work forward, the urgency goes out of the

prayer group and the glory departs. The leader must continue to cultivate a heart of dependence upon God and must be daily proving His sufficiency if he hopes to call others to join him in prayer. The scriptural promise of effectual prayer is to the righteous man; the carnal leader will never win great victories in the spirit nor will he be able to encourage others to rely upon spiritual means to accomplish the business of the kingdom.

Next to our personal fellowship with Christ Jesus, our first priority as praying leaders is to lay a solid and shared theological basis for praying together. Does that seem to be at odds with leading interesting and exciting prayer meetings? Well, it might be if we pursued this priority like a seminary course, but that is not the only way to build upon a theological foundation! Rather, a skillful leader can do this in just a few sentences at the beginning of a prayer meeting before any specific requests are mentioned.

Paul laid a shared theological foundation for prayer at the beginning of 2 Corinthians (1:11) when he told them that they were “helping together” by praying for his missionary team. This verse tells us that Paul believed prayer helped in his daily deliverance, that partners praying together helped even more than believers praying individually, and that one of the main reasons for praying together is so that God will receive more glory when we thank Him together for His answers.

We must always guard against turning our prayer meetings into Bible lessons, but in five minutes or less it is possible to greatly heighten the awareness of common purpose in prayer. This will encourage passion and perseverance in the group and it will cause the requests and the intercession to focus much more on the business of the kingdom of God than on the business of the group and its members. The business of the kingdom is of earth shaking significance, and prayer partners who understand their part in conducting that business will not soon lose interest.

Are we praying for the Lord to provide the right personnel for some work in His Kingdom? Jesus’ example in Luke 6:12 inspires us to pray as He did before setting apart workers. Are we waiting on the Lord for financial provision? Paul’s message to his supporters in Philippians 4 is encouraging and emboldening. Are we asking God to adopt new children into His family? Five minutes of meditation upon I Timothy 2:1-6 will add power and confidence to a unified prayer team.

When inviting people to join a prayer group it is also important to state the prayer focus or common prayer burden from the outset. One of the weekly prayer meetings that I lead focuses on praying for revival in our country beginning in our church. When we meet we want to know about specific needs in one another's lives, but we all come with the anticipation that we will be praying together for revival and spiritual awakening. This mutual understanding of our purpose for meeting helps us to avoid the deathtrap of shallow prayers far removed from the glory of Christ in His church. Once a prayer group starts down the road of self-absorbed "sharing", all of the energy bleeds out.

A group that meets once per month to pray for a local mission began to lose focus in just this way. The host had a family need that everyone in the group took to heart, and we spent part of our prayer time supporting him and praying for his family and I am glad we did. Over the next couple of months other members gave similar requests until finally we were spending only about ten minutes of the hour praying for the mission and its outreach. As the group lost its focus, it also lost its urgency and the members became less committed to consistently gathering together. The prayer leader regained the initiative and restored our focus by sending out a list of specific prayer targets to each member of the group on the day before the meeting.

Prayer groups die when they lose their sense of united purpose and become self-absorbed, but prayer power can also be quenched in a meeting when one or two people monopolize the time. This is just self-absorption in another suit of clothes. The members need to learn that when they are leading out they should pray to the point and then pass the baton. Generally sixty seconds are sufficient to make a request and to state the grounds for the request. When I hear a child going on and on to his parents about why he needs something, I wonder why the parents don't make him be quiet. If the request is legitimate, it should not take a dozen paragraphs to justify it, and Jesus has already made it clear how He feels about needlessly lengthy prayers. We need to trust that if we leave out an important point, someone else in the group will press that point when it is their turn to pray, and even if they don't, "the Father knows what you need even before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8).

Prayer time is just about the most valuable resource that God has given us to steward, and the prayer leader must make a budget and stick to it. The first few minutes are needed for the group to gather and greet one another and then five minutes are needed for the leader to recall the group to its common purpose and to remind the believers of God's encouragement and desire to hear their prayers. Then the wise leader will begin to remind the members of God's answers to their recent praying and will give opportunity for praise and thanksgiving from the members. There also needs to be time set aside for the members to share prayer requests that relate to the group's purpose. An hour can easily evaporate leaving only a few moments to actually do the work or praying. This is like spending millions on research and design and then having nothing in the budget to actually build the project!

To avoid the fiasco of prayerless prayer meetings, the wise leader should clearly communicate the anticipated end time. When busy Americans are in an open-ended meeting they become very nervous—it is as if someone has left the faucet open and their precious hours are being poured down the drain. Everyone rests more easily when the leader tells them the end from the beginning. The leader should also make it clear how much of the time he expects to spend in actually doing the work of praying, so no one feels devalued when he has to cut short the time of sharing requests.

The last common dissipater of prayer power that I must mention is neglecting to sharpen the point. I am not convinced that it does any good at all to pray, "Lord, bless our missionaries;" there may be some value in this for some saints, but it is not possible for me to pray this prayer and mean anything by it other than some pleasant niceness that everyone can agree on. The blur and the haze that result from such general prayers cannot abound to the glory of God, because no one can ever point to a specific answer to praise Him for. It is risky to ask God specifically to supply the \$90,000 needed by March 1 for Missionary Smith to secure a church building, but when Mr. Smith reports the arrival of the funds at 10pm on February 28, there is great glory and it all goes to the Father. Remember blind Bartimaeus. His general plea "have mercy" was only a starting point, and then Jesus asked him (Mark 10:51), "What do you want Me to do for you?" I doubt he would have received his sight had he said, "O, just bless me and my family and the rest of my synagogue." We have been granted the power of Niagara, but how often we fritter it away by refusing to bring it to bear.

Praying for spiritual breakthrough

One way my partners are teaching me to steward the spiritual power of praying in Jesus' name is by identifying "breakthrough prayers." By "breakthrough prayers" we mean requests that: 1) advance Jesus' kingdom in measurable ways, 2) advance our mission in Jesus' kingdom, 3) can only be accomplished by God, and that 4) we agree together to pray persistently with fasting.

An Old Testament example of breakthrough praying was Ezra's leadership at the Ahava Canal (8:21-23). He brought all of the exiles together for a period of fasting. He established the basis of his prayer upon the reputation and kingdom of God, because he had told the king that God was able to protect them more effectively than an army could. The request was specific and measurable: if they were attacked or if they died of hunger or thirst through not finding "the right way", it would be obvious that God had not answered their specific request. They purposely went without an escort in order that their safety could only be explained by God's protection.

This is strategic praying in its highest form. Ezra understood from the Word of God how important their mission was in His plan and kingdom. With the vision of God's glory clear before him, he prayed with absolute confidence and carried forward the purpose of God in his generation. Ezra's administrative work was important and his faithful attention to detail obviously played a part in the success of his mission, but his crucial contribution was his determination to seek the Lord and to call his people to seek the Lord for His help and direction.

A New Testament example of this kind of strategic praying is the leadership team at Antioch Church (Acts 13:1-3). At a crucial point in the history of the church, as the first mission team went out specifically to carry the gospel to the gentiles, the church leaders met together for two periods of prayer focused by fasting. In answer to their first breakthrough prayer, the Holy Spirit gave them direction about whom they should send. Then they apparently prayed afresh with another period of fasting (v. 3) for the success of their missionaries, and the rest of Acts 13 and 14 details the answer to that prayer. Near the close of that period of spiritual breakthrough, the apostles again followed this pattern with each of the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, appointing elders and praying together with fasting (14:23).

Every autumn our church leadership spends several weeks in prayer seeking to refine our breakthrough requests for the coming year. Since 2001 we have been praying every year for ten new missionary families to send to the field by the end of 2010. So far the Lord has given us three families that have gone out and the rest are still in preparation, but our whole congregation is in united prayer for those whom the Lord is identifying in answer to our prayer.

Breakthrough prayers help our faith to grow. In 2004 we prayed that we could lead fifty people to faith in Christ, and the Lord gave us 51. This was far beyond our fruitfulness in previous years, so we were emboldened in 2005 to ask for ninety people that we could baptize (we had been averaging fewer than 20 baptisms per year), and He gave us 87. We noticed that our youth were desiring a greater involvement in the prayer revival, so in 2006 we asked for seventy students and seven teachers whom we could lead to faith in Christ (notice how far our faith had grown in two years) and He gave us 164 students and two teachers! We were thrilled by the direct answer to our prayer, but we were a bit disturbed that only 32 of us were involved in the actual fruit of the evangelism, so in 2007 we are asking for fifty of us to be able to lead at least one person to faith in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit seems to guide us into the prayers He desires to answer as we set ourselves to seek the glory of God and the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

How breakthrough spreads

Breakthrough prayers allow us to partner with other churches. We have a special relationship with one independent church in La Pine, Oregon and another in Richardson, Texas. We can't be in more than one place at a time, but because the leaders of these churches have identified breakthrough prayers, we are able pray accurately for them and to participate in the fruit God is producing among them. Last weekend the Lord allowed the Oregon church to baptize six of their young people many of whom were facing stiff opposition, and we had part in this victory by prayer. This week I hope to see some visiting missionaries from our partners in Texas whom I pray for every day. I began to pray for these missionaries simply because I was interceding for my Texan brothers who desire a breakthrough to Muslims in their community and around the world.

Revival and spiritual awakening is a work of God that He effects by answering prayer. As our churches notice His answers, our people grow in faith to ask for more... and the more they ask, the more they receive. A cascading effect of growing faith and increased prayer results in the spiritual momentum called "revival". And the revival spreads when the praying leaders of one local church join with the praying leaders of another. This is true revival that begins with repentance at home.

Let me conclude with a prophetic word concerning Israel's future, a scripture that 260 years ago became the theme of America's Great Awakening (Zechariah 8:21):

The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying,
"Let us continue to go and pray before the LORD,
And seek the LORD of hosts.
I myself will go also."