

The Tentmaker and Prayer

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Prayer is essential for tentmakers because they are on the frontlines in this cosmic war for control of the world. They spend much time with outsiders and most serve in spiritually hostile countries.

A few years ago, the U.S. government put pressure on Afghanistan to let tentmakers put up a church building. Two years later, the government ordered the beautiful temple torn down. The Afghan men dismantled it carefully so they could reuse its materials. Instead of raising an international fuss, the Christians responded lovingly to the laborers, serving cold drinks. Many of Afghans wept and a few found the Lord. Many Afghans later believed that the devastating earthquake which hit a couple of years later, and then the Russian invasion, were God's punishments for their bad treatment of the Christians.

Ed, head of a firm in another closed country suffered the loss of a large sum of money rather than take bribes which both the Bible and the Koran forbid. He gained a reputation in government and construction circles for his Christian integrity and honesty.

Carl, an engineer was repeatedly caught in the middle between the lies his bosses told each other. How should he deal with this tactfully but honestly? He and his wife and children suffered illness and accident and discouragement and wanted to quit. But people prayed, God gave wisdom, and their friends are finding God.

In each case, prayers were decisive.

Missions is warfare

Missions is nothing less than a cosmic war for control of the world! Cosmic because it involves non-human as well as human beings. In the Rebellion in the Garden, God's vice-regents betrayed his planet into the hands of his archenemy, the Serpent (with a capital S). Ever since, God's creation has been enemy-occupied territory and human beings have been dead in their sins. Even Jesus referred to Satan as "the ruler of this world." But then Jesus died and rose, paying for our sins, making us alive, and triumphing over all the principalities and powers! The cross and the empty tomb constitute the decisive battle in the war! (Col.2:15,16, 1 Cor. 15:25ff.) But as in most wars, some of the fiercest fighting occurs after the decisive battle. That is what engages us now.

Our King could destroy all the rebels and take over, as human victors do, but he loves the rebels, as he loved us while we were still his enemies. (Rom. 5:8) So he sends us out to patiently, lovingly persuade them to change sides and surrender to the King of Kings, so he can transfer them from the kingdom of death and darkness to his kingdom of light.

It was only after Jesus had been seated on the throne with his Father that he made the post-resurrection visits and commissioned his followers with the words, "All power and authority has been given to me. Go therefore into all the world and make disciples. . . And lo, I am with you until the end of the age!" He told them to wait in the upper room until he had sent his Spirit to indwell them. Then he sent them out in small teams, not alone.

The imposter does not look kindly on any invasion of territory he considers his—all those countries that he has kept deceived for centuries. About 80% of the world's people live in countries that restrict the entry of regular missionaries. It is to these countries that most tentmakers go, because they can enter as professional people, earning their own living in

secular employment, while they make Jesus Christ known full-time by their lives and their words, on the job and in their free time.

Without enough prayer, Christians in spiritually hostile countries may become discouraged and spiritually dry and even succumb to temptation. They may fail to witness, or develop marital problems, or conflicts with fellow Christians. They may become ill or suffer accidents. Or their ministry may be active but ineffective. The enemy may divide little local fellowships. Converts may backslide.

Tentmakers must have on the whole armor of God, complete with prayer and the sword of the Spirit—God's Word. Paul tells them to put on the armor, piece by piece. This must mean that Christians do go out without it. If we remove the military imagery, we are to rejoice in our salvation, be committed to righteousness and truth in all our dealings, and have strong faith in God in whatever situation arises. Sandals on our feet mean readiness to take the gospel to those who do not know it. We must take the sword of God's Word, and be bathed in prayer, our own, and the prayers of others for us.

Nothing can touch God's people without his permission, but they must use the protection he provides for them. They need wisdom to know how to face every difficulty and to keep their eyes on him. (See Eph.6:10-20, Mt. 4:8, Lk. 4:5-8, John 12:31, Col. 2:13-15, 2 Tim.2:3,4, 2 Cor.10:3-5.)

Nehemiah had his officers guard the builders of the walls of Jerusalem because enemies were trying to frustrate their efforts. But each builder also held his tools in one hand and a weapon in the other. Daniel gives a glimpse into the cosmic conflict behind the scenes. His prayers affected even hostile governments.

Individual prayer

Nothing takes the place of the individual's personal, daily devotional time with the Lord. A most helpful booklet is Quiet Time (IVP). We come to God daily, not only for what we get out of it, but for what the Lord gets out of it. Our coming delights him! He waits for us. He requires us to present our needs personally so our relationship with him will grow. (Psa. 27:9, 9, John 4:23.)

We set aside a regular time and place. If we break this appointment, we extend to the Lord the same courtesy that we would to someone else—and we set a new time. We read from his Word, listening to his voice and interacting with him on its content. We worship him for who he is and thank him for what he has done for us. We then make our personal requests and intercede for the needs of other people.

Sometimes he will overwhelm us with a sense of his presence. But it is not necessary to feel his presence to know he is there. We know by faith that he is present, listening, because he has promised to be there whenever we approach him. Whether we feel him present or not. (James 4:7,8, Heb. 4:14-16, John 15:7, 1 John 5:14, 15.)

We should watch through the day to see how God continues our morning conversation. It is not only the answers to prayer that are important, but what God is saying to us through them. About each good event and each problem throughout the day, ask, "What is God saying to me through this?" "How does he want me to handle this?"

Often it is something he has told us in the morning that will be exactly what we need. That is because for the believer every day is a "day which the Lord has made" so we can "rejoice and be glad in it." That means he knew in advance all that would happen and he has already planned the solutions. We need to remember that and to trust. Nothing can touch us without his permission!

Be convinced that he always answers, but he may say Yes, No or Not yet.

Watch for partial answers to prayer requests. It is easy to say a situation worked out well, forgetting it might not have done so if we had not prayed. Thanksgiving increases our awareness of God's presence.

That is why spiritual bookkeeping helps. I write my requests in a small loose leaf notebook. I record a partial answer with a small "t" for "thank you." A row of small t's shows me God is working on the answer and encourages me to keep praying. A large "T" shows the answer is complete. I describe major answers in another section so I will not forget. God says many times in Deuteronomy to remember all the ways God has led us. Past answers are an encouragement to present faith. What God gives is important, and so is the manner in which he gives it. James 1:17.

When I keep records, the Lord seems to intervene constantly on my behalf. When I don't, he seems more distant. Maybe I just don't notice. Or maybe he does less for me because why should he answer prayers if I will not notice?

In my notebook I list immediate requests first—urgent matters to which I expect an answer soon. Another section holds names of people I pray for regularly—like family, certain friends, missionaries, tentmakers, GO applicants, donors, etc. I pray for a few daily, for others weekly or monthly, and for some, only when I hear from them. Too many names makes praying a burden.

Time and place

It is not enough to pray as we go about our daily activities. We must set appointments with God where he has our sole attention. Early morning is ideal because it prepares us to walk through the day with him. A friend who had trouble waking up, prayed, pacing the floor. He said he had to pray in the morning because it was during the day that he was most likely to get into trouble. But another time may suit you better.

It is good to have a regular place for prayer. But privacy is rare in most cultures. A married couple in their own home can plan for each other's individual time and for their prayers together. Single tentmakers can do the same for their Christian roommates in a dorm or an apartment. It is more difficult with a non-believing roommate or when living with a family that does not know God. Then you should explain that you need a few minutes for prayer every day. Muslims are not ashamed to put down their prayer rugs in any public place to pray.

A Christian does not need to go into hiding. To go into your closet (Mt. 6) only means to avoid deliberate ostentation in order to seek praise for your religiosity. Sometimes you can have your quiet time while taking a walk outdoors. If there is no private place, learn to close your ears and concentrate on the Lord even with movement in the room. If I am in a busy room and cannot speak out loud, it helps me to write out my prayer. The main benefit of speaking or writing is that we have to clarify our thinking. God says, "Bring with you words. . ." Specific requests.

Family devotions

Spouses must have their separate prayer times and prayers together. It can keep their relationship open and healthy.

They also need to pray with their children. Adjusting to another culture puts pressures on children as well as on the parents, although children seem to manage more easily. Devotions may include a song, Bible reading with explanation, conversation, and prayer. Children grow more quickly if they are not sheltered from the family's problems. They can help to pray about them and then rejoice over God's answers. Children's story books are helpful. The prayer time need not be long. Some do it after their evening meal.

Devotional materials

Many excellent Bible bookstores around the world carry books in English. But if you are going to a restricted country there may not be a single one, and you may not be able to get many books through customs. You need to carefully select a few that will help your own devotional life, and help you to teach about it. You may want one of several devotional guides. Do not forget books appropriate for the ages of your children.

Prayer partners

It is good to have one prayer partner who is not a family member with whom to share on a deeper level than with your other Christian friends. The reason is that we have great difficulty being completely honest with ourselves or with a family member. Two friends can help each other be more objective. It works out easily if it someone you see anyway during your week's activities. You each keep a journal (a section of your prayer notebook?) of good and bad things that happen, of your triumphs and failures, inspirational thoughts, Bible insights, etc., and when you meet you try to share honestly from your journaling and pray for each other. There should be no pressure on either one, but the goal is to share fully. Deep sharing must be mutual, so that both understand the need for strict confidentiality.

Our student groups in Brazil were transformed by prayer partnerships, which deepened all of our fellowship. People had not shared openly because each was ashamed and guilty of his or her failures. In sharing we discovered that everyone was struggling with the same sins and problems. There was no need to hide.

Single people must find prayer partners of the same sex. Every couple needs another couple for objectivity—the husbands meeting together, the wives together, and sometimes, all four.

Laura went to teach English in China. It could have been lonely, even with some other tentmakers there. But she found Mary to be "a rare kindred spirit." They often prayed together. She recalled an unforgettable Easter morning. They rode their bikes before dawn to a distant hilltop. There they could look down on the 2000 year old Han Dynasty tombs, with their dead kings and many life-size stone horses and stone people. As they watched the sun rise over this scene of death, the death and resurrection of Jesus had new meaning. Out of joy, they sang loudly, "Up from the grave he arose!" And "He lives!" And "Crown him with many crowns!"

Larger group prayer meetings

The Lord's special presence is promised when Christians pray together. (Mt. 18:19,20, Heb. 10:23-25.) Before you go abroad, we can put you in touch with Christians already in your target country. In open countries you can choose a group of missionaries, tentmakers and national Christians that you feel most comfortable with.

But in restricted countries you may have less choice. In a large city there may be an international fellowship with a couple of hundred people. But probably only a few share your interest in missions. More often, small groups meet in homes. In one Muslim city, Howard and Betty met with an English doctor and his wife, a Ghanaian professor and a Philippine engineer. Then a Finnish woman found the Lord. That is all the believers there were anywhere in that large section of the country! They were thankful for each other even though they came from different evangelical traditions. This was the team the Lord had put together.

In Hong Kong, Brett and Shirley attended services at a church of their denomination. They were a bit suspicious of people not from their church. But they couldn't go to midweek prayer meeting, because of the intense traffic. So they attended an interdenominational prayer group in their apartment building. When they came home they said one of the highlights of their time in China was this prayer meeting and getting to see God's truth from new viewpoints.

If your new team is not already praying together, you will want to introduce this emphasis quickly. You may want to begin with a song or two. Use hymns and choruses that have spiritual depth, not those that are endlessly repetitious. You may have a brief meditation from the Bible, and maybe some sharing time. Or you may pray after a short group Bible study discussion. We suggest that you use conversational prayer.

Conversational prayer

In the usual prayer meeting, one person says a whole prayer and then the next person prays a whole prayer. And so on around the room. Too often while some are praying others are composing their prayer, because it is like giving a little speech. Not everyone can do it easily. The first person covers most of the requests, so others have little left to say except to repeat. It makes for a boring meeting. Every time someone prays, we should be praying their prayer with them. So the endless repetition is a waste of effort.

A prayer meeting should be more like a family conversation. A father does not give each child at the dinner table one chance to speak his mind and then hold his peace. Rather they all freely interact with each other and with the Father.

So in conversational prayer, each person adds a sentence or two, as the whole group makes up one corporate prayer. The first person makes a request, and then several people pray about different aspects of that request. When there is a moment of silence, a pause, someone should present another request, and it should be prayed over from various angles. Each person's contribution suggests other aspects. There is little or no repetition and the prayers are much more thorough.

Conversational prayer is ideal if your group includes people who are not fluent in English, because a person reluctant to compose a whole prayer can add just a sentence or two. It is a great way to teach new believers to pray. Everyone adds a thought. There is little repetition and often the Holy Spirit works powerfully in the group together. Time flies as you pray around subjects.

The leader may suggest that first everyone will begin with worship—talking to God about who he is. This increases the sense of his presence and power. Maybe everyone will want to add a note of praise. After a pause, the leader may suggest a time of thanksgiving. Recalling what God has done increases faith in what God can do. Each one adds his thanks for something specific. Then there can be personal requests. Suggest that these be very specific, using the first person singular, "I," not "we." After a time of this you can suggest intercession for others. Each person's prayer suggests other aspects to consider. Change the subject only when there is a pause indicating readiness for a new item.

But if people start to pray around the circle, in order, it is good to break the sequence, so no one will feel pressured to pray just because it seems his or her turn. Everyone may pray several times.

When there is a pause, someone might suggest a Bible promise or a verse of a hymn. This is beautiful if each person is being sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

Longer prayer meetings

From time to time it is good to have an all day prayer meeting—or even all night. The pattern above is still an excellent one to follow, but with more Scripture, testimonies and songs interspersed with the prayers. A map and other visual aids help praying for missions.

People from different cultures have different prayer traditions. I attended a meeting in a Japanese church where all prayed at once, but in whispers, creating a reverent wind-like sound.

In IVCF-IFES conferences, with people from every continent, we designated certain rooms for those who felt sincere only if there was singing and clapping and tongues, and other rooms for those needing a reverent, hushed atmosphere. People were free to move from room to room.

Prayer support from home

You must have regular prayer support from friends at home. It is said that you cannot get people to pray for you unless they also give to your support, and most tentmakers earn their own support in their overseas jobs. In truth, most people who give do not pray. Many feel they have discharged their missions obligation by their gifts. They feel they do not have time for further involvement. So missionaries and tentmakers alike must cultivate prayer support or they will not have it. This may mean teaching your friends to pray, and speaking of the power of prayer and your need for it in a church meeting. The people who commit themselves to praying for you should be made to feel that they are a part of your team—as much as your colleagues overseas.

The tentmakers' prayer warriors should include their home church. Or their home churches. In today's peripatetic age, the husband and wife usually grew up in different churches (where their parents still attend). Then there are the churches in which they were active during their student years, and the church or churches they have attended as a married couple, as a family.

Yet many church members, including their pastors, do not understand the bivocational concept. There is little appreciation of lay ministry. Even missionaries often view tentmakers as part-time and second-class. You may have to begin by educating your church also about tentmaking.

Several GO Papers could be helpful. *Why Did Paul Make Tents?* presents the rationale and the biblical basis. See also our *Tentmakers and their Churches: Mutual Responsibility*, and *Your Church: Why not send tentmakers?*

Before you leave for overseas, you need a chance to tell the congregation what God is leading you to do and to request their commitment to pray for you. (It can be difficult to get this opportunity. Sometimes we contact the pastor and ask on behalf of the tentmakers.) Then you need to keep them informed about your work. You need to let them know your specific requests for prayer. Consider four ways to do this.

1) Newsletters. You should send out regular newsletters. Send one copy to friends at home who will reproduce and mail it to your address list. A Sunday school class might be willing. If no one is willing, try some of the missionary service groups that do this for reasonable fees. But your newsletters need to be well-written, or they may just end up in the waste basket, along with other people's dull letters. Yours should have an attractive appearance, but not fussy. This is easy today when everyone has a computer and printer. Never start with a guilty apology about why you did not write sooner. Your first couple of sentences must grab your readers if you expect them to read further. So jump right into a story. You must help readers to see, hear, smell and feel the stories you tell about yourselves or the local people. Send for our paper on *How to Write a Good Newsletter*.

If you work in a hostile country the problem is more complicated. You dare not write freely nor receive letters freely because of government censorship. A careless letter from home can get you expelled from the country. But you can write freely if your letter can be hand-carried by someone who is flying home. Take U.S. postage stamps with you for this purpose. But do not attach the stamp to the envelope. Give it to anyone at the airport who can be trusted to add the stamp and drop the letter into a U.S. mailbox on arrival.

It is against the international postal code to carry mail in any country that has an uncanceled stamp from another country on it. A few countries have been known to enforce this law.

But you and your prayer team should know how much they can freely write. You will find good suggestions for yourself and for your prayer supporters, in our paper, *How to Send Letters to and from Hostile Countries*.

2) Faxes and e-mail. What a boon these are for Christian workers who serve abroad! You can fax letters home. You can communicate often. And e-mail allows you to report news immediately and to get immediate response. But neither is safe from eavesdroppers and censorship. You will need to investigate the situation in your host country.

But these electronic devices require discipline. They can absorb far too much of your time. Another danger is to be so often in touch with your home country that psychologically you do not really leave it. Your ability to adjust to your new host country is impaired and your ministry is damaged.

But fax and e-mail do give you a way to keep in close touch with your main prayer supporters. Most people who go to serve overseas will find only a small number of people who will faithfully pray. These are the ones you should keep in close touch with. Let them know your requests, and the answers when they come. Let these people know how much you depend upon their prayers and how it helps.

The other people on your list should receive your prayer letters, probably six times a year. Monthly seems too much, and four times a year too little.

3) Visits from friends at home. This is a superb way for them to understand your situation and your work. But if you are in a popular tourist location you have to guard against too many visitors who are looking mainly for cheap accommodations and a free tour guide. Your ministry stops, your family is inconvenienced and you become a tourist service. In a letter, invite friends to come because there are reasonable hotels and restaurants nearby, so they won't expect to stay with you. You can then provide one meal and information about your work. You are still free to extend personal invitations to those you wish to host in your home.

4) Your visits home. Missionaries used to have furloughs every 4 or 5 years. But in this day of easy travel, most come every two years. Many tentmakers have four to six weeks paid vacation at home every year, in summer. Those in Muslim countries may come home during the Ramadan holiday. Try to see your most faithful prayer supporters. Try to give a report in each of your home churches. Oddly, few churches give this privilege to tentmakers. Even missionaries find it increasingly difficult to report to their churches. Convince the pastor you have much to give.

Conclusion

Expect the enemy to interfere with your personal and group prayer and to keep your friends at home from praying, because this is so crucial to your effectiveness. Satan will let you spin your wheels, so you will think you are doing great, as long as there is little prayer involved. So be on guard.

There is a sure way to get rid of Satan's interference. When you sense his activity, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. . ." (James 4:7,8) I do not speak to the devil, but I ask the Lord to make him flee, according to his promise.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. . . Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:6,7).

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