Prayer – The Work of Missions

The key lesson I have learned about prayer over the years is that in order to sustain a heart for prayer and to sustain a movement of prayer in a church or on a mission team you need to talk about something other than prayer first. The first thing important to think about in our own hearts and minds and talk about in the church or on a mission team is **war**!

Life is war! I don't think it is ever possible to know what prayer is until we understand that life is war. We must understand that the stakes are higher than in wars being fought today in various parts of the world. In the Muslim World there is war between the Sunni and the Shia. There are confrontations between Donald Trump and the leaders of Russia. In so many parts of the world there is no peace and there will be no peace until the Lord Jesus returns!

The second thing we need to think about and talk about before we can really begin to think about creating an atmosphere of prayer or having the strength to sustain prayer is the Sovereignty of God. Until we grasp the Sovereignty of God, we don't know if we are going to win the war! If we are not sure we will win the war, we won't be able to sustain the strength to pray day and night the way the Lord Jesus calls us to pray. Without hope we can't pray for long and we can't have hope without an understanding of the Sovereignty of God.

Once we understand that life is war and once we have grasped something of the Sovereignty of God that assures us of victory, we can begin to see the place of prayer in the global purposes of God.

We need to pray as we think or talk about these issues. Satan is very much against our gaining an understanding of true prayer. So there will be demonic activity in our midst unless, in answer to the prayers of God's people, God banishes all demonic influences and anything connected with the powers of darkness from our presence. Our prayer could be something like:

"Come Lord Jesus, by your Spirit, and reign. Take control of every heart and mind and be pleased to rule over our lives. Help us as we study these things in your Word. Glorify your name Lord Jesus, for the sake of Your Father's honour and for the sake of the many millions of people in this world who are starving for the Gospel including those in our neighbourhood. It is in your great name that we pray Lord Jesus."

So life is war. When Paul came to the end of his life he wrote, ***"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."*** (2 Tim. 4:17). In 1 Tim. 6:12 Paul had said, ***"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."***

If we put these two texts together we will see that it is war just to maintain faith and get to heaven! If anyone thinks it is downhill to heaven, he/she hasn't read Paul's letters! It is fighting all the way until we get home to heaven. Paul is exhorting Timothy to keep on fighting and laying hold of eternal life. Satan tries to create unbelief by targeting our faith.

In 1 Thess. 3:5 Paul is writing to the believers in the church he had helped to plant, ***"For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."***

What could make our work in vain? Satan is targeting our faith. It is war to maintain faith. Paul says, ***"I don't run aimlessly. I don't box as one beating the air, but I pummel my body to subdue it lest after having preached to others, I should find myself disqualified for the prize."*** (1 Cor. 9:26-27)

This is the language of a soldier talking about the problems and difficulties of being in mortal combat.

In 2 Cor. 10:3-4 we read, ***"For though we live in the world, we don't wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."*** So our ministry is war! Fighting for faith in my heart is war. Fighting for the souls of men and women and children is war. All aspects of the Christian life are war!

What is the most critical text in the Bible about warfare? I think it is Eph. 6:10-18:

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God so that when the evil day comes, you may be able to stand your ground and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place and your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

So life is war! The enemy is awesome and you can't see him. Most Christians find it hard to believe this, which is why it is hard to get them to pray! They may say they believe it, but watch their lives. Sometimes there are peacetime casualties among us! We may develop a casual attitude to spiritual things. There are no nuclear bombs falling in their lives, no bullets whizzing over their heads, no mines to be avoided and no wars on the horizon. All appears to be well!

So why pray? In wartime, newspapers carry headlines about what our troops are doing. Sometimes families get together and talk about how family members are doing on the front lines. They are deeply concerned for their safety. They are vigilant and ready at any time to go into action.

In wartime we spend our money very differently than in peacetime. Usually there is austerity and simplicity not because these are not valuable in themselves, but because there is such a great cause to spend your money on rather than sprucing up your home etc.

In wartime everyone is touched. In WWII the luxury Atlantic liners became troop carriers. In a cabin that slept four in its commercial days, nine soldiers slept in shifts in wartime.

So it is clear that very few believers really believe we are at war! I think it was in England in WWII that every house where one of the sons or daughters had gone to war lit a candle and kept it alight until their children came home.

But we are in a war much worse than WWII! It is a war worse than any imagined nuclear war. Casualties don't just lose an arm or a leg. They don't just lose a life! They lose everything for ever.

If we really believed that life is war, how different things would be! The connection to prayer isn't left to guesswork. Look at Eph. 6:17-19. Paul says, ***"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and pray in the Spirit with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind be alert and always keep praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth words may be given to me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should."***

Prayer is a power that wields a great weapon – the Sword of the Spirit! Prayer is not a civilian device.

Jesus said, ***"You didn't choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in My name"***. (Jn. 15:16) This is a crucial verse if we are to understand the place of prayer in missions and in evangelism in general.

So why will the Father answer our prayers when we ask in Jesus name? The Lord Jesus has given us a mission to ***"go and bear fruit"***. To turn this around, why did the Lord Jesus give us a mission that we should go and bear fruit that should remain? Was it so that we could enjoy getting answers to prayer! The answer is that it is for **war**. It is not for civilian times.

The number one reason why prayer malfunctions in the hands of believers is because they take a wartime communication device and turn it into a message system to the maid to bring another pillow! Prayer is for wartime. It is for the trenches. It doesn't work when you install it in your canal

boat. It won't work in your third or fourth car! We won't know what prayer is for until we believe that life is war.

This is what I believe has happened. God sent His Son into the world for mission. The Son comes to us and says, *"My Father has extended His and My mission to you. It is dangerous, but you can't lose. The mission will succeed. He has given Me these transmitters. You can each have a transmitter and each one is coded to the Supreme Commander's frequency. As long as you stay in the battle driving back the enemy in His ways, you will always have free access via the 'transmitter' to the Supreme Commander. Go and use it and I will do whatever you ask for the cause – for the war."*

But thousands of believers have stopped believing that there is a war. They don't have any sense of urgency, no vigilance, no strategic planning. They are just living in easy peacetime prosperity. They take the radio transmitter and install it in a luxurious home and then they can't figure out why it isn't working! It is malfunctioning. They are not getting any signals.

So if we're going to mobilise a movement of prayer in our churches, if we just want to sustain a hope for prayer, we must believe and feel that life is war. We must get a war mentality into our minds. We must get away from a peacetime mentality that believes we can all do whatever we like. Don't you believe it! There is no peace. Until we feel the desperation of a bombing raid and the thrill of a new strategic offensive we will never pray with the spirit of the Lord Jesus.

We must think and talk about the Sovereignty of God before we talk about prayer. Why is this? Why is embracing the Sovereignty of God utterly essential to having a heart for prayer and a movement of prayer. I think there are two reasons:

- If you don't believe in and enjoy the Sovereignty of God, you can't consistently pray for God to reveal His truth to unbelieving sinners.
- If you don't embrace the Sovereignty of God then you can't be sure that the cause of the Lord Jesus will triumph since there is no obvious reason to think that it would.

World Missions is all about saving unbelieving sinners. In Rom. 10:1 Paul wrote, ***"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved."*** He wasn't just trying to share a little bit here and there. He was crying out to God to save them! It is impossible to pray like that unless you believe in the complete Sovereignty of God.

There are many people who don't believe in the Sovereignty of God. By this I mean God's right and power to save unbelieving sinners and bring them to faith. There are many people who say that God has no right to intrude into the mind and soul of a human being and meddle with his self-determining autonomy. Such people cannot pray consistently for the salvation of sinners. Why not? Do you take the promises of the Old Covenant and pray for them to become true for unbelievers?

"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh." (Ezek. 11:19)

"The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul and live." (Deut. 30:6)

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws." (Ezek. 36:26-27)

Do you also claim the promises of the New Covenant?

"Those who oppose him, he must gently instruct in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth." (2 Tim. 2:25)

"One of those listening was a woman named Lydia … who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." (Acts 16:14)

Do you pray for your friends and relatives like that? It is impossible unless you believe in the Sovereignty of God since otherwise you would be inconsistent. You are contradicting your own

theology if you don't believe in the Sovereignty of God, because then every human being would have the right to be the final determiner of his own destiny. It is Biblically inconsistent for man to have that right.

So how do people pray who reject the Sovereignty of God? Here are some inconsistencies:

- Some suggest asking God to prompt a specific person to begin questioning who they can really trust in life. The hope is that this will lead them to recognise that the Lord Jesus is the answer.
- I have heard someone say we should pray that God would plant in people's hearts an inner unrest together with a longing to know the truth. But I ask myself, what kind of a longing should I pray for before God comes into a person's heart? Should it be a longing strong enough to embrace the Lord Jesus as Saviour and Lord – i.e. to pray for conversion?

  But in this case I have deprived him/her of the right to self-determination. You can't pray God would save unbelieving sinners unless you believe that God has the right and the authority to work in the human heart to bring a person to believe and to overcome their resistance. Some Calvinists like to speak about 'irresistible grace', but grace is being resisted nearly everywhere! The question is, 'Can God overcome it?' He did for me and He has done for many of us. God can overcome all resistance. It is true that some people are hard-hearted and happily resist the Holy Spirit. But ask yourself how in the world did you get saved? The reality is that God overcame my rebellion and resistance during my teenage years.

You can see where this is going. Those who believe that human beings have the ultimate power of self-determination and that as individuals we will determine who goes to heaven or hell cannot pray consistently for the conversion of unbelieving sinners.

Paul left no doubt in our minds when he wrote, ***"It does not therefore depend on man's effort but on God's mercy."*** (Rom. 9:16) Remember Rom. 10:1, ***"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge."***

"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited. Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved". (Rom. 11:25)

So ungodliness will be banished from Israel by God for He is Sovereign. We need to pray that God would take out of the Jewish people a heart of stone and give them a heart that loves God. We need to pray that God will pour His Spirit into them and cause them to walk in His ways and that they would have a spirit of repentance as they come to a knowledge of the truth. God can open their hearts – as he did Lydia's – to believe the Gospel.

When we believe in the Sovereignty of God – that God has the right and the power to move upon the hearts of spiritually dead sinners bringing them back to life, then we will be able to pray!

This is the major reason we need to focus on the Sovereignty of God before we begin to pray. We can't be sure we are going to win the war unless God is Sovereign. We can't be sure that our prayers will succeed and that the cause of mission will triumph.

In England the whole concept of mission was born out of men and women who believed in the Sovereignty of God. They had a hope of conquering the world for the Lord Jesus that was absolutely indomitable. They believed Psalm 86:89, ***"Among the gods there is none like You, O Lord. No deeds can compare with Yours. All nations You have made will come and worship before You. O Lord. They will bring glory to Your name"***.

They believed what Genesis 12:3 says concerning the call of Abraham, ***"I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all people on earth will be blessed through you."***

They believed Ps. 2:8, ***"Ask of Me, and I will make the nations your inheritance and the ends of the earth your possession"*** as well as Ps. 22:27-28, ***"All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to***

the Lord and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations."

"Posterity will serve Him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim His righteousness to people yet unborn for He has done it." (Ps. 22:30-31)

"Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the Glory of the Lord fills the whole earth …." (Num. 14:21)

They believed in the Sovereignty of God

About 150 years before William Carey there was a man called John Elliott. He went from England to New England in 1641 at the age of 27. The next year he became a pastor of a church just outside Boston. Around Boston there were 20 tribes of American Indians. He used the word 'nations' of Indians.

John Elliott couldn't resist for long the implications of his theology. If the Bible is inerrant and if God is Sovereign then someone who gives his life to take the message of God to one of these 'nations' has great hope to believe that God, in His Sovereignty, will open the door for the Gospel and build His church. When he was 40 years old he started to learn an Indian tribal language – a very difficult language. Some words in this language are 28 letters long! He deciphered the vocabulary, the grammar and the syntax. He translated the whole Bible and other Christian books, like Pilgrim's Progress, into this language. He started schools and by the time he was 80 years old there were Native American Indian churches all over the area of the North East of the USA. Many of them were pastored by Indian pastors from the Bible Training Institute Elliott had set up.

He said at the end of his life, **"Prayers and pains, through faith in the Lord Jesus, can do anything."** Why? Because nothing is too hard for our Sovereign prayer-hearing God.

In my own heart, I find I can't sustain the will to pray – let alone start a movement of prayer in other believers – unless I have the hope that we are going to win! I must believe that the cause of the Lord Jesus is going to triumph and in the end all the nations will come and bow down and worship and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ.

So missions is birthed out of the Biblical teaching on the Sovereignty of God. People like William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Brainerd, Alexander Duff, David Livingstone, John Patten and a whole stream of other faithful workers passionately believed in the Sovereignty of God.

Today's missionary movement didn't emerge out of a vacuum. It emerged out of a great Reformation tradition that exalted the Sovereignty of God and put it at the centre of life. Without it, the confidence, the largeness, the perseverance and the boldness of prayer begins to vanish and what is left is a kind of vestige – something you sometimes find in dying churches at what they call a prayer meeting! It is weak and uninspired. It is small-minded because very little has been said about these two things before prayer: **Life is war** and **God is Sovereign**.

So what is the place of prayer in this great global purpose of God? This is how I understand God's purpose for the church:

God's purpose in Creation and Redemption in the whole universe is to banish all unbelief and sin out of His Kingdom and fill the earth with His glory by filling it with white hot worshippers from every people and tongue and tribe and nation – filling the earth with white hot, reverberating, mirror-like worshippers before the Throne of God.

What is the place of prayer in the accomplishment of that purpose? It is easy to overstate the case at this point! The title of this paper illustrates this mistake: **Prayer – the Work of Missions**. Let me tell you why. I believe **the work of missions is the proclamation of the Gospel**. **The work of missions is to spread the Word of God**,

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed and how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:13-14)

"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." (Rom. 10:17)

"The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation." (Rom. 1:16)

"We were born again not with perishable seed, but with imperishable by the living and abiding Word of God." (1 Pet. 1:23)

"This Gospel of the Kingdom must first be preached to the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come." (Mt. 24:14)

The Word of God is the weapon that God designed to penetrate the darkness and gather the children of light and bring His redemptive plan to fruition and ultimately to a conclusion.

This means that the global purposes of God hang on the success of His Word. They hang on whether you and I proclaim a faithful and powerful Gospel. If the preaching of the Word aborts, all the purposes of God abort! But actually this can't happen!

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My Word that goes out from My mouth. It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Is. 55:10-11)

All the global purposes of God hang on the success of the preaching of the Gospel. We must be deeply convinced that **this cannot fail** because God is Sovereign over all!

Once it is clear to us that the Word is the weapon that will penetrate the darkness of all peoples, we need to gather the 'children of light' and get victory over 'the world'. Then it is the time to ask ourselves, without exaggeration, about the awesome place of prayer. The accomplishment of God's purposes hangs on the success of His Word and the success of His Word hangs on the prayers of His people.

If we don't succeed in earnest, global, persevering prayer, God's purposes could abort! But this can't happen!! ***"For this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all nations and then the end will come."*** So God will pour out on His church a spirit of supplication and prayer in these days. Whether you pray or not is ultimately in <u>your</u> control. God will get prayer going! He reigns! He has made salvation contingent on faith and He rules over faith. He makes missions contingent on His Word and He rules over His Word. He makes the success of His Word dependent on prayer. If you don't pray, God doesn't fail, but sadly He has to pass you by and get prayer elsewhere. The Lord reigns! Even if I fail, He will never fail!

Paul asked the churches to pray for him:

"Pray for me that whenever I open my mouth words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should." (Eph. 6:19)

"Pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should." (Col. 4:3-4)

I recently read that 82% of all "hidden peoples" (those who have no access to the Gospel at all) will soon be in countries inaccessible to foreign Christian workers. Such a statement makes me angry! My wife and I have spent much of our lives working in countries that don't allow missionary visas. The Lord reigns in <u>all</u> countries including the so-called 'Restricted Access Countries'. Paul said, ***"Pray for us that a door would be opened"***. Prayer opens doors!

"Finally brethren pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you." (2 Thess. 3:1)

We need to pray every day, *"Father, today in my life, in the place where I live, cause Your Word to triumph."* Prayer is the power that wields the Word. Prayer is the 'walkie-talkie' you can use in the battlefields of the world. It calls in the accurate location for the target of the Word. It can call in

protection. It can call in divine firepower! It can open doors that are shut. It can call in miraculous healings – especially the healing of 'wounded soldiers'.

God is so very gracious that when we pray with even a minimum of faith, He answers miraculously, usually to our great astonishment. We live in a day of much controversy in terms of what is called 'Power evangelism' but we need to maintain a Biblical balance and never say, "no" to a gift.

The 'walkie-talkie' is needed to call in reinforcements. Mt. 9:38 is a significant verse, ***"Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field."*** This isn't a military image but it is easy to transfer – "Pray to the commander-in-chief, that he would send reinforcements to the frontline."

Often God is asking churches to send some of their people out into mission. This might be locally in their own country – perhaps among immigrants from some of the unreached places in the world. God is saying to us, "Will you ask Me to send them?" That is what the 'walkie-talkie' (prayer) is for!

A great verse that has often pricked my conscience concerning my prayer life with regard to missions is Lk. 18:7-8, ***"And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones who cry out to Him day and night? Will He keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"***

Do you cry out, *"How long Lord? How long until Your cause triumphs among all peoples, tribes, and nations in the world? How long will it be before You render the heavens and come down with Your Spirit on the churches? How long before you vindicate the believers who are suffering hardship, persecution and death and cause Your name to be glorified in this world? How long Lord?"*

Do you hear the answer coming back from this text? ***"Over whom He will not delay."*** Which church will He come to speedily? It will be to the church that cries to Him for vindication day and night! I have to ask myself, do I plead day and night for the vindication of the cause of Christ here in England and throughout the Muslim World?

As I conclude these thoughts, I am asking Almighty God our Heavenly Father that if I have said anything that is untrue or out of balance or if I have not had a spirit that accords with God's truth, He would blot it out for the sake of any who read this and He would forgive me. Whatever has been true and Biblical, I pray that it may be like a bomb and a rapier. May it encourage and may it convict. I pray that the Lord would help us to maintain a wartime mentality and give us a deep confidence in His Sovereignty. I pray that He would teach us to use the weapons of our warfare – especially His Word – effectively so that we can pray day and night for the vindication of His cause.

Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus even as we continue to do what You have called us to do.