



# AN INTRODUCTION TO INTERCESSION

Praying for others in  
the light of Scripture



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*This material is also available as a series of videos about why and how to pray, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In Isaiah 59:16, God is appalled. He is appalled not only at the injustice, oppression and evil that He sees in His people who had turned against Him, but also at the fact that there is no intercessor. Similarly in Ezekiel 22:30, He is looking for someone to stand in the gap for the land so as not to destroy it, but He finds no one, leading Him to pour out His judgement.

That longing for someone to engage in the battle of prayer can also be seen in Jesus' heart during His struggles at Gethsemane. He had to chide His sleeping disciples for not joining with Him as He laboured in prayer, saying: "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation" (Matthew 26:40-41). Jesus is our example as our great Intercessor (Hebrews 7:25) – He took on our sorrows and our sin, standing between a holy God and an unholy people; He is constantly interceding for us in heaven now, and He longs that we would follow His example in interceding for others.

Intercessors For Britain was founded in 1969 when Denis Clark asked people to commit to praying regularly for the UK. This came at a time when the church at large had failed to intercede for the nation, as society was sliding into sin and rebellion. Lots of prayer warriors took up the challenge to pray, fighting many battles, and seeing some great victories when the Lord chose to act in mercy in response to prayer.

The work of Intercessors For Britain continues today, along with other prayer groups, and we thank God for all those who are involved in interceding for the nation and the church. Yet with the nation in sin and turmoil and many problems within the church, the requirement for intercession is more pressing than ever, and the next generation of prayer warriors is desperately needed.

This booklet (along with its accompanying video series) is intended as a call to those who haven't yet joined in the battle, a guide to those who are uncertain of how to start, and an encouragement for all of us to go deeper in our prayer lives. Only God can open our eyes to the matters considered in this booklet, and any explanation we have given is inevitably going to be limited, but by God's grace we at least hope to lay a foundation from Scripture about why and how we should intercede. We are grateful to those whose writings, teachings, ministries or advice have greatly shaped our own understanding. We pray you will be blessed and challenged by the fruit of many people's labours.

## **WHAT IS INTERCESSION?**

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul exhorts the church to make supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings for all men, and particularly those in authority, with the aim that we can lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity, because of God's desire for all men to be saved and to come to know the truth. While we can't force great distinctions between the different words used there for praying, it should make us ask: what is intercession, and what makes it special?

Intercession involves coming between God and other people, identifying with them and crying to God on their behalf. In our opening passage from Isaiah 59, God was astonished that there was no one to intercede. The word for "intercede" in the Hebrew can have the idea of having something laid on someone, of urgently asking for something, or of placing oneself between two people or parties. All of these things are involved when we intercede: God lays burdens on us to pray, we seek to come between a holy God and a sinful people, and we plead urgently for God's mercy.

Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, and His intercessions are described in Romans 8:26 as "groanings too deep for words". This is a reminder of the depths we can reach in intercession if the Holy Spirit really gets hold of us. Intercession demands a deeper level of commitment than simply saying a few prayers for others every now and then – although this is better than not praying at all! Biblical intercession calls us to live

continually in a place of petition before God on behalf of others, as Moses did for the Israelites during their journey to the promised land. He pleaded for them before God when they had sinned, asking God to turn from His burning anger and the harm He would otherwise bring on them (e.g. Exodus 32:11-12). A measure of judgement did fall at times, but the people as a whole were spared, thanks at least partly to Moses' intercession.

## **INTERCESSION'S IMPACT ON US**

Besides the scriptural commands to pray and the inspiring examples we have of intercession, there are other reasons to engage in the battle of prayer. One of these is that intercession can have a significant and positive impact on our own spiritual lives, even though we are coming primarily to please God and pray for others.

For example, as we identify and pray about sins in the nation or in the church, this can open the door for God to shine a light in our own hearts, showing us sins which we hadn't recognised, and giving us the opportunity to repent and put things right. As we'll see later, confession of our own sins alongside the sins of those we are praying for is a biblical principle – for example, Daniel spent time confessing both his sin and the sin of his people Israel, while praying for God to have mercy on them (Daniel 9:20). In the process of praying for others, our own sins can be highlighted and forgiven, and this helps us move on with God.

Intimacy with God is another benefit of intercession which we will experience in deeper measure as we allow Him to lead us deeper in prayer. We can begin to see His heart, feeling something of how He feels about situations, and knowing a closer bond with Him as He shares His heart with us. That passage from Matthew 26 shows the intimacy which Jesus' disciples could have had with their Lord at Gethsemane, if they had only stayed awake. The King wanted His servants to share in His burden and sorrow, and He hand-picked His three closest disciples to come further in and share a deeper fellowship as He prayed.

Intercession can also move God to reveal things to us. It is a spiritual battle (as we'll consider later) and God wants to give His servants spiritual discernment so we can engage in the battle effectively. That discernment may help us to understand what our enemy is doing in a situation, what is on God's heart, or what is about to happen. This can be seen in Daniel 10 where an angel comes in response to Daniel's prayers and his seeking heart, giving him (and us) a window into a spiritual battle going on behind the scenes, and into the prophetic future. God may even reveal more of our personal calling and lead us to take action ourselves, as happened with Nehemiah, who prayed night and day about the destitute state of Jerusalem, and ended up becoming an instrument in its rebuilding (Nehemiah 1:4-11).

## **HOPE FOR OUR DESPERATE NATION**

Perhaps the most obvious reason to intercede is for the sake of those we come to pray for. As we recognise others' needs, we should be moved not only to care about them but also to pray for them, knowing that God may show them mercy. We must come with the recognition that God has ultimate authority, control and power in our world (whatever Satan may be doing within it), and that He is well able to intervene mightily when He chooses. Dramatic changes can occur when it's God's will to act, and that should motivate us to pray for spiritual and moral changes in a nation that desperately needs them!

We live in a post-Christian culture that has completely forgotten or forsaken God. Very few people are part of a church and many children have never heard of Adam and Eve. Marriage has been redefined and is less popular than ever, with around half of marriages ending in one of over 100,000 annual divorces. Huge proportions of children have no father at home, and over 100,000 children are in care. Gender has been redefined as anything that we want it to be. Life is not sacred; a quarter of pregnancies end in abortion and 10 million babies have been killed in the womb since 1967 in our nation.

Drug use is increasing. The online world of virtual reality and social media is a dangerous jungle of self-harm, pornography, abuse and gambling. Sexual immorality is the norm. There have been significant increases in violence, anger and hatred towards others, both in public spaces and within the home. The so-called church has done little to challenge these issues, either because of blindness or fear. Many in the church have joined with the world in its sins, casting aside biblical truths and assuring the lost at every wedding and funeral that they are safe. True preachers of our beautiful gospel are increasingly persecuted, and we're experiencing a genuine famine of hearing the word of the Lord as we draw nearer to Jesus' return.

Yet all is not lost for our nation! While we see a general downward spiral that's consistent with biblical prophecies about the end times, this doesn't mean that God has given up on His great mercies, or that the principles of intercession have changed. The 'divine dare' of 2 Chronicles 7:14 still stands: "[If] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land." We can say with Joel, "Who knows whether He will not turn and relent?" (Joel 2:14), as we pray for a nation which can't and won't pray for itself.

## **TOWARDS EFFECTIVE PRAYER**

Having seen the call, need and benefits of intercession, we should turn to another question: what is the best way to intercede to gain the best results? James 5:16 tells us that "effective" prayer can accomplish much. It points to Elijah as a man who had a

nature just like ours, but whose prayer played a key part in God changing the national weather for 3 years. This should encourage us as we pray and should make us ask what the keys to effective prayer might be.

That question was in the disciples' thoughts too, because on one occasion they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Matthew 6:7). He willingly gave them guidance in response and also modelled a powerful prayer life Himself, spending time in secluded places at night as He devoted His attention to prayer. We have one full example of Jesus' prayers in what is often called His high priestly prayer, which He offered to God just before His death (John 17).

The Bible is full of other examples of prayer too. Various saints cried to God about things which burdened them and often gained a positive answer. There are too many prayers for us to mention them all in this booklet, but full lists can be found easily online and are instructive for Bible study. If we put together the examples in Scripture and add the teaching and experience of mature intercessors, we should never be short of guidance on how to pray effectively.

As we move on to look at this guidance, each of us should ask God to search our hearts and prayer practices. However long we may have been involved in prayer there will always be room for improvement, and thankfully there will always be forgiveness and grace too from God's throne, so that we can leave behind our failings and press on to greater maturity.

## **SEVEN THINGS WE NEED**

Before we can pray effectively, there are seven things which we need to have in place. God in His mercy may still answer us when we haven't addressed all of these, but we are called to address them if we want to win the victories which the Lord desires us to.

### 1) Walking in the light

Just as John tells us to walk in the light in order to have fellowship with God (1 John 1:6-7), the psalmist tells us that if we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord won't hear us (Psalm 66:18). We won't be sinlessly perfect this side of the Lord's return, but there can be recurrent sins in our lives which He wants to deal with, and until we let Him deal with them they will hinder our prayer lives.

We see an example of this in King Saul. He rightly prayed for direction before the battle of Gilboa, but received no response because he hadn't truly repented of his disobedience and pride (1 Samuel 28:5-19). Peter shows the seriousness of this matter when he warns that if a husband doesn't treat his wife in an understanding way, his prayers will be hindered (1 Peter 3:7).

## 2) Humility

One of Intercessors For Britain's foundational verses is 2 Chronicles 7:14, which we quoted earlier. Humility is listed there as one requirement for prayer to be heard – it prepares us to recognise any sin which needs repenting of, and it helps us to come reverently before our holy and awesome God Who is described sometimes in Scripture as a consuming fire.

While we are able in Christ to come confidently before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16), we must never forget to come with reverence before the One Who holds our breath in His hands. When interceding with God over Sodom's looming destruction in Genesis 18, Abraham had the tenacity to keep pushing and persisting with God in bringing increasingly bold requests, yet he did so very reverently with such phrases as "I am but dust and ashes", "may the Lord not be angry", and "I have ventured to speak to the Lord."

## 3) Right motives

James reminds us that one reason we don't receive what we ask for (if we ask at all) is that we're praying with wrong motives in order to indulge our pleasures (James 4:3). We can easily bring a respectable sounding prayer to God but do so from selfish motives which displease Him, often without realising! Like David we need to ask God to search our hearts and reveal when we are doing this, so we can have our fallen motives replaced with His pure ones (Psalm 139:23-24).

Such pure motives were revealed by the Lord Jesus when His disciples asked how they should pray, and He told them to start by praying: "Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done..." (Matthew 6:9-10). They were to prioritise praying for God's interests before they got to any personal requests. These two will sometimes align, because God's interests can become grounds of appeal for Him to show mercy on those we care about – but His interests must come first, even if that means we have to pray for the opposite outcome to the one we naturally want.

## 4) An ear for God's will

Scripture tells us to be confident that if we ask anything according to God's will He will hear us (1 John 5:14). The implication of that verse is that He may not hear us if we're not praying according to His will. That should be kept in mind when we read another verse from John, where he quotes Jesus' promise that if we ask anything in His Name He will do it (John 14:13). We must remember that doing anything in someone's name assumes their approval of the action (like an ambassador bringing a message in the name of their country), and that the verse continues by saying that the purpose is for the Father to be glorified (rather than for us to get whatever we want). Jesus goes on to point out two verses later that we must keep His commandments, so any prayers we pray must fit with what He tells us.

The best example we could turn to would be Jesus Himself. Of all people on the face of the earth, the Son of God was in the best position to get what He wanted, and if anyone could have pursued His own agenda successfully, it would have been Him. Yet Jesus chose instead to prioritise His Father's will, saying He could do nothing on His own initiative (John 5:30), and submitting His own will and deep struggles to God during His agonising prayers at Gethsemane (Mark 14:34-36).

If we're wondering how we can know God's will, the answer is to seek and listen for it, both by prayer and by getting to know the truths of Scripture. As we read God's word and listen for His Spirit's guidance, He can teach us both His general will (the things which He always wants) and His specific will for a situation.

### 5) Faith

Jesus had to correct a man for his doubt in Mark 9:23 when he said: "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus replied by telling him: "All things are possible to him who believes." Faith is clearly needed for things to be possible in prayer, as it is for everything else in the Christian life. The question is, what type of faith should we have when praying, and can it be abused?

Some people take Jesus' words in Mark 11:20-25 to mean that we can do anything we want if we just believe for it. Jesus did teach in that passage that we can command mountains to move into the sea if we don't doubt when we pray for it, and He even went on to say, "all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you." That describes a faith which is so certain of victory that it acts as if the victory has already been received!

However, we must always handle the word of truth accurately (2 Timothy 2:15), and not take a passage in isolation. While we should all be challenged to receive more faith from God for our prayers, we need to balance this passage against others, which show we must also pray according to God's will and from right motives. If we don't, no amount of apparent faith will be successful, and our faith may prove to have been merely presumption. But if we do follow God's leading when praying, there will be situations where He gives us the faith that He is both able *and* willing to act, allowing us to pray with certainty that He is going to respond. May God grant us more of this faith!

### 6) Self sacrifice

In our Christian lives, God looks to see if we mean business – to see if we are serious about gaining something, and willing for the cost to gain it. This is evident from Genesis 32 where Jacob had to wrestle all night, even having his hip put out of joint before he finally received the blessing. Similarly, while some prayers may be answered very easily, others may require significant time and effort, as part of laying down our lives and taking up our cross. Daniel understood this – on one occasion he "gave [his] attention to the Lord" to seek Him with fasting, sackcloth and ashes, reaching a point of "extreme



weariness" (Daniel 9:3,21); on another occasion he spent three weeks in mourning and self-deprivation until he received an answer (Daniel 10:2-3). The cost we have to pay may be different to Daniel's, although we should note that fasting is an established element of prayer in both Old and New Testaments because it helps to show that we're serious about particular situations.

Prayer in the New Testament is sometimes described as "labouring" or "striving", as in the case of Epaphras who was "always labouring earnestly" in his prayers for the Colossian believers (Colossians 4:12). The Greek word for "labouring" is *agonizomai*, from which we get our English word *agony*. Similarly, we have seen that the Spirit intercedes for us with "groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Our efforts in prayer often fall far short of this deep burden, and thankfully God is often merciful in hearing even the weakest prayers for help, but it's a reminder of the emotional cost there may be for us as we go deeper in intercession.

### 7) Persistence

While we may sometimes receive an answer after a relatively short period of prayer, sometimes we are called to go on praying for a much longer period of time. Jesus knew that we have a tendency to give up easily, so He told the parable of the unjust judge (who eventually gives in and helps a widow because of her pestering) as an encouragement for us to keep praying and not lose heart (Luke 18:1-8). In the context of that parable, the particular example Jesus gave was of God's elect crying to Him day and night for justice. Jesus would have known that many saints would die with that prayer unanswered, but their prayers wouldn't be ignored, and He promised that one day He would answer them.

We won't always need to go on praying about situations until the end of our lives, but this should remind us that God's timescales are not ours, and that even if we have to wait for a long time, prayers that are according to His purposes will be answered one day. That's why Paul tells us to pray at all times with all perseverance (Ephesians 6:18), which we should seek from God so that we don't give up as our flesh often wants us to.

Having considered these seven requirements for effective prayer, we should remember that we are all works in progress. The process of maturing as believers isn't usually a quick one, and we shouldn't come under condemnation if we feel we have a long way to go. However, that shouldn't stop us from seeking the Lord's help to change and do better in prayer – and He may surprise us as we do that by giving abundant answers to encourage us further. May He keep any of us from falling short of all He desires for us!

## **PRAISE, CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE**

Once we're ready to pray, we often want to jump straight in with our requests – and sometimes that's necessary if we're short of time, when we can only pray a quick "arrow

prayer” to God – but should we always get straight down to requests when we come to pray? When we look at the prayers recorded in Scripture, they would suggest a different approach is needed.

In Daniel 9, Daniel prays a great prayer on behalf of Jerusalem, which has been lying barren for many years because of God’s righteous judgement upon it. Daniel’s heart is stirred for his people, and he longs for them to be forgiven and restored to their land, but he only asks for that in the final third of his prayer. The first two thirds are devoted to confession and praise as he acknowledges that his nation had been warned, that God had been righteous in judgement, and that they had no reason to deserve God’s mercy.

In Nehemiah 9 we read the words of the Levites as they led the returned exiles in prayer. Out of 34 verses of prayer, only 1 verse (near the end) asks God for mercy – the other 33 verses are filled with confession of the nation’s sins, and praise for God’s past compassion and wonderful acts. And in Ezra 9, Ezra takes things a stage further. When he discovers the sinful mixed marriages of the exiles, he’s so appalled that he can’t bring himself to make any request of God at all; instead, he plucks out his hair, tears his clothes and sits in silence and shame for hours, then prays a prayer of pure confession and praise.

The New Testament has fewer full prayers recorded, but we can see a similar principle in Acts 4 after Peter and John have been threatened over their preaching. They and their companions gather together, wanting to ask God for miracles and boldness in the face of these threats, but the majority of the prayer that’s recorded is praise and acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty before they make their requests at the end (Acts 4:24-30).

### The importance of praise and confession

Why do these prayers place such an emphasis on praise and confession? Let’s consider some benefits of this approach.

By starting with praise when we pray, it helps us to get our focus off ourselves and onto God. As we acknowledge His righteousness, we recognise afresh how perfect His standards are compared to ours, and how seriously God sees the sins of those we are interceding for. As we worship God for His power we are reminded of what He can do, whether in fearful judgement, or in the merciful deliverances we come to seek Him for. By worshipping God, as well as giving Him what He rightly deserves anyway, we can gain a fresh perspective of Him, of ourselves and of the situation we’re praying about, remembering that we are meant to look down on earthly situations from a heavenly perspective as those seated with Christ (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1-3).

Confession is also important before we pray for mercy, because sin is usually the cause of the problem in the first place. If sin is causing God to judge in a situation, or to hold

back from blessing, that sin must first be recognised as the cause before we can ask for change. The people we are interceding for may not recognise this and change for themselves, but we can at least acknowledge their sin and confess it before God, so He can see that some people understand His heart and stand with Him in condemning the sin He is grieved over. Confession can also help us and others to recognise the gravity of a situation more fully, as we realise just how great people's sins are and just how close they may be to God's righteous judgement. This is apparent in Ezra 10:1 as a large assembly gathers in mourning, convicted by Ezra's torn clothes, plucked hair and deep sorrow over their sin.

### Repentance and identification

While confession of sin is necessary, sometimes we need to go beyond that to repent of sins in our own lives, actively choosing to turn from it and to change by God's grace. As we confess others' sins in a particular area during intercession, we may realise the need to repent personally of any sin we have committed or any action we have omitted in that area. We can also pray that God would grant others repentance for themselves (2 Timothy 2:25b) so that they too can change direction.

While we can't have that change of mind on others' behalf, it is biblical to identify with others' sins, like Nehemiah did with his people. This means that we pray as if we ourselves had committed those sins, standing in others' shoes and pleading with God for mercy and forgiveness as if we were facing their judgement ourselves. This 'identificational confession' can be seen in Nehemiah's prayer when he said: "I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned" (Nehemiah 1:6b). Nehemiah hadn't committed the great abominations which his father's house had committed, but he identified himself as one of the people, confessing their sins as if his own, and no doubt recognising too that he was far from perfect as an individual.

### A wrong understanding of praise

Before moving on, we should touch on the claim that praise in itself can defeat the enemy. This claim is based partly on 2 Chronicles 20:22 where it tells us that when Jehoshaphat and his army began to praise, the Lord destroyed the army that was about to engage with them. However, context is very important when interpreting Scripture, and we see earlier in the chapter that the battle had actually been won beforehand through a national day of fasting and prayer. The nation had gathered to cry for help in the face of an overwhelming enemy; God responded mercifully with the promise of victory, and when the Israelites took hold of His response by faith and praised Him for the victory He had promised, God brought it about on earth. So while praise is absolutely key as one part of intercession, we can't use it to avoid the battle that must be fought in prayer if we want to see a victory.

## **BRINGING OUR APPEAL TO GOD**

Having come to God with a right heart in an attitude of worship, and having confessed anything we feel the Lord telling us to, we can begin to bring an appeal to God for mercy. This should lead us to the question: does the Bible give us any guidance on how we should bring that appeal? Are there special words or techniques that should be employed, or does it not matter which particular words we use?

### Being led by the Spirit

The first thing to be said about this is that there is no special formula that will automatically gain an answer from God. Our flesh would love to have a magic phrase which is guaranteed to gain a result, but the Bible doesn't provide this. There is no one-size-fits-all technique with prayer; rather, Scripture shows us that we must always be led by God in what to pray. Just as David was given different strategies for what seemed like similar battles (2 Samuel 5:18-25), God may lead differently from one prayer battle to another, although always according to the over-arching principles that we're studying here.

Despite Paul's great devotion and experience in prayer, he says, "we do not know how to pray as we should" (Romans 8:26). He recognised he could put no confidence in his flesh, or in his experience of what worked previously. He writes twice in his letters that we should pray "in the Spirit", and generally emphasises that we should be "led by the Spirit" in all that we do.

### Our many words

Secondly, we should remember that effective prayers don't need to be complicated or clever – in fact, that can sometimes be a hindrance – what means more to God is whether they are heartfelt. God took note of His servants when they groaned about the state of the world (Ezekiel 9:4), and was moved by the groanings of His people when in bondage in Egypt (Exodus 2:24) rather than by their eloquent words.

When the disciples asked how they should pray, Jesus began by warning them not to use vain repetition like the Gentiles did, who thought they'd be heard for their many words (Matthew 6:7). He went on in the next chapter to encourage the disciples to come to God with a childlike attitude, making requests of their Father in heaven (Matthew 7:7-11). Children aren't known for making complex arguments when they want food! This should be an encouragement to us if we struggle with confidence when trying to join in with a prayer meeting – and a warning to us if we have a tendency to string together long prayers to impress the Lord or other people.

### Scripture as our example

Having said these things, the Bible does give us clues and suggestions about the words and strategies we might use when praying. It's not wrong to want a guide on prayer technique, as we see from the fact that Jesus willingly accepted and answered the

disciples' request for teaching on it. He gave a pattern prayer, and while we shouldn't pray it robotically, Jesus gave it as a guide to help shape our prayers.

There are also lots of answered prayers in Scripture which have been given to us as examples. Each has something to teach us, and where a common thread runs through them we should take particular note of it. Apart from the general right attitude shown by those who prayed them (demonstrating the seven things we considered earlier), two common threads can be seen in them: acknowledgements and grounds of appeal.

### Things to acknowledge

There are things which God wants us to acknowledge when we come to intercede, which shouldn't be missed out or glossed over. These are things which God sees and which are on His heart, but which He wants His servants to see and acknowledge too. Here are five acknowledgements from Scriptural prayers, which can be found in more than one place in the Bible, although we will only give one reference as an example for each:

- We have been warned – *Daniel 9:13* (“As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us...”)
- We deserve any judgement we've received – *Nehemiah 9:33* (“You are just in all that has come upon us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.”)
- We don't deserve the mercy we're seeking – *Daniel 9:18* (“we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion.”)
- We rightly bear shame – *Ezra 9:6* (“O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.”)
- We lack power and understanding – *2 Chronicles 20:12* (“For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You.”)

### Grounds of appeal

In law courts, barristers will often present arguments before the judge, giving reasons for a criminal to be shown leniency. We see something similar to this in many biblical prayers. We need to remember we are approaching a holy God as sinful and flawed human beings (though clothed in Christ's righteousness), and God isn't impressed by our words as we've already seen – but we can still learn from these examples, and the Holy Spirit may lead us to use one or more of them as we go on in prayer. Again, we are just giving one reference as an example for each ground of appeal:

- God's Name/glory, and how it could be affected – *Numbers 14:15-16* (“Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say,

*'Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.'*")

- God's sovereignty over all rulers and powers – 2 Kings 19:15-16 (*"O LORD, the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth ... listen to the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to reproach the living God."*)
- God's patience and compassion – Numbers 14:17-19 (*"But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression ... Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness...'"*)
- God's justice – Genesis 18:25 (*"Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"*)
- God's promises – Exodus 32:12-13 (*"Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens...'"*)
- God's previous mercy – Numbers 14:19 (*"Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."*)
- God's gracious favour to us as intercessors – Exodus 33:12,13,17 (*"You have said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favour in My sight.'" Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favour in Your sight, let me know Your ways ... Consider too, that this nation is Your people.' ... The LORD said to Moses, 'I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favour in My sight and I have known you by name.'"*)
- People's suffering – Nehemiah 9:32 (*"Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day."*)
- The enemy's evil – 2 Chronicles 20:10-12 (*"Now behold, the sons of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir, whom You did not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt ... see how they are rewarding us by coming to drive us out ... O our God, will You not judge them?"*)

One further ground of appeal which we sometimes use in prayer is: "for the sake of the children". This isn't specifically found as an appeal in Scripture, but we use it because of Jesus' teachings about His love for children, and the just punishment of those who make them stumble (Matthew 18:6). We can mourn with Jeremiah over the affliction of children in our nation (Lamentations 2:11-12), asking God to take note of it and act. However, as with all of these appeals, we need to keep a balanced view of the Bible's

teachings, because there are times when God has to include children in His judgement because of previous generations' sins (Hosea 4:6). While our flesh may struggle with this, we must understand it as part of God's righteous judgement; this is explained in more detail in our 2022 series about God's judgement (on our YouTube channel).

## **WARFARE, AUTHORITY AND OUR ENEMY**

The topics we turn to now are complex ones, in which scriptural truths have often been ignored (leaving our spiritual weapons unused) or taken too far (as people try to bind or declare things without God's approval and protection). We aim to provide a scriptural balance here, but our understanding and explanation will inevitably be limited; each of us needs to ask for God's revelation personally on these matters and to learn them with others wherever possible.

### Knowing our enemy

The Bible tells us that besides God and His angels, other powers have an influential role in our world behind the scenes. The ringleader of these powers is given various names in Scripture, including Satan, Lucifer, the devil, the evil one, and other titles that reflect his character (e.g. "father of lies"). God has allowed Satan to have a measure of control over many things in our world (1 John 5:19), although only for a time and within limits.

Satan isn't alone as we sometimes read of spiritual powers in the plural. Revelation 12:3-4 indicates that when Satan was cast down, he brought a third of the stars (speaking of angels) down with him. These fallen angels are sometimes described in the Bible as demons (who possess individuals until they are cast out), and also as evil spirits (sometimes with specific titles, like a lying spirit or a deaf and dumb spirit).

However, demons don't just affect individuals. Ephesians 6:12 describes them as powers, world forces of this darkness, and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. We have a concrete illustration of this in Daniel 10, where an angel appeared to Daniel and said he had been delayed because of the prince of the kingdom of Persia, who had withstood him for 21 days until the archangel Michael came to help. No human prince could resist an angel's power, so it's clear that this was a spiritual prince with authority over an earthly kingdom (the kingdom of Persia).

Some demonic powers may also control particular ideologies like Islam or evolution. We could say these are examples of the "lofty things exalted against the knowledge of God", which Paul tells us we need to fight against with spiritual rather than fleshly weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

### We are in a battle

Having seen that we have an enemy, we need to recognise that we are in a battle as believers, whether we have realised it previously or not. Life is full of difficulties for all

human beings, but as believers we can find that it's particularly hard to live the Christian life. Temptations abound, persecution can arise out of nowhere, and doubts and discouragements regularly assail us. Why is that?

There is more than just our flesh or hostile fellow humans at work here – if we think it's just those, we're in danger of looking at our situation with fleshly eyes. Ephesians 6:12 tells us that our struggle as believers isn't against flesh and blood, and 2 Corinthians 10:3 says that we shouldn't war according to the flesh. Whether it's someone opposing us personally, or a prominent person promoting wickedness in the nation, we can tend to focus our attention on problematic human beings, when they are just a tool in the hand of the enemy.

Ephesians 6:11 tells us that the devil schemes against us, so we need to put on the full armour of God to stand firm. People don't need to wear armour in peacetime or away from the battle line – but we as believers are all on the front line to some extent – and the more we seek to serve God and take a stand for Him, the fiercer the battle can become for us. Thankfully, as the chapter goes on to say, we have been given all the armour we need to stand firm in defending against the enemy, and we can even send him fleeing if we use the sword of the Spirit (the word of God) appropriately and resist him. We can't do this if we're not in Christ, but if we are and we have submitted to God we can resist the devil and he will flee (James 4:7).

### The need to act

Once we know that there are spiritual powers at work in our world, the question is: what are we going to do about them? It's clear from the passages already mentioned that we're not meant to leave the work of these spiritual powers unchallenged. We've seen that we've been given divinely powerful weapons, and that we have been placed in a "battle" against spiritual powers.

While Ephesians 6 is at least partly talking about standing firm defensively when the enemy attacks us, the passage in 2 Corinthians 10 speaks of strongholds that are to be pulled down and lofty things that are to be destroyed. This is what's often being described when people use the term "spiritual warfare": fighting against what the enemy is doing or seeking to do in a situation.

Whether with demons possessing individuals, or spiritual powers affecting the nation, we're not to stand idly by and let them carry on unhindered – we're called to engage in the prayer battle, looking to God to see if He will allow the enemy to be pushed back.

### Unlimited authority?

Having seen that there is an enemy to be challenged, does that mean we can just rush in, proclaim the Name of Jesus, and command the enemy to leave every place and situation? Or do we need to exercise caution and restraint?



We know that Christ our Lord has all authority over Satan and all his host. Jesus told His disciples that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18), and while 1 Corinthians 15:24 tells us that He will abolish all rule and authority in the future, other passages remind us that He's already seated far above every power (e.g. Ephesians 1:20-21). If Christ has this great authority and power, do we have it too?

We might come to that conclusion if we take certain verses on their own – for example, where Jesus gives the 12 disciples (and later 70 others) authority to heal people and cast out demons. He says in Luke 10:19: “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.” But if we have unlimited power over the enemy and over sickness, why didn't the disciples get whole nations to turn to Christ? Why did Paul experience persecution and injury, and have to keep fleeing cities? Why did he heal some people, but leave Trophimus sick at Ephesus (2 Timothy 4:20)? Why did he have to struggle on when a messenger of Satan buffeted him as a thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7)? These examples would suggest that there are limits to what we can do against the enemy, no matter how much faith or authority we feel we have.

We should also note the warnings in Scripture about going presumptuously against the enemy. The 7 sons of Sceva discovered to their cost that invoking Jesus' Name against a demon didn't give them automatic power (Acts 19:13-17), although we note that they probably weren't believers to begin with. When approaching the promised land, the Israelites were told by Joshua and Caleb that their enemy's protection had been removed by God – but when the Israelites rebelled against God and then went against their enemy without His support, the enemy defeated them. And Jude denounces those who think they can revile spiritual powers, pointing out that even the archangel Michael didn't dare to rebuke Satan directly, but instead said, “The Lord rebuke you!” (Jude 8-9).

The enemy is certainly a defeated foe from the Lord's viewpoint, and we don't need to cower in fear of him if we're in Christ and following His command – in fact, when He gives us the direction and authority in a situation, we can receive permission to push the enemy back – but we also need to recognise that the devil still has significant power in the world, and we don't have a blank cheque to direct him however we please.

### What we can do

When considering what we *can* do against the enemy, we should notice how the archangel Michael dealt with the enemy – he said, “The Lord rebuke you!” – because he recognised that any rebuke against the enemy had to come from the Lord rather than himself. That didn't hold him back from disputing over the body of Moses, but he did so recognising he had to have the Lord's backing.

Jesus' words in Matthew 18:18 about binding and loosing things have sometimes been misused, but the literal translation is: “whatever you bind on earth *shall have been* bound

in heaven.” God in heaven has to bind something first – then by His grace we can receive direction to bind on earth as He seeks to involve us. And as it goes on to say in the following verses, our victories can only come when we’re gathered in Christ’s Name, which assumes we’re doing things under His specific direction.

So any authority we can gain to take a stand against the enemy must be a specific authority for a specific situation, following His leading – because as we saw earlier, if we haven’t genuinely heard from the Lord, we’re acting in presumption and not faith.

All of this means that spiritual warfare is largely conducted in prayer to God, rather than addressing the enemy. As we become aware of the enemy’s power in a situation we can appeal to God to act against him, and then keep battling on in prayer to God by the Spirit’s leading, seeking victory if He’s willing to give it (while recognising that in a time of judgement He may not be willing).

When we do hear from the Lord with certainty, we can then act against the enemy. This is usually best done in a time of group intercession, with people of some maturity in the faith, where leaders and the group as a whole feel they’ve reached a point where God is signalling that He’s willing and ready to act (through a combination of how the group is starting to pray, and inner conviction). At that point, the group may need to declare the end or binding of something, or they may feel within their spirits that victory has been won. Then, they wait to see the evidence of the spiritual victory in earthly events!

In summary then, we are in a battle, and although we can’t act presumptuously against spiritual powers, we can and should engage in spiritual warfare rather than allowing the enemy free reign. In the days leading up to Christ’s return, Scripture warns of increasing evil and problems in the world (e.g. Matthew 24:3-14) – so while the gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony, great victories may be fewer than in the past. Yet God hasn’t finished with our world, and we continue to hope in His mercy, that He will still be willing to intervene at least at times in our nation for good.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYING TOGETHER**

All that we have considered so far could be applied to both personal and corporate prayer. However, while the underlying principles for both are the same, there are some additional benefits and strategies for corporate prayer which are worth considering. This is important, because we may sometimes be tempted to ask why we need to pray together at all when we can pray at home instead, avoiding the inconveniences of gathering together and interacting with people who may think or pray differently to us.

God certainly can and does act in response to the prayers of individuals. Almost all the examples of prayer which we’ve considered in this booklet were prayed by individuals (like Daniel, Moses, Ezra and Abraham), and they received some powerful responses

from God. As James 5:16 encourages us, one righteous man's effective prayer can achieve much, whether prayed by Elijah or by us, despite us all sharing the same flawed human nature. God searched simply for "a man" to stand in the gap for the land of Israel (Ezekiel 22:30), which demonstrates that it's not always great numbers of intercessors which are needed for judgement to be averted.

These reminders from Scripture should encourage us. We can all feel weak, cold or ineffective at times in our individual prayer lives – not helped by the enemy's attempts to discourage us – but if those feelings of weakness lead us to seek God's strength, He can enable us to press on and even contribute to great breakthroughs as individual prayer warriors. Yet if all that's needed is individual prayer, why did the early church focus so much on praying together?

### The example of the early church

The first example of corporate prayer in the New Testament church was shortly before Pentecost, when the eleven apostles and other followers of Jesus gathered together. They were "continually devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14), and they did so with one mind – they had a shared goal of receiving the promised power of the Spirit, and they therefore had a shared practice of being together in an upper room and praying fervently for it. It was no coincidence that they were all together in one place when the Spirit came at Pentecost, nor was this the only time when gathering and praying together led to a powerful shared result.

When Peter and John were threatened for preaching the gospel, their first response was to go to their companions and share the situation with them (Acts 4:23). This led the whole group to lift their voices in one accord, praising God and making a communal request for boldness, resulting in God shaking the building they were in and filling them all afresh with the Spirit. The same response to a crisis can be seen in Acts 12:12, when the freshly-delivered Peter discovered many people were gathered together to pray for his release. Similar responses to crises can be seen in the Old Testament, which contains calls to collective repentance and prayer (e.g. Joel 1:14) and groups which demonstrated this (e.g. 2 Chronicles 20:1-19).

We see a different type of gathering in Acts 13:1-2, where rather than praying together because of a problem, the believers at Antioch were simply gathering to minister to the Lord while fasting. The result was that a prophetic word was given by the Spirit, calling Barnabas and Paul into missionary service. Would all of their later converts have come to the Lord, and all of Paul's epistles have been written for our benefit, if those believers at Antioch had stayed at home and prayed on their own?

### Benefits of corporate prayer

There is clearly something special about corporate prayer when done in a right way under God's direction. Jesus hinted at this when He taught that if two or three gather

together in His Name and agree over something they are requesting, His Father would do it (Matthew 18:19-20). Of course, we must remember the safeguards that we've considered in connection with this – the need to pray according to His will, acting in submission to the One in Whose Name we are gathering together, and acting in response to what's been decided in heaven – but Jesus clearly knew that corporate and united prayer under His direction could lead to decisive results which might not be granted to individuals.

While the potential for powerful results should be enough to motivate our gathering together to pray, we could also consider two other benefits of corporate prayer times. Firstly, praying with others can help us to keep going in prayer where we might otherwise pray for shorter times or give up altogether. Doing anything as a group can be very motivating compared to doing it on our own, and we have a great picture of this in connection with prayer in Exodus 17:8-13. There we read of a great battle taking place between Israel and the Amalekites, while Moses fought a closely linked battle in prayer from a nearby hill. Each time Moses held up his hands, the Israelites began to prevail, but he couldn't maintain this on his own because his hands grew weary. Thankfully, he hadn't gone alone – Aaron and Hur were there to strengthen him, supporting his hands for a long time until the battle was won (on the hilltop and down below).

Secondly, corporate prayer helps us all to learn how to pray better. We can be inspired, challenged or even corrected by how others pray, and can give the same benefit to others by our example. As iron sharpens iron, so we can sharpen each other (Proverbs 27:17). Sharpening can be uncomfortable as we spend time with others who pray differently to us and who have insights which challenge our own, but it can lead to great fruit (compare Hebrews 12:11 about the blessings of enduring discipline and training). Scripture tells us that prophecies must be tested and judged by others, so that the whole church is clear on whether God has definitely spoken or not (1 Corinthians 14:29); while the same isn't said of prayer, it's good for our prayers to be tested too by others at times, so that we don't carry on unchecked with wrong ideas or bad habits.

## **PRINCIPLES OF PRAYING TOGETHER**

Having considered why corporate prayer is beneficial, we should now consider some principles to guide our corporate prayer times. These five principles have largely been gained through the teachings and experience of intercessory leaders (which illustrates the point about learning from each other), but they can also be backed up by Scripture.

### Principle 1 – Listen for the Spirit's leading through each other

We have already seen the need to pray according to God's will in order to be heard, and therefore the need to be led by the Spirit in prayer. This is true of individual prayer as we seek to discern on our own what the Lord is saying, but it takes on a new significance in a corporate setting.

We've seen that the early church prayed together with one mind, and this can only have been achieved by the Lord directing them all in this way. Like the conductor of an orchestra, God wants to direct His intercessors so that they are all on the same page, playing the same piece at the same time. If we don't listen for His leading, we will be a bunch of well-meaning individuals who happen to be in the same room, but whose prayers may not link together.

God may sometimes give direction to a group by direct revelation (through a prophecy or a word of knowledge) like He did to the church at Antioch, and if it's been approved as a genuine word from Him it can give great clarity to a prayer time. However, more commonly He will lead us through each other's prayers. As we listen carefully to each person's contribution, we can give a hearty "Amen" when what they say witnesses with our own spirits as being from the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:16), and we can back up such prayers by adding our own prayer immediately afterwards along the same lines. Together, when we notice a theme emerging, we can recognise that the Lord is highlighting something and pursue it as far as we feel He's calling us to.

### Principle 2 – Stay focused on one thing

Given that God wants to lead us, and that He is a God of order rather than confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33,40), it follows that there will be something particular which God wants us to focus on when we pray. This focus may not be apparent at first, and we typically have to spread a matter before Him initially as we feel our way forward, but our desire should be to develop a clear focus and stick to it, until or unless we are led otherwise.

We easily get bored as human beings and start to jump around from one thing to another in a prayer time. Even if we all pray about the same overall issue, we can end up focusing on lots of different aspects when perhaps God would have us hone in on one or two. For example, when praying about a moral issue in the nation, one person might pray about the government's legislation over it, another may pray for hearts to be changed in the nation, then another may pray about the media's reporting of the issue, followed by another who prays for the church to be a better voice over the issue. All of these things are good and right to pray, and may need to be mentioned at the start – but does the Lord want us to cover them all briefly like a shopping list, or to begin to focus on one aspect in depth?

Picture an archery target, with its bullseye and its middle and outer rings. If our prayer meetings were plotted on such a target, many of them would demonstrate a scattergun approach, with shots all around the target sheet (and some having missed it completely). Yet if we really want to get through with God over an issue, we should long and aim for a time where all of our collective shots hit the bullseye one after another.

We considered the importance of persistence earlier, and Jesus' parable about the unjust judge. The widow in that parable didn't come with various different requests, but

kept persisting with one simple plea: “Give me legal protection from my opponent”. This approach isn’t as exciting, and we may have to overcome our collective fear of repeating each other in prayer times, but it may be the most effective path to any victory God would lead us into.

### Principle 3 – Keep brief and to the point

Long prayers can sometimes flow naturally from burdens which the Lord puts within us as we pour out our hearts before Him. Yet they can also become hindrances, especially when they are made in the flesh. They can kill or dampen a vibrant prayer time, as listeners switch off and any fervency which had been built up drains away.

First and foremost, our prayers are meant to be heart cries – simple, heartfelt, and sharing the nub of our burden with the Lord. The longer our prayers become, the more likely they are to move beyond that nub into waffle and human thoughts, while someone with a genuine heart cry from the Lord is sitting waiting for their turn to pray.

We’ve seen that Jesus criticised those who thought they would be heard for their many words, and Ecclesiastes 5:2-3 suggests that it’s good for our words to God to be few, in contrast to the voice of a fool with his many words. There is also an interesting principle to be found in 1 Corinthians 14:30, within a passage that’s giving directions for corporate worship and the use of spiritual gifts. There we are told that if something is revealed to one who is seated, the first (who’s currently speaking) should stop and give way to their brother or sister. It’s a helpful reminder that out of love for each other, as well as out of a desire to make God’s prayer times as effective as possible, we should be considerate of each other and generally keep our prayers brief, so we don’t hold back others who God may be waiting to speak through.

### Principle 4 – Pray on behalf of the group

When we are the active speaker in a prayer time, it’s important to remember that it’s not just us as the individual who’s praying at that moment. The whole group is meant to be actively involved with our prayer, praying alongside us in their hearts and voicing their approval when they agree with what we’re saying. It’s therefore good to use collective pronouns (we/us/our) so that others feel involved and everyone remembers that it’s a team prayer.

This comes with a warning though: when we pray on behalf of the group, we should be seeking as much as possible to pray in a way which the group agrees with, under the Lord’s direction. All of us get that wrong sometimes, and we shouldn’t be discouraged by this – but sometimes when we don’t receive much of an “Amen” after our prayer, we might discern that some or all of what we prayed may not have been in line with the group’s feelings. This isn’t a foolproof test, because the rest of the group will be fallible too, but it can be a good guide. This is actually a great opportunity for learning and growth if we heed the signals given by our brothers and sisters.

To take this a stage further, we should never make a declaration or seek to bind the enemy as an individual, because any such action needs to be taken together once the group (and particularly the leaders) have reached the collective feeling that God is directing in that way. If we say, "I believe You will do this" or "I declare that this will happen", the group may not agree – and more importantly, the Lord may not agree either. However, if a whole group feels God is leading towards some decisive action, the action can be taken collectively with greater confidence that it's from Him.

#### Principle 5 – Join in!

The New Testament makes clear that we're in a body for a reason, and that each of us has a part to play. The foot must never say (or think subconsciously) that it's redundant because it's not a hand, and no member should ever think that another member isn't needed, no matter what the gulf between them may be in understanding or character (1 Corinthians 12:14-25). Our short, hesitant prayers may bless, guide or even challenge others more than we realise – and if it's a heart cry that's in line with God's will, it can achieve as much as the most confident and eloquent prayer in the prayer meeting. Let's not rob ourselves or others of the blessings that can result from our active participation!

### **CONCLUSION**

We have sought here to lay a foundation for effective intercession, based on the whole counsel of Scripture and the experience which has been built up within intercessory circles. We are very aware of our own shortcomings, both in prayer and in these explanations, and therefore wouldn't pretend that we have got everything right or included everything that should have been.

However, we are certain of three things: that our nation needs intercession, that the church is called to intercede, and that the church isn't doing enough of it. As we seek to grow in the truths and practices laid out in this booklet, we pray that you will do the same, and will reap the benefits and victories that can result.

We praise God for His abundant grace and forgiveness. There is no need for us to wallow in guilt where we've failed previously in prayer, or to think we can't improve. May the Lord help us to strive as Paul did in Colossians 1:29 – according to His power, which mightily works within us.

To Him be all the glory!

## **ABOUT THIS BOOKLET**

Our nation and church are in crisis. We're a post-Christian culture that has turned away from God, and we see the consequences of this throughout our communities. Marriages are failing, families are breaking apart and children are suffering. Abuse, self-harm and drug use are on the rise, along with depression, anger and murder. God's righteous laws are being cast aside as we remove sexual boundaries and pursue pleasure at any price, even the killing of millions in the womb. We hear little from the church, which turns a blind eye or even goes along with the nation's sins.

At this crucial time, the only hope for our nation and our church is to turn to God in repentance and prayer. While many will not do this for themselves, Scripture speaks to any who will listen, calling us to intercede for others and to pray for God's purposes to be fulfilled.

In this booklet we explore God's call for us to intercede, what intercession means, and the benefits it can bring to our own lives as well as those we pray for. We ask how we can intercede effectively in order to move God's heart, recognising that we all have room for improvement. Having laid the foundation of a right heart attitude and the need for praise and confession, we move on to biblical ways we can appeal to God's heart. We also cover questions about spiritual warfare and our authority as intercessors, together with the benefits and principles of praying as a group. A collection of related videos on how and why to pray is available on our YouTube channel.

## **ABOUT OUR WORK**

Intercessors For Britain exists to inspire and inform prayer for the UK, with prayer days, conferences, prayer news, leaflets and videos. Membership is free, and we simply ask that you pray regularly for the nation. You can join up on our website, or contact us for more information.

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