

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Intercession: Gift, Calling, or Discipline?

“And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, a spirit of grace and of supplications, so that they will look on Him whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born.”
Zechariah 12:10

“And in the same way, the Spirit helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings and cries too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, for He intercedes for the saints according to God.”
Romans 8:26,27

“...in the first year of [Darius'] reign I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of Yahweh to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely 70 years. So I set my face to the Lord God to seek Him with prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.”
Daniel 9:2,3

“We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints...”
Colossians 1:3,4

As is true with many phenomena of the spiritual life, the ministry of intercession has, in some circles, come to be very highly regarded, and this interest has engendered a great deal of talk, teaching, sharing of experiences, conferences, and the production of books and tapes. While it is a good thing to delve deeper into the things of God, we must always be aware of some of the pitfalls and excesses that seem to inevitably accompany popular movements that emphasize aspects of our spirituality apart from the whole. There can develop a kind of mystique, a popular mythology, an unhealthy emotionalism, and, ironically enough, a spiritual pride among those who hold any gift, calling, or spiritual discipline too highly. A focus on intercession can fall prey to some of these same excesses. Even though one would think that there could not possibly be anything that could go wrong with those who simply have a passion to seek God on behalf of others, this desire, too, can be deftly shunted off into a world of semi-Biblical, or non-Biblical, ideas and practices that move the seeker from the sublime to the ridiculous, or even to the dangerous. We must stay close to a sound, Biblical foundation. Without this as our compass, we cannot safely navigate the confusing sea of human thoughts and opinions that seems to surround us. Beyond that, we can observe and learn from the experiences of others, but we dare not make authoritative or universal statements, lest we “go beyond what is written, ...[and] become puffed up in behalf of one against the other” (I Cor 4:6).

What about intercession? Is it a spiritual gift? I have heard some speak of “the gift of intercession”. I have even used that manner of expression myself in regard to a particular phenomenon. What does the Bible say? **In all the listings of the spiritual gifts, intercession is never mentioned.** “Prayer warrior” is also conspicuously absent. Some would say, “Well, the listings of spiritual gifts are not necessarily exhaustive.” If that were true, then how would we determine when something is a “spiritual gift”? That road moves rapidly “beyond what is written”, leading only to confusion, disagreement, and division. It is not necessary to insist that intercession be a spiritual gift to recognize that it is a valuable activity, ...an important service which is of great importance for the work of God among men. **Intercession is an opportunity and privilege** made available to us by virtue of our relationship with God in Christ. It is not to be taken for granted. Not all people have such an open door to the throne of God (Job 13:16; Mic. 3:4; Jn. 9:31; 14:13; I Pet. 3:12; 16:23,24,26,27). **It is to be a discipline which every child of God should exercise** (Eph. 6:18). **Furthermore, it is a calling for some**, an appointment or duty which God has specifically brought to their heart, and which seems to be a repeated, ongoing area in which they find themselves investing time and energy. **Finally, there is an aspect of “gifting” that occurs at times**, in that He will occasionally give a “burden” to a person which drives them to prayer.

As a spiritual discipline, we are admonished repeatedly to give ourselves to prayer for others. **Jesus' instruction and example** teaches us that beyond our own need for fellowship with God (Mk. 1:35; Matt. 14:23; Lk. 9:13,28; 11:1; Heb.5:7), there is definitely a need to intercede for others. Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:44), ...to ask God to send out workers into the evangelistic harvest (Matt. 9:38), ...to specifically pray, so that certain difficult demons might be expelled (Matt. 17:21), ...to pray together for forgiveness and restoration in relationships (Matt. 18:15-20), ...to lay hands upon and bless others in prayer (Matt. 19:13), ...to pray to avert hardship (Matt. 24:20), ...to ask that another's faith may not give out (Lk. 22:32; cf. Jn. 17:11,12), ...to plead for the forgiveness of others (Lk. 23:34), ...to pray for others to receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:16,17; cf. 20:22), ...to pray that

God would keep others from the evil one (Jn. 17:15), ...and to pray for a visible oneness for believers, so that the world would know that God sent Jesus (Jn. 17:20-23). **The early church** was also a community of prayer (Acts 2:42). They prayed for boldness to witness about Jesus (4:23-31; cf. Eph. 6:18-20). The apostles saw the need to devote themselves to prayer (Acts 6:4). They prayed and healed others (6:6; 9:40; 28:8). They prayed for some to receive the Holy Spirit (8:15; cf. 19:1-7). The church prayed for Peter in prison, and he was miraculously released (12:5-17). They prayed over those who went out to evangelize (Acts 13:1-3). They chose elders and committed them by prayer and fasting to God's care (14:23). Paul prayed for the safety of his fellow travelers, probably saving their lives (27:9-11,21-26). In addition to the bird's eye view offered by the example of the early church in Acts, we also are given a glimpse of **Paul's life of intercession** through his writings. In virtually every letter, he mentions how he regularly prayed for the recipients (e.g., Rom. 1:9; Eph. 1:15,16; I Thess. 1:2,3). He prayed for such things as a spirit of wisdom and revelation to be given to the church, that they might come to know God better, and come to perceive what He has made available to them (Eph. 1:15-23), ...that they might be strengthened within, established in Christ and Christ in them, so that they might come to experience God's love and be filled with His fullness (Eph. 3:14-21), ...that they might grow in love, with real knowledge and all discernment, so that they might discover the "best things", and might be filled with the fruit of righteousness through Christ (Phil. 1:3-11; cf. I Thess. 3:11-13), ... that the church might be filled with the insight-knowledge of God's will in all practical-wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that we might walk in a way that pleases God and bears fruit in everything we do and increases in insight-knowledge of God, being strengthened by His power for the attaining of all endurance and long-suffering, with joy giving thanks to God (Col. 1:9-12), ...that God may fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, in order that the name of Jesus might be glorified (II Thess. 1:11,12), ...that God's word might spread rapidly and be glorified, and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men, ...and that God might direct their hearts into the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ (II Thess. 3:1,5). In addition, there are **numerous other insights or admonitions concerning intercessory prayer** which call us to the discipline of prayer, and show us its significance (Rom. 12:12; 15:30-32; II Cor. 1:8-11; Phil. 1:12-19; 4:6,7; Col. 4:2,3,12; I Thess. 5:17,18,25; I Tim. 2:1,8; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 5:13-18; I Pet. 4:7; I Jn. 5:14-16; Jude 20,21).

Finally, let me close with a few words about **prayer burdens**. It is very clear from Rom. 8:26,27 that the Holy Spirit can "help us" in our weakness by guiding us in our prayer, and by praying "with sighs and groans too deep for words". There are some important observations to make. First of all, **a prayer burden can come in a variety of ways**. The prophet Daniel was moved to intercede by his awareness of a promise of Scripture (Dan. 9:2,3). We can consciously ask for a deeper awareness of God's heart, or it may be something that the Holy Spirit will sovereignly give to us, like the prophecy in Zechariah 12:10 describes. Secondly, **a prayer burden can sometimes be very emotional and intense**. Intensity in prayer is something some of us are unfamiliar with, but is an important aspect of many Biblical prayers (Heb. 5:7; Rom. 15:30 [where "strive" literally means "wrestle", from the Greek word, *agōnizō*]; Ex. 32:30-32). The emotion comes out from the Holy Spirit, or naturally out of your own heart. Unfortunately, some *learn to be emotional*, thinking that their prayers will be more effective then, or that deeper prayer must be expressed that way. Emotional manipulation is phony, ...distasteful to God as well as to others. Authentic emotion, however, indicates the passion of the heart. Thirdly, **a prayer burden of this sort can be inexpressible**, too weighty for words, or just not clear enough to express. Some take this to mean that praying in the Spirit must mean speaking in tongues, and they give expression to their heart in this way. I think it is great if they have such an outlet, but the verse in Romans clearly says that the Spirit intercedes in "sighs and groans too deep for words". This indicates that carrying an inarticulate burden is OK, ...in fact, the Spirit does not even use words to express this, just sighs and groans. Not all speak in tongues, even as a "prayer language" (I Cor. 12:30). Praying in the Spirit is *not equivalent* to tongues, though often tongues *is* a form of praying in the Spirit. Finally, **the burden is there to motivate us to pray**. We ought to continue in prayer until the burden is removed, or the answer comes. Those who experience these heavy prayer burdens often call the lifting of a burden "praying through". Often they testify that the answer will happen simultaneously, or sometime shortly thereafter. This is their experience, not a Biblical teaching. You must learn how God speaks to you, and make sure it lines up with the Scripture.