Hi, the latest Ministry Magazine newsletter is here...

sharing ideas

We've had some strange weather in Washington, DC. Most regions on the continent experienced record-breaking low temperatures. But there is something even more unusual than the current cold snap: it was actually warmer in Anchorage, Alaska and Nuuk, Greenland than it was in Washington, DC.

Strange things are occurring in our world, and I'm not just referring to the weather. Such changes could steal our peace and fill our hearts with anxiety. How should we respond to such unsettling times? I love this testimony of the psalmist David: “LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me” (Psalm 131:1-2, NKJV). Whatever the temperature outside, whatever vortex impacts your life today, may your soul be calm and quiet in the arms of our loving God.

- Derek Morris, editor

featured articles

Prayer

- Praying the Psalms
- The pastor as a harvest worker: Praying the radical prayer
- Stop praying for the harvest
- Praying for the Sick

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Real Empowerment - by Jay Randall Sloop

featured website
RevivalandReformation.org - Prayer Resources
Praying the Psalms

Recently, I was in a faculty meeting discussing the meaning of prayer in contemporary liturgy. It did not take long before complaints were expressed about the length and, particularly, the language of liturgical prayers. The prevailing impression was that public prayers tended to be too long and saturated with superficiality. One person objected that some people were inclined to preach, teach, and even supply information to God when praying. This made me think. Although this article is not based on research on how people pray or how they view public prayers, I want to share some thoughts on how we could better our prayers and find new ways that will enrich both our liturgical and personal prayer lives.

Unjustly dismissed borrowed oil

Rolf Jacobson shares an interesting anecdote from his friend’s life. An evangelist was visiting her home, and as they were sitting down for dinner, her father began the meal with a prayer that consisted of reciting Psalm 145:15, 16: “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”¹ As he was in the midst of his prayer, the evangelist interrupted him: “We thank you God that we do not have to burn our lamps with borrowed oil.” Jacobson rightly remarks that with this pejorative critique, the evangelist dismissed the irreplaceable value of prayer uses of psalms.²

A belief that only spontaneous, unlearned prayer is real prayer appears to be prevalent among many Christians. God placed a prayer book, Psalms, at the heart of the Bible not simply to inform us about how people of ancient times prayed but to teach us to pray today. With all due respect to spontaneous prayer, I am arguing here that our conventional, routine prayer lives can be offered new dimensions and power when the spiritual oil of the psalms is poured into our lamps.

Here are some ways of how praying the psalms can transform our individual and communal prayers.

Praying the psalms articulates our experience

Careful use of Psalms in liturgy can exalt God’s power and splendor. The psalms can praise God for His marvelous deeds and salvation. While thanksgiving psalms can be heard from pulpits quite often (e.g., Pss. 8; 23; 147–150), other psalms, with complaints and laments, seem to be inappropriate for many liturgies. For example, the words of Psalm 137:8, 9 just do not seem right to most of us, “O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” Many would argue that Psalm 44 does not fit a worship service: “Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path. But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness” (vv. 18,19). Thus, the selectiveness of Psalms in liturgy reflects the exclusiveness of moods and words that we express in our communal prayers.

Sometimes contemporary worship services featuring the popular genre of praise music attempt to create “a sense of ‘false happiness’ as the main purpose and normal state of the Christian Church and of individual Christian lives.”³ This could cause us to miss the point of worship. Such restrictiveness may be a sign of our inability or uneasiness to
engage the dark realities of life and worship. Walter Brueggemann rightly observes that “surface use of the Psalms coincides with the denial of the discontinuities in our own experience.”

This is true not only of the selective use of Psalms but also of prayer. Though we may sometimes feel that God treats us unfairly when suffering hits us, we do not find it appropriate to express our thoughts in liturgy or even in private prayer. The failure to express honestly and openly our feelings and views before God in prayer often leaves us in bondage to our own emotions and sin. This also denies us confidence and trust in approaching God. Praying the psalms gives “an assurance to us that when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage.” Psalm 44, for example, can help worshipers articulate their experiences of innocent suffering freely and adequately. Praying the psalms also helps us experience the freedom of speech in prayer. The psalms give us words that we cannot find or do not dare to speak.

**Praying the psalms supervises our experience**

Praying the psalms does more than enable worshipers to articulate freely their experience. Walter Brueggemann and Patrick Miller suggest that the psalms supervise the experience according to God’s standards that make it bearable, manageable, and, hopefully, meaningful in the community. The psalms make the experience “formful just when it appeared to be formless and therefore deathly and destructive.”

Praying the psalms will sometimes reveal a dissonance that may exist between the emotions of the psalms and the emotions of the worshiper. Imagine a worshiper who learns that he is dying of cancer. The lamenting words of Psalm 22:1 will help him express his grief and sense of loneliness: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?” However, he will also read in the same psalm: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you” (v. 22). These words may not coincide with his present experience, and they may even drive him to despair. Rolf Jacobson argues that pastors and theologians must learn to make fruitful use of this dissonance and help the worshiper resolve the spiritual discomfort by letting the psalms introduce new cognitions and attitudes into him. By giving us words to pray, the psalms teach us that we pray first and later feel what we pray.

When my husband and I lost our first child due to some complications at delivery, I was left without any spiritual oil in my reservoir. As I was lying alone in my room that Friday evening, I reached for my Bible to begin the Sabbath. I could not pray; I had no words to say. The Bible opened at the place where the marker was placed the day before. This was Isaiah 49, that is, the song of Restoration of Zion. I began reading mechanically. It seemed as if each word of the song was meant to pierce my heart: “Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains!” (v. 13a). But when I read verse 14, I felt that my lost words came back to me, and I read over and over again: “But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.’ ” These words became my words for they expressed everything that was in my heart. These were the only words spoken by Zion in the song. The Lord continues the song by answering Zion: “ ‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!’ ” (v. 15). I felt that God was talking to me. I was still sad and desperate, but not forsaken and forgotten anymore.

One of my students copied Psalm 42 on a beautifully decorated scroll and sent it to me in the hospital. “My tears have been my food day and night. . . . Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (vv. 3, 5, 6). These words filled me with hope—that tears would be exchanged for praise one day in the future. Isaiah 49 and Psalm 42 became my prayers at the time when I had no words of my own. Over the days and weeks, I began to feel and mean the praise and hope expressed in these two songs. I still pray them when I wish to express special thanks to God.

Praying the psalms supervises the experience by taking the worshipers to new spiritual horizons. The psalms let the worshipers express their feelings and understanding, but the worshipers are not left where they presently are.
Worshipers are led to abandon their burdens of pain, disappointment, hatred, anger, and despair before God and adopt new understanding and eventually healing. In the same way, praying the psalms provides a joyful, grateful heart with inspired ways to experience new dimensions of praise and thanksgiving.

**Praying the psalms transforms our experience**

Tremper Longman says that when “we read the Psalms with faith, we come away changed and not simply informed.” The language of the psalms is creative. Praying the psalms does not always pronounce what is, but rather “evokes into being what does not exist until it has been spoken.”

The psalms are not simply ancient human words that help believers express their inner feelings before God. The psalms are the Word of God by which a believer is transformed into, for example, a person with a broken and contrite heart as described in Psalm 51. The constitutive power of the psalms in relation to piety is demonstrated in the ability of a psalm to enable the believer through the Holy Spirit to act in the way demanded by the psalm. “In other words, the praying of the psalm is an event by which God’s grace is made manifest in the lives of believers.”

However, a mere repetition of the words of the psalms with only a slight comprehension of their meaning may not produce the authentic transformation intended by their use. Praying the psalms does not mean to serve as a kind of use of amulets with quotations from the Hebrew Psalter that are believed to have some kind of magical curing power. James Mays observes that the words of the psalms may become empty and perverted if they are spoken without an understanding of the distinctive faith of the psalms. “We must by means of the psalms enter and live in that particular world if praise and prayer with their words are to be authentic.”

**Praying the psalms broadens our experience**

Sometimes there may be a total disjunction between the words of a psalm and the worshiper’s present experience. Imagine a happy newly wedded couple praying Psalm 88: “May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave” (vv. 2, 3). However, Jacobson shares two reasons why praying a lament psalm is beneficial to the worshipers who are not in distress. First, it prepares them for a time of trouble that may come in the future. Contrary to the popular gospel of prosperity, the psalms make worshipers aware that suffering is part of general human experience and happens to the righteous, not just to the wicked. The psalms give the assurance that God is in control and provides strength and solution in times of trouble. Second, praying the lament psalms teaches the worshipers compassion towards the sufferers. We must be mindful of the less fortunate when expressing our happiness and gratitude to God. In the same way, introducing a psalm of praise to sufferers can transform their suffering by creating hope.

Praying the psalms makes the believing community aware of the full range of human experience and teaches the worshipers to engage the various facets of that experience and worship. The responsibility of a pastor or priest includes leading in that process and keeping the lamps of the congregation burning constantly with good oil. The psalms are abundant with precious spiritual oil. The psalms are divine-human prayers. For that reason, praying the psalms brings the believing community to the center of God’s powerful healing grace while empowering the worshipers to share the deepest impressions of their hearts.
References:

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the NIV.


5 Ibid., 14.


7 Jacobson, “Burning Our Lamps,” 92, 93.


10 Bruggemann, Praying the Psalms, 18.


Have you ever prayed a bold prayer? I am not talking about, “Thank You for the world so sweet, thank You for the food we eat,” or “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” I am talking about a bold prayer.

Like Elijah, when he stretched himself out three times over the lifeless body of the son of the widow of Zarephath and prayed, “‘O Lord my God, I pray, let this child’s soul come back to him’” (1 Kings 17:21). That was a bold prayer.

Or like Jesus, when He held a small lunch in His hands and prayed to His heavenly Father to provide food for a vast multitude (Mark 6:41). That was also a bold prayer. The Gospel writers do not give us the exact words of Jesus’ prayer, but surely He was not just saying, “Thank You for the world so sweet, thank You for the food we eat.”

The radical prayer

Jesus challenges you to pray a bold prayer. A radical prayer. Listen to the words of Jesus:

“The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2).

At first reading, this may not sound like a radical prayer. But a careful study of these words of Jesus will reveal that this represents a radical request. There are several Greek verbs that can be translated “pray.” Is Jesus asking us to make a request? To express a desire? It is more intense, for the Greek verb used, deomai, means “to beseech,” “to plead earnestly,” “to beg.” The request of Jesus comes across so much stronger than simply “to pray.”

Let us consider some passages where this verb is used. We find it twice in connection with this teaching of Jesus to pray to the Lord of the harvest. It is also found in Luke 5:12, in connection with a leper who begs for healing; in Luke 8:38, where a man who has been freed from a legion of demons earnestly pleads to go with Jesus; and in Luke 9:38, where a man also pleads for his son’s deliverance from an evil spirit. Do any of those occurrences sound like simply expressing a desire or making a request?

Perhaps even more helpful for our understanding is the use of this verb in Luke 22:31, 32. Here Jesus prays, “‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’” (emphasis added). Peter was in danger of eternal loss. Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. How do you think Jesus prayed for Peter? He used the verb deomai. Jesus earnestly pleaded with the Father on Simon Peter’s behalf. That is how Jesus tells us to pray the radical prayer. Pray earnestly. Beg.

The earnest appeal

Notice, this verb is in the imperative: “therefore pray the Lord of the harvest . . .” What do authors imply when they use an imperative? It’s a command or an appeal. An imperative expects an active response. If a firefighter runs into a public building and shouts, “Vacate this building immediately,” this should not be considered a polite suggestion but a command. If a teacher says to her students, “Turn in your homework at the end of class,” that is not just a tentative request. She expects an active response. Similarly, when Jesus says to the disciples, and also to us, “Pray the Lord of the harvest,” He expects an active response.

The logical thought might be, Wait a minute! I don’t understand. Why do I need to beg the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers? Why do I need to start begging the Lord of the harvest as never before? Doesn’t the Lord of the harvest already want to do this? Absolutely. So why then do we need to beg? The answer, I suggest, is that begging has more to do with changing our hearts than changing God’s.
Throwing out laborers

What, then, is so radical about this prayer? As we dig deeper, we find the answer in the words of Jesus. We are to earnestly plead with the Lord of the harvest to do what? “Send out laborers into His harvest.” That does not sound very radical. But “send out laborers” is not an accurate translation of the Greek. The common verb in Greek for “send out” is apostello, from which we get the noun apostle. When the Gospels record that Jesus “sent out” the disciples, the authors use this verb. But Jesus used a much more radical verb in Luke 10:2.

“Send out laborers” is not even an accurate translation. It is far too polite. The verb used here is ekballo. Ballo means “to cast” or “to throw.” This verb describes the disciples casting their nets out of the ship (John 21:6), when the enemies of Jesus picked up rocks to throw at Him (John 8:59), and when John the Baptist was thrown into prison (John 3:24). Yet it still does not capture the complete meaning of this radical prayer.

Jesus used the Greek verb, ekballo, in Luke 10:2. The prefix ek means “out.” So ekballo means “to throw out,” or “to cast out.” On numerous occasions in the Gospels, this verb is used for casting out demons and also when Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple (John 2:15). This is not a soft verb, and Jesus is not asking you to pray a soft prayer. Jesus asks you to earnestly plead with the Lord of the harvest “to throw out” laborers, “to hurl out” laborers, “to cast out” laborers into His harvest. We call that a radical prayer.

A personal request

You cannot possibly pray this radical prayer unless you are willing to be a part of the answer. Let us rephrase it this way:

“Lord of the harvest, I earnestly beg You to throw out laborers into Your harvest, and You have my permission to begin with me.”

Jesus Himself was willing to be thrown out. Matthew records that immediately after His baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Jesus came out of that wilderness to begin His active ministry. Mark, on the other hand, records that Jesus was “thrown out” by the Spirit. Most translators do not translate the Greek accurately. The verb used in Mark 1:12 is ekballo. Jesus was willing to be thrown out into God’s harvest field.

The logical question is, What will happen to me if I give the Lord of the harvest permission to throw me out into His harvest field? That is God’s responsibility, not ours. He will throw you out where He wants you to be. It may be to a distant land or where you currently live. Your assignment, my assignment, is to be willing, to be ready, to pray the radical prayer, to earnestly plead, “Lord of the harvest, I earnestly beg You to throw out laborers into Your harvest, and You have my permission to begin with me.”

My testimony

Since I have started praying this radical prayer, my life and ministry have been radically transformed. Early in 2008, for example, I received an invitation to hold a citywide evangelistic meeting in Vancouver, Washington, United States. My natural response in the past would have probably sounded something like this: “You need to ask an evangelist like Mark Finley. I’m just a local church pastor.” However, because I had been praying the radical prayer, I recognized that I was being thrown out into the harvest field.

As I began to prepare for this harvest work, God opened the door for me to participate in Discoveries ’08 with Mark Finley. I was blessed to serve alongside him and learn both by observation and active involvement. Pastor Finley graciously helped me craft an eight-part reaping meeting, which we called “The Radical Teachings of Jesus.” We addressed the following important topics: what Jesus taught about Himself, what Jesus taught about the Scriptures, what Jesus taught about salvation, what Jesus taught about His return, what Jesus taught about the Sabbath, what Jesus taught about the judgment, what Jesus taught about death, and what Jesus taught about His church.
That series of presentations was life changing, not only for many of those in attendance, but also for me. I caught a clearer vision of what the Lord of the harvest can do when we radically depend upon Him. During those meetings, I was impressed that God wanted to use that series to impact people worldwide. Through a series of miracles a book, audiobook, small-group DVD series, and leader’s kit are now available.

**Your response**

Not everyone who responds to the appeal of Jesus in Luke 10 will be “thrown out” into the same harvest work. I am simply encouraging you to earnestly pray the radical prayer and see what the Lord of the harvest will do in your life:

“Lord of the harvest, I earnestly beg You to throw out laborers into Your harvest, and You have my permission to begin with me.”

I challenge you to cry out to the Lord of the harvest. Say, “Whatever You want me to do, I’ll do it. Wherever You want me to go, I’ll go. Just show me what You want me to do, Lord. I give You full permission. I yield fully to You. Throw out laborers into Your harvest, and You have my permission to begin with me.”
Stop praying for the harvest

James A. Cress

Our Lord never instructed us to pray for the harvest; instead He instructed us to pray for the reapers of the harvest. He asks us to make it a matter of prayer that the Lord of the harvest will send forth reapers. The challenge, then, from Jesus' viewpoint does not lie in a shortage of harvestable grain, but a shortage of workers to help gather in that grain.

In the first three quarters of 2004 the Adventist Church's Year of World Evangelism, over one million baptisms have flooded the membership rolls almost 3,000 new believers a day! It's likely that by December 31, this year will mark the greatest one-year baptismal total in the history of our denomination.

Even as we rejoice in these accessions, we ought also to repent for the shortage of workers to complete the discipleship task. Today, despite our best efforts to recruit the names of newly interested individuals, or even to baptize new believers through evangelism, we face the awesome challenge of integrating those we baptize into discipled believers who, themselves, will become part of the harvest labor force. Rather than praying for greater quantities of converts, we ought to pray for a greater quantity and quality of harvesters.

Pray for reapers who'll care for the harvest

"There was a great deal of work to be done, and a great deal of good likely to be done, but there wanted hands to do it... They that were ill taught were desirous to be better taught; people's expectations were raised, and there was such a moving of affections, as promised well... Note, It is a blessed thing, to see people in love with good preaching. The valleys are then covered over with corn, and there are hopes it may be well gathered in. That is a gale of opportunity that calls for a double care and diligence in the improvement of it; a harvest-day should be a busy day. It was a pity when it was so that the laborers should be so few; that the corn should shed and spoil, and rot upon the ground for want of reapers; loiterers many, but laborers very few."1

Harvesting must consist of more than "mowing down" the grain; laborers also must preserve it in barns. Left untended, even though reaped, the good grain will rot if it's neglected or abandoned. For example, too often thousands of new accessions are added to the church without as much as a place for them to worship, a pastor or elder to watch over them, or even a song book to aid their worship.

One union president told me of a short-term effort that produced mass baptisms of thousands for whom they had neither names nor addresses. His members feared their already too-crowded facilities would be over whelmed, not to mention that from these new converts no tithe or offerings would come in.

If numbers explode by the thousands and giving does not increase in proportion, such efforts are not true evangelism, but exploitation. If we are more focused on total accessions than integrated discipleship, the numbers we grab will not result in fruit for the kingdom. Massive additions to the church without commensurate efforts to preserve the fruit will result in massive apostasy of the newly converted, not to speak of members who might hold an antagonism against public evangelism. We can easily destroy the very process we desire to establish.

Sometimes glowing reports of evangelistic efforts fail to tell of abandoned and disillusioned new converts who end up as enemies of the faith they had embraced. If we lack sufficient time or resources to place the newly baptized in a
church facility and provide them trained spiritual leaders either pastors or lay leadership to develop them into functioning disciples, we should not junket to distant places, but rather stay home and pray for genuine reapers.

**Pray for the keepers**

The task is not complete once people are baptized. Much activity even earnest evangelistic activity without preservation of the harvest, leaves the results in worse condition than if they had never been contacted. "To labor at considerable expense to bring souls into the truth and then leave them to fashion their own experience according to false ideas they have received and woven into their religious experience, would leave that work far worse than if the truth had never been brought to them. To leave the work incomplete and to ravel out is worse than to wait until there are plans well devised to take care of those who do come into the faith."

Note the conundrum. Individuals brought to conversion without adequate follow-through end up worse than if they had never been contacted. Mass actions by people may result from Holy Spirit-inspired movements, as at Pentecost, or may result from the mob spirit of terrorists who eagerly consume and leave a track of destruction in their wake.

Activity alone is not the hallmark of progress. Hurricanes produce tremendous activity, but have tragic consequences. "God would be better pleased to have six truly converted to the truth as the result of their labors, than to have sixty make a nominal profession, and yet not be thoroughly converted."

Incomplete work curses rather than blesses both the new believers and the church. Jesus employed some challenging analogies to describe the effects of an incomplete reformation good seed which birds snatch away, or which weeds choke out and into whose now empty space unclean spirits return sevenfold; a swept house with the last state worse than the first.

Pastors and local church elders are the keepers. We need to instruct, resource, and hold accountable these leaders to function as responsible "keepers." Their job is not complete when an individual is baptized, but only when those who are baptized are brought to responsible discipleship.

"Souls are precious in the sight of God; educate them, teach them, as they embrace the truth, how to bear responsibilities. He who sees the end from the beginning, who can make the seeds sown wholly fruitful, will be with you in your efforts."

**Pray to preserve more of the crop**

A Dakota wheat farmer once demonstrated that the task of reaping is not limited to a massive machine moving through the fields to mow down the grain. Mowing also must be "combined" with collecting, baling, storing, and preserving or the efforts are wasted.

Ellen White uses the same language to describe the plowshare of truth, planting, reaping, and preserving. "Too often the work is left in an unfinished state, and in many such cases it amounts to nothing. Some times, after a company of people has accepted the truth, the minister thinks that he must immediately go to a new field; and sometimes, with out proper investigation, he is authorized to go. This is wrong; he should finish the work begun; for in leaving it incomplete, more harm than good is done. No field is so unpromising as one that has been cultivated just enough to give the weeds a more luxuriant growth. ... A minister might better not engage in the work unless he can bind it off thoroughly."

Discipleship is a process, not an event. The goal of the Great Commission is not numbers baptized, but numbers discipled. Baptism is a vital, essential step and even a climactic point in the conversion process, but it cannot be "the event" that measures a completed work. Notice the command of Jesus: "In my authority go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things."
Too often we have failed to understand the difference between the event of accession onto the membership rolls of the church and the process of assimilation into the body of believers. As Peter Wagner so aptly declares to his church growth classes, "Any scheme which separates evangelism and follow-up has built into itself the cause of its own failure."\(^6\)

Churches are all too often raised up and then left to crash and burn, all the while new fields are being entered. "While we should be ever ready to follow the opening providences of God, we should lay no larger plans, occupy no more ground in branching out than there is help and means to bind off the work well and keep up and increase the interest already started."\(^7\)

This spiritual formation of new believers is not easy work. Of course, there is always adequate reason behind the temptation to rush off and start new work, rather than to stay by the original task and complete the work of developing the new converts into productive disciples. Nurture of newborn believers is challenging, difficult, and can be distasteful work; it requires constant and extended effort. It is far more exciting to make babies than to change diapers.

"After individuals have been converted to the truth, they need to be looked after. The zeal of many ministers seems to fail as soon as a measure of success attends their efforts. They do not realize that these newly converted ones need nursing watchful attention, help, and encouragement. These should not be left alone, a prey to Satan's most powerful temptations; they need to be educated in regard to their duties, to be kindly dealt with, to be led along, and to be visited and prayed with. . . . No wonder that some become discouraged, linger by the way, and are left for wolves to devour. Satan is upon the track of all. He sends his agents forth to gather back to his ranks the souls he has lost. There should be more fathers and mothers to take these babes in the truth to their hearts, and to encourage them and pray for them, that their faith be not confused."\(^8\)

**Pray and care for God's new "children"**

Neglect or rejection of new believers is neglect or rejection of the Savior Himself. Jesus describes new converts as "newborns of the water and the Spirit" and "little ones" who must receive nurturing care. Those to whom He refers are little ones who believe in Me "those who have not [yet] gained an experience in following Him, those who need to be led like children, as it were, in seeking the things of the kingdom of heaven."\(^9\)

It is basic to the role of Spiritual leaders to patiently help new converts. "Those who have newly come to the faith should be patiently and tenderly dealt with, and it is the duty of the older members of the church to devise ways and means to provide help and sympathy and instruction. . . . The church has a special responsibility laid upon her to attend to these souls who have followed the first rays of light they have received; and if the members of the church neglect this duty, they will be unfaithful to the trust that God has given them."\(^10\)

When you petition the divine Master of the Harvest to send forth reapers, remember "the need is always greater than the supply of workers. In praying for laborers, we must be willing to go ourselves, obviously."\(^11\)

This passage (Matt. 9:37, 38) constitutes one of the great missionary passages of the New Testament. "Jesus pictures the world as a great spiritual harvest in need of laborers to gather it into the fold. He urges the disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send forth the workers to gather it.... As so often occurs, those who prayed were themselves sent."\(^12\)

Everyone who loves Christ and the souls He died for should show this love by their earnest prayers to God (especially when the harvest is plenteous) that He would send forth more skillful, faithful, wise, and industrious laborers into His harvest.

"Bind off your work thoroughly. Leave no dropped stitches for some one else to pick up. Do not disappoint Christ.
Determine that you will succeed, and in the strength of Christ you may give full proof of your ministry."13

3 Ibid., 320.
4 Ibid., 335.
5 Ibid., 332.
6 C. Peter Wagner, personal class notes, Church Growth I, Fuller Theological Seminary, March 1986.
7 White, 323.
8 Ibid., 351, 352.
9 Ibid., 341.
10 Ibid., 351.
13 White, 325, 326.
Praying for the Sick

"There are some who seem to think that if we had sufficient faith when we ask God in prayer to heal the sick and afflicted, we could say unconditionally to the sick, "Arise and walk," just as Christ said to the sick of the palsy, and they would rise up at our command, in response to our or their faith. There are others who shrink from praying for the sick, because they feel that God turns a deaf ear to their prayers when He does not answer the specific form of their request in behalf of the sick and in response to their faith.

One thing is well settled in the Scriptures, and that is that God does answer prayer. We need to consider the questions : What is prayer? What constitutes an answer to prayer? Are prayers answered unconditionally? When we approach God in prayer, we must recognize that He is an infinite God—infinite in wisdom—and that we are finite and "know not what we should pray for as we ought." God alone knows what is best for us ; we do not. Christ made this very evident in His own prayers to His Father, in behalf of Himself as well as others. Praying in harmony with the will of God is fundamental when we approach God. He allows no finite being to bind His hands, coerce His will, or question His wisdom and justice.

When the messenger of death begins to reach for the cords of life in your child, you go to God in prayer and ask God to spare him. In agony you plead with God. You love your child, but you must remember that your love for your child is finite love. God's love for your child and His child is infinite love. You can plead with God, but you must not dictate to Him, for you do not know the child's future as He knows it. If the child dies, do not turn against God in bitterness and accuse Him that He turned a deaf ear to your prayer and earnest entreaties.

Suppose you asked God for the life of your child so that you might enjoy mutual companionship and fellowship through as long a period of time as possible. But suppose your heavenly Father saw that your companionship for a few years in this short life would mean endless separation from your child in the world to come, whereas a brief separation on this earth would mean eternal companionship in the life to come. God would perhaps answer your prayer by a denial of companionship now, so that you might enjoy eternity together, under conditions far superior to your present environment.

Suppose you asked for your child's life, not only for your own selfish enjoyment and companionship, but that the child might live for a high and noble purpose and prove a great blessing to the world ; yet your child died in spite of your earnest wishes expressed to God. Do not conclude that God did not answer your prayer. Did you not pray that your child might fulfill a high and noble purpose and prove a great blessing to the world? If God, who is all-wise, saw that you really had the future happiness and welfare of your child at heart when you yearned that your highest ambitions for him might be realized, and honor and blessing might be showered upon him, your prayer was answered when He substituted for your present dreams a career in the world to come. Moreover, perhaps He saw that the child's death would result in increased self-sacrifice, devotion, and consecration in the lives of his remaining friends.

Prayer Answered in Light of Eternity

God answers our prayers in harmony with our best interests, not only for time but for eternity. Prayer must be answered by God in the light of eternity. This brings me to the question, What is prayer? Prayer is not dictation. A refusal of a specific and unconditional request is not an injustice. If it were an injustice, then the petition would not be a prayer but a claim. If a man owes me a claim, I do not pray him to pay it; I demand payment. If he refuses to pay, he denies not my prayer but my demand. We dictate only when we have the right to exercise power and authority. We pray when we are suppliants without a right to dictate. Dictation means independence and the power to impose one's will; prayer means dependence without any right to push a claim.

Prayer means asking God in Christ's name. "Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do." Every prayer in
Christ's name is answered. But you say, "I know of a mother who prayed to God in Christ's name for the life of her child, and that prayer was not answered. The child died." No; that mother did not pray to God in Christ's name, or her prayer would have been answered. But you answer, "Yes, I heard her say, 'For Christ's sake' and 'In Christ's name I ask this favor.'" That may all be true, but saying, "In Christ's name," is not necessarily praying in Christ's name. It is not what that mother said to God, but what Christ authorized her to say. Praying according to God's will is praying in Christ's name. That is the only kind of prayer Christ prayed while here on earth in His own behalf—"Not as I will, but as Thou wilt."

Let me illustrate what it means to pray in Christ's name. I go to the bank to draw some money. There is no money in the bank in my name, but there is a deposit there in my friend's name. I ask for money in his name. The banker demands that I show evidence that my friend has authorized me to ask for his money. If I cannot produce the evidence, I get no money. If I produce the evidence, the banker hands me the money. But who is to certify to the banker that I have the authority to draw in my friend's name, I or my friend? If I say I want it in his name, that statement will avail me nothing with the banker unless I can produce evidence and can prove to the banker that my friend has authorized me to ask for his money.

When I appear before God in prayer, He knows whether I am asking in Christ's name or not, but I do not know until I see the results of my prayer. When I appear before the banker I know in advance whether I am asking in my friend's name, but the banker does not know until I present the evidence. Not every wish or want brought to God is in reality a prayer. Only such requests as Christ authorizes in His name are honored by God as prayers, because they are based on the one condition on which God can answer prayer—"Not as I will, but as Thou wilt."

This being the basis for all answered prayers, it must follow that when the mother asked for the life of her child unconditionally, it was not a real prayer but only her own ardent wish and desire, irrespective of the consequences. If she had asked according to God's will, her prayer would have had the authority of Christ in His own name. Then the wish of Christ would have become the wish of the mother also, and there would have been an answer to her prayer whether the child had lived or died. It is impossible for God to deny a real prayer made to Him in Christ's name, just as impossible as it is for Him to lie or to break His own promises or frustrate His word. Christ's will and God's will are one, and every prayer offered to God according to God's will in Christ's name, is answered in harmony with God's will. That alone is a real prayer which is willing to leave the results in the hands of God.

Therefore none should hesitate to come to God and pray for themselves or for others when they are sick and afflicted, provided they are willing to leave the final results with a merciful God, who loves us with an infinite love, who will allow nothing "to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." We may be sure that God has something better in store for us when our specific request is not granted. Paul prayed thrice that his affliction might be removed, but the Lord informed him that it was necessary for his own good to retain his affliction, and that He would give him sufficient grace to bear up under the trial. When the Lord gives you His abundant grace to sustain you and keep you through the trial, He is performing a greater miracle than if He healed you. It takes more of God's power to sustain a person in a great affliction than it would take to remove the affliction.

Something Better in Store

Martha and Mary sent a messenger, requesting Christ to come and heal Lazarus, who was sick unto death. But Jesus purposely tarried; He did not respond. That particular request was not answered in the way they wanted it answered. Jesus had something better in store for them and for Lazarus—something that would enable God to glorify His Son to a far greater extent than a mere healing would have done. When Jesus plainly informed His disciples that Lazarus was dead, He said: "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe."

If Christ had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Death flees from the presence of the Life-giver. Christ was anxious to do something far greater and better than work a miracle of healing. When He raised Lazarus to life after four days in the grave, He performed the crowning miracle of all miracles, and His disciples now had the evidence that Jesus was the life and the resurrection—the great I AM. When your particular request for healing is denied by the
Lord, you can always be sure that He has something far better in store for you, which will glorify both His Son and you.

Moses wanted to live and lead God's people into the Promised Land. "I pray Thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan." "But," said Moses, "the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me. The Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more to Me of this matter." Moses could not enter the Promised Land. He must die, but God had something far better in store than what he prayed for. God permitted Moses to enter a far better land than the country of Palestine—a heavenly country—to dwell in the presence of God, the Son of God, and the holy angels. Moses had the honor of being the first man of the entire human race to experience a resurrection from the dead and to enjoy an eternal inheritance where trouble and sin could not enter.

If God does not grant your request, be sure He will deal with you in a way that will give you far more than your original request implied. Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."
The importance of prayer for the preacher, the hearers, and the community: An interview with Alvin VanderGriend

Editor’s note: Dr. Alvin VanderGriend is a leader in the Christian prayer movement and has written several books on prayer, including Love to Pray: A 40 Day Devotional for Deepening Your Prayer Life and The Joy of Prayer: A 40-Day Devotional to Invigorate Your Prayer Life. He is cofounder, along with Henry Blackaby, of the Denominational Prayer Leaders Network and a member of the National Prayer Committee in the United States.

Derek Morris (DM):

When did you first realize the importance of prayer?

Alvin VanderGriend (AV): I was taught to pray from childhood. My parents encouraged me to pray when I got up in the morning and when I went to bed at night. They led us in prayer before and after each meal. I am deeply grateful for what I learned about prayer through my Christian upbringing. Some important foundations were laid.

But there was a lot about prayer that I didn’t know. I didn’t know that prayer was all about relationship, a love relationship with God. I didn’t know that I had to ask for spiritual blessings in order to receive them. I didn’t know what a difference intercession could make.

When I was ten years old, sitting in the balcony of our church, I was convicted that if I ever became a preacher, I would emphasize prayer. Several years later, when a senior in high school, I entered a speech contest for our church’s youth convention and decided to speak about prayer. During my ministry, I was deeply moved by reading Power Through Prayer by E. M. Bounds. He emphasized that “in every truly successful ministry prayer is an evident and controlling force.”

DM:

I have also appreciated Power Through Prayer by E. M. Bounds. Some have called that the greatest book on prayer ever written. Unfortunately, in my training, there was little or no training in regards to prayer or prayer ministries. Few understood about prayer-saturated lives, prayer-saturated preaching, and prayer-saturated churches. A lot of dangerous assumptions were made. Perhaps that is why Bounds, even in his day, asserted that “a school to teach preachers how to pray, as God counts praying, would be more beneficial to true piety, true worship, and true preaching than all theological schools.”

AV: I believe that our seminaries should not assume that pastors in training understand prayer or that they are devoted to prayer. We need to lay a proper foundation for prayersaturated ministry by teaching the Scriptures. I was amazed to discover that the Bible is over ten percent prayer. We need to recognize the place of prayer in the Scriptures and in the lives of the great heroes of faith. All of the great heroes of faith were also heroes of prayer.

It’s important to realize that prayer doesn’t start with us. Prayer starts with God. God is the initiator. He moves us to pray. He gives us prayer ideas. He holds out the promises that we claim in prayer. God is at work in all our praying.

DM:

You have noted in your writings on prayer that the early Christians, preachers in particular, were devoted to prayer.
AV: Prayer was a priority in the early Christian church. The prayers at their prayer meetings were not short, shallow, bless-me kind of prayers. They were truly devoted to prayer. Their leaders were devoted to prayer. The word devoted literally means “to occupy oneself diligently with something” or “to persist in.” We read in Acts 6:4 that the apostles gave up other duties in order to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. When I first read that passage, I asked myself this question: Where did the apostles learn to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word? The answer is obvious: they had been with Jesus. They learned it from what they saw. They learned it from what they heard. Jesus spent entire nights in prayer. He bathed the key moments of His life in prayer. His words, His miracles, His power all came through prayer. The first Christians simply continued with what they saw in Jesus’ life and heard from His lips. I’m convinced that the amazing growth that took place in the early Christian church happened because of prayer-saturated lives and prayer-saturated preaching.

Bounds was right when he observed that, “God’s true preachers have been distinguished by one great feature: . . . prayer. . . . God to them was the center of attraction, and prayer was the path that led to God.”

DM:

What have you learned about the importance of prayer specifically as it relates to the preparation and delivery of powerful biblical sermons?

AV: The most important preparation is the preparation of the preacher. That has to happen in relationship with God, and prayer is an important part of that love relationship. By prayer, we invite the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts and lives, to impress us with the truths of a passage. The sermon needs to be born of prayer and bathed in prayer. The Holy Spirit knows the needs of my listeners, and He will reveal to me the things that they need to hear. Then when we deliver the sermon, the Holy Spirit comes in response to our prayerful invitation and anoints us with power and freedom.

Bounds puts it this way, “Prayer, in the preacher’s life, in the preacher’s study, in the preacher’s pulpit, must be a conspicuous and an all-impregnating force and an all coloring ingredient.” He continues, “The text, the sermon, should be the result of prayer. The study should be bathed in prayer, all its duties impregnated with prayer, its whole spirit the spirit of prayer.”

DM:

That is powerful! Now tell us about the listeners. What is the role of the congregation in prayer-saturated preaching?

AV: Once I realized the importance of prayer for the preparation and delivery of powerful biblical sermons, I encouraged my listeners to pray for me. I agree with Bounds that “it is an absolute necessity that the preacher be prayed for.” I came across a quote by Frank Laubach in his book, Prayer: The Mightiest Force in the World, that deeply moved me. This is what he said, “In nearly all congregations where we plead for every listener to pray hard we feel a strange, strong, delightful response from all parts of the room. Always, when congregations pray with great earnestness and unanimity, we feel lifted almost as though an invisible arm held us up; our hearts burn, tears lie close, and ideas come fresh and far better than any written address. Commonplace truth becomes incandescent, and burns like liquid metal. A congregation is three-fourths of a sermon.”

Laubach continues, “Pastors around the world in ever increasing numbers are testifying that their preaching has been transformed by asking people to lean forward and pray.” That quotation just gripped me and confirmed my own experience that a prayer-saturated congregation makes a significant difference when I preach. When people in a congregation pray, something also happens for them! Their own hearts are brought under the authority of the Word. They are transformed from sit-and-soak listeners into giving and reproducing Christians. Their praying helps in that transformation. Prayer-saturated listeners are also impacting the people around them. A lot of good things happen when people devote themselves to prayer during the preaching of the sermon.
DM:

So a preacher who is committed to prayer-saturated preaching would want to educate the congregation about the importance of prayer?

AV: Very much so! There is a church in Chino, California, that gives about twenty people who attend the worship service a “pray through” card. This card invites them to be designated prayers throughout the worship service. That’s one way that we can train members. We would like every listener to be devoted to prayer, but by selecting a certain number of designated prayers each week, we can educate our congregation about the importance of saturating the service with prayer.

DM:

As you look back over your ministry, both as a local pastor and as a prayer leader, what is it that confirms for you the importance of prayer?

AV: There was a time in my ministry when I was functioning alone. The Holy Spirit led me to four other men; we covenanted to meet together for one to two hours every week to pray for each other. As we prayed for each other, I experienced a huge lift in my whole ministry, including my preaching.

Once I became a denominational prayer leader, I visited churches that were strong in prayer. After I had visited about six of these churches, it dawned on me that every church that was strong in prayer was essentially healthy—impacting its community and growing through evangelism. One pastor gave this testimony: “When we work, we work; when we pray, God works!”

I have also seen prayer impact whole communities. When I was serving as a pastor in Chicago, we prayed fervently that God would show us a way to impact our community. I can still remember the prayer team kneeling in a circle in the living room of one of our members. They prayed passionately for about half of the meeting time and the other half of our time was spent discussing ways to impact the community for Christ. Out of that effort came a ministry to children called Story Hour that brought eighty-five neighborhood children to our church building each week. Then we offered Bible study opportunities to mothers who brought their children. Those mothers brought other mothers, which led to an evangelistic Bible study ministry that resulted in many people coming to Christ. That Bible study ministry has now become an interdenominational ministry. All of that community impact flowed out of prayer.

DM:

Tell me about your efforts to encourage other pastors to devote themselves to prayer.

AV: We put together a prayer leadership team. The first meeting we prayed for a couple of hours—and then we worked. The second meeting we prayed for a whole morning—and then we worked. The third meeting we prayed the whole day and then worked the second day. Out of that prayer leadership team came The Praying Church Sourcebook. It was one of the first sourcebooks on prayer. It included twenty-seven different strategies that churches were using to grow and strengthen prayer in their churches, along with many stories and illustrations.

DM:

That sourcebook is an amazing resource. I appreciate the practical suggestions, such as houses of prayer and the pastors’ prayer team. Since we began a House of Prayer at Forest Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church, our prayer service attendance has grown under God’s blessing. Now, instead of a handful of believers, our church sanctuary is filled with earnest praying Christians and seekers after God. What are other ways that you have encouraged pastors and their congregations to devote themselves to prayer?

AV: We have developed Lighthouses of Prayer, little groups of Christians praying in their homes and their churches. They focused on praying for hurting and unsaved people that they knew in their workplaces, and in their
neighborhoods. As a result, the Lighthouse Movement developed, teaching thousands of people to pray particularly for the unsaved. We are continuing that emphasis in our 40 Days of Prayer initiative, which helps a whole church get lifted in its prayer life through prayer-saturated preaching, small groups, and prayer events.

DM:

I understand that you were also involved in the formation of the Denominational Prayer Leaders Network.

AV: That started back in 1989 with about fifteen denominational prayer leaders. At one point, we tabulated the number of local churches that were served by the leaders who were present and discovered, to our amazement, that we represented about one hundred forty thousand churches! This group has met at least annually to pray together, encourage each other, and share resources and strategies. We find that each time we gather together we are strengthened in our efforts as denominational prayer leaders as we try to help our congregations grow stronger in prayer and be Houses of Prayer.

DM:

Can we expect a revival of prayer in the days ahead?

AV: Peter Wagner once said that the prayer movement was out of control. By that, he meant that the prayer movement is out of our control and under the control of the Holy Spirit. There have been a lot of roadblocks, a lot of resistance, but there is still a growing interest in prayer. I believe that prayer is the key to a revival of the church and the church’s ministry and mission.

DM:

What appeal would you make to each reader?

AV: We have to begin with ourselves. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you a holy discontent with the status quo, with maintenance-oriented Christianity. Ask for a spiritual hunger that you might long for the presence of God, the breaking in of God. We must be poor in spirit, beggars before the Lord. If we start there, the Lord is eager to answer that prayer. Beyond that, we have to become part of a praying community. Vital, powerful praying happens in a context with other believers. Jesus, in Matthew 18, encouraged corporate prayer and gave some promises in that regard. In the book of Acts, there are at least thirty-three references to prayer, twenty-six of which are references to corporate prayer. God’s Word pictures a church devoted to prayer, persisting in prayer, and occupied diligently with prayer. That is what Jesus taught. That is what the New Testament church modeled. That is what God still expects today.