

Intercessory Prayer and the Missionary's Stewardship

Bearing fruit that remains and
inviting the Church into the
harvest

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Abiding in Christ

In the 1990s, a popular phrase, “What would Jesus do?” (W.W.J.D?), swept through Christian culture in the United States. There were W.W.J.D. bracelets that served as a visual reminder to ask yourself what Jesus might do in your situation. Christians may no longer wear the W.W.J.D. bracelets, but we do look to Scripture to glean “what would Jesus do” as we seek to live in ways that honor the Lord.

As we read God's Word, we see Jesus model a life dependent on the Father. One of the things Jesus consistently did was spend time in prayer. As we seek to walk daily with God, we cannot neglect that Jesus modeled an abiding relationship with His Father. In addition to the encouragement from Christ's life, we have His command in John 15:4 to abide in him. John 15 goes on

to teach that we abide in Christ through spending time in the Word and in prayer.

“Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5b ESV) is a passage that should bring holy fear to all Christ-followers, especially those who leave their homes to serve as missionaries. As someone who served as a missionary with the International Mission Board for over two decades, I know that no missionary wants to move to a new culture, learn a new language, and leave family and friends to do... nothing. Bear no fruit. Make no difference. See no lives changed. Waste money and time and throw away your life for... nothing.

God offers us fruit and fruit that remains (John 15:16). He says that we can come to Him in prayer, that He hears and answers us, and that this brings Him glory (John 15:7-8). Gerald Borchert in his commentary on John 12-21 emphasizes that, “bearing fruit therefore means loving others as God loves them and giving witness to the world. Such fruit-bearing is possible only by abiding in Jesus, the vine.”¹ This is the desire of the missionary heart—to see fruit that endures. Missionaries desire to see evidence of God at work and that their lives are spent for fruit that lasts.

If prayer is essential to bearing fruit, then prayer is essential to the missionary task. In their book, *Exalting Jesus in John*, Carter and Wredberg suggest that, “where there is prayer, there will be answers. God listens to his people... As the Word shapes our desires and the Spirit forms us from the inside out, we will begin to pray for those things that God cares about. God will hear and answer those prayers.”² The *Foundations* document emphasizes prayer as a core conviction in missionary sending and church planting efforts,

¹ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, New American Commentary 25b (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 146.

² Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, *Exalting Jesus in John*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2017), 307.

stating that bold and expectant prayer is needed because God is the one who brings about this abundant fruit we so desire to see.³

Carter and Wredberg remind readers that “when we pray expecting him to answer, he will. Confident prayer in the name of Jesus- according to his will- will be answered, and when that answer comes, God will be glorified.”⁴ Missionaries desire to see God glorified among the people and places to whom they are called. Thus, the missionary must pray and invite others to do the same. They must persevere in prayer, seeking God’s glory among every nation and all peoples, tribes, and languages.

Intercessory Prayer

Intercessory prayer is an essential component of abiding in Christ. As such, it is not an ineffectual discipline to check off a list but an invitation to cry out to our Father, the Almighty God, to work in and through His Church and to draw the lost to Himself. His plan is that His glory would spread to every nation, tribe, people, and language.

Billions of people worship someone or something other than the One who is truly worthy of worship and praise. God desires that these great multitudes turn in repentance, believe in the one true God, and receive everlasting life. In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, David Wells states, “Petitionary prayer, therefore, is the expression of the hope that life as we meet it, on the one hand, can be otherwise and, on the other hand, that it ought to be otherwise. It is therefore impossible to seek to live in God’s world on his term, doing his work in a way that is consistent with who he is, without engaging in regular prayer.”⁵

³ International Mission Board, *Foundations*, v. 4 (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2022), 61.

⁴ Carter and Wredberg, *Exalting Jesus in John*, 295.

⁵ David Wells, “Prayer: Rebelling against the Status Quo,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, Third Edition*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 143.

God's Word teaches us to pray with perseverance and persistence, as in the example of the persistent widow in Luke 18. We see Jesus as an intercessor in Hebrews 7:25 and Romans 8:34. We see the Holy Spirit as an intercessor in Romans 8:26-27. We see amazing examples of God working through the fervent intercession of His people throughout the Bible, including the examples of Moses in Exodus 32:11-14, 30-32, and Paul in Romans 9:1-4. Spiritual revival and gospel advance are precipitated by the fervent prayers of God's people.

The missionary must remember that God is the One who draws people to Himself (John 6:44). Apart from Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5; Ps 103:14). God's Spirit works powerfully in us, His Church (Acts 1:8; Gal 5:22-23). He calls us to go to the ends of the earth and to proclaim the good news (Matt 28:18-20).

We cannot bear fruit without remaining in Him through prayer and meditation on His Word (John 15:1-8; Ps 1:1-3). He tells us to ask Him for laborers for His harvest field (Matt 9:37-38). We know that, through abiding in Him, we will have joy, and we will have answers to our petitions (John 15:11,7, 16:24; Gal 6:9). By studying God's Word, we discover His heart and mind, and through prayer, we apply that knowledge as we seek His leadership and empowerment for joining in His work (Isa 30:21, 42:9; Jer 33:3, Amos 3:7; John 16:13).

We also realize we are in a spiritual battle and that spiritual breakthroughs and advances come in response to our believing prayer (Dan 10:12-13; Eph 6:10-20). God is pursuing all peoples. This effort is met with an intense spiritual battle against a real foe who is highly organized, powerful, and unrelenting in his attempts to keep God's purpose, the salvation of souls, from prevailing. This battle does not belong only to the missionary on the front lines of lostness. This is the battle for the Church, which must unite through intercessory prayer.

Personal Testimony

Dependence on God to bring fruit is clearly laid out in the Bible, but it is a truth that I had not fully grasped until living overseas as a missionary. Seven years into our serving in South Asia, God called our family to write a weekly update in addition to our 3-4 times a-year newsletter. We were discouraged over the years by the lack of communication from our family, friends, and church partners in the States. But, in obedience to what we believed the Lord was asking us to do, we wrote our newsletter list of over 300 people and asked who would be willing to partner with us weekly in prayer. Only ten people replied.

We began writing weekly praises, prayer requests, and a kids' corner with stories of our kids' lives and ways to pray for them. I did not even know what to write each week at first. We shared transparently from our lives and work, and we saw God answer prayers we had been praying for years as just ten more people prayed with us in strategic and informed ways.

We had been asking God for national partners, and as people prayed together with us, God brought a family who had converted to Christianity from Islam and wanted to work with us. He also led us to a local pastor who led his church to partner with us in ministry. We had been asking God to call out more laborers from the United States, and as people prayed together with us, God brought two young ladies who spent the next two years working alongside us in a new area of the city. Through this experience, God opened our eyes to the fact that strategic and informed prayer is a way every believer can take part in reaching every nation.

God has continued teaching us this over the years and has grown our intercessory network and stewardship. In my current role as director of the International Mission Board's Prayer Office, I have the privilege of seeing a glimpse of global lostness, gospel advance, the Church, and the worldwide efforts of our Southern Baptist missionaries. I am blessed to work alongside co-laborers to encourage and equip Southern Baptists and the global Church

to labor together in intercessory prayer. God continues to remind me of the stewardship missionaries have to invite the Church to come together to see every nation and all tribes, peoples, and languages before the throne.

God brought that lesson home to me in a personal way on one of our stateside assignments. Nine years after we began weekly praise and prayer communication, our family had our first stateside assignment in the small town where I grew up. A small country church down the hill from my childhood home prepared their parsonage for us. God planted us at this tiny church where I used to attend community worship services and Vacation Bible Schools and sing “specials” on occasion. My childhood piano teacher is still the pianist. The men and women who taught me in VBS are still there. The members of the other country churches in the area told me stories of how they remembered teaching me, remembered me standing on a pew learning to sing along with the hymns, and remembered my family at revival services. Many were there when I chose to follow Christ, and they witnessed my baptism. Many joined us at our wedding.

These faithful brothers and sisters prayed with us and for us for years. They had prayed by name for our neighbors, friends, church family, and the people of South Asia. They hung on to our every word as we shared about South Asia. They cried at the lostness we shared with them and rejoiced at the stories of redemption.

God showed us clearly by planting us in my hometown that I am one of that family. I am an extension of this family, giving a relatable voice to God’s work among the nations as these brothers and sisters walk alongside us in prayer. What I thought was “my story” is not just my story; it is their story, too, because they have been an intimate part of the work in South Asia.

Many of these people have prayed for the nations for years. Maybe they even prayed for the nations we lived among even before God called the girl on the hill to plant her life there. They pray now in strategic and informed ways because we invited them into places and people’s lives they would likely

never have known otherwise. This story of God's work among the nations does not belong only to missionaries. It belongs to the Church.

Missionaries must share the burden of lostness so others can carry it alongside them. They need to spur on the Church to "continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." (Col 4:2 ESV) Missionaries mobilize the Church to pray steadfastly by giving them the opportunity to do so in informed and strategic ways. They encourage them to be watchful by reporting where prayer is still needed or where God has answered prayer. They can do so with thankful hearts, knowing He hears the prayers of His people and is working for His glory.

Exhortation to Missionaries

I plead for missionaries to be worthy of imitation in their dependence on the Lord to do the work before you. Humbly preface your labors with prayer and seek to be reminded daily that the missionary task is essentially God's work and will be accomplished only in His strength. Join other believers and pray for God's glory and mercy to be displayed as His Spirit moves to bring a multitude from every nation and all tribes, peoples, and languages to know and worship our Lord Jesus Christ.

I encourage missionaries to exhort and equip the global Church to labor together in prayer. Missionaries witness the devastating lostness among unreached peoples and places throughout the world, but they also see lives transformed by the power of the gospel—a momentous change from darkness to light.

God will work in the hearts of His people as they pray and call them to greater and greater dependence and faithfulness as they abide in Him. He will call people to Himself, call them to give, go, and send. One of the purposes of prayer is to align our will with the will of God (Matt 6:9-10; John 10:3-5). Millions of people, in alignment with God's will for their lives, could change the world as He works through them as a means to accomplishing

His purposes. Missionaries have the opportunity and stewardship to model dependence on God. They can point to God as the hero of this great pursuit of all peoples.

The Great Commission is beyond our ability to complete by ourselves. The Triune God works to bring about the vision of Revelation 7:9—a vast multitude from all nations, every tribe, people, and language To the missionary, I say, “Abide.” Abide deeply in the Word and prayer. Invite others along on this journey with you. Allow others to pray with you for the lost, for the gospel to advance, and for you to be faithful and fruitful. Pray alongside them for the global Church as well as individual churches in your location and theirs.

God is worthy of your worship. He is worthy of all worship. He will accomplish the work He has begun: the calling of people from every nation, all peoples, tribes, and languages.

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