

Encouraging and Equipping Missionaries Through Prayer

Grant McClung

Most everyone has a file or a special place full of meaningful letters, mementos, and memorabilia. Mine has a handwritten note from a former professor, one of the evangelical world's best known missions leaders. Not long after leaving seminary to start my own missionary service, I received a note from him in the mail, written on behalf of the wider group of colleagues that had impacted my missions journey. "Today," he wrote, "in faculty meeting we remembered you in prayer." That note is one of my prized possessions.

Missionaries are encouraged and equipped for effective service through our prayers. The Apostle Paul, the exemplary New Testament missionary, understood this very well. Paul's letters are full of his requests for prayer to ministry partners in local churches, and reminders that he is also praying for them. Among my favorites is:

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now..." (Philippians 1.3-5).¹

Paul had a special friendship and partnership with the Philippians. His letter to them reveals a special closeness and intimacy and a willingness to open his heart with special requests for prayer. He also lets them know how special they are to him, how he has them in his heart, and that he has been praying for them.

Through his appeals for prayer, we see a human side to this great apostle and visionary church planter. We learn from him and other Biblical examples that missionaries are not super-spiritual machines who begin turning out converts for Christ as soon as they land in another country. They are normal people trying to serve God effectively in another environment. Like us, they need prayer to stay close to Jesus in an intimate relationship and be productive in their ministry. They need prayer partners at home to share their burdens and victories. We must encourage and equip them through ongoing, systematic, intense intercession – and let them know that we are praying.

Encouragement through intercession equips missionaries to face opposition and hardships. In typical situations, missionaries are:

- living in an alien culture.
- working among an unresponsive or hostile people.
- dealing with a shortage of personnel leading to work overload.
- traveling sometimes away from family.
- balancing the demands of "the work" and family needs.
- enduring physical discomfort in sub-standard living conditions.
- doing problem-solving and counseling in another language.

¹ All scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version of the Bible (1984 edition).

- facing government or local official harassment.
- warring against spiritual opposition.
- striving to maintain their financial support. ²

Encouragement and equipping through prayer is Biblical. Scripture reveals our Heavenly Father as an encourager who listens to the heartfelt cries of prayer: “You hear, oh Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you *encourage* them, and you listen to their cry” (Psalm 10.17). God has designated encouragement as one of the spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Alongside the more (supposedly) “prominent” gifts such as prophesying, teaching, governing, there appears the spiritual gift of encouragement (Romans 12.8).

In the New Testament, encouragement carries the emphasis of “urging forward, persuading, and stimulating” others in the discharge of their duties and obligations as believers – especially in the face of harsh opposition, resistance, and violence. Early Christians were urged to, “...*encourage* one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you will be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3.13). In the face of stress, persecution, and obstacles, they were counseled, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us *encourage* one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10.25).

To encourage is to inspire with courage, hope, or resolution. Some older definitions use the phrase “to hearten” which literally means “to put heart back into someone.” This is particularly relevant in light of our soul-searching times, described by Jesus as times when “men’s courage will fail completely” (Luke 21.26 Phillips Translation). ³

Paul’s Requests for Prayer

Paul understood the struggle involved in advancing the gospel into new territory among new peoples and cultures. He urged the church in Rome to, “Strive together with me in your prayers to God for me” (Romans 15.30). His requests for prayer expressed his interdependence with others who were standing with him, shoulder to shoulder, advancing the gospel in the face of opposition and persecution. ⁴ There can be no doubt that the missionary effectiveness of Paul and his missionary teams was the result of encouraging and equipping prayer from others.

Thankfully, the prayer requests from this great missionary are recorded for us in his letters to his prayer partners in the sending/supporting churches of the New Testament. In them, we see how valuable and effective our prayers can be as we pray for missionaries. ⁵

² Janice McClung, “Praying for Missionaries,” www.MissionsResourceGroup.org, “Resources/Articles.”

³ Grant McClung, “Encouragement: Our Gift to the Next Generation,” in Engage: A Journal for Church of God Leaders (Winter 2011), pp. 44-45; also posted at www.MissionsResourceGroup.org, “Resources.”

⁴ Grant McClung, Globalbeliever.com: Connecting to God’s Work in Your World (Missions Resource Group 2010), p. 147. The book is available free in English and Spanish as online “eBook” at www.Globalbeliever.com (“Read the Book”) and www.creyenteglobal.com (“Lea el libro”).

⁵ Dwayne K. Buhler, “Paul’s Missionary Prayer Requests: Scriptural Principles of Praying for Missionaries,” in Evangelical Missions Quarterly (January 2004), pp. 44-51).

1. Pray for open doors

Writing from a Roman jail, here is his prayer request to his Colossian friends:

“At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the message, to speak the mystery of the Messiah “(Colossians 4.3).

When he wrote to the Philippians, he makes it clear that the gospel had spread because others were praying for open doors:

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has actually resulted in the advancement of the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is for Christ. Most of the brothers in the Lord have gained confidence from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the message fearlessly” (Philippians 1.12-14).

What appeared, on the surface, to be a “closed door” for Paul (his imprisonment) had actually turned into an “open door” for him to preach Christ among the authorities and guards who held him, and also gave confidence for his brothers to preach Christ fearlessly on the outside. He saw this as an answer to prayer and was encouraged!

Let us pray for open doors for the gospel!

2. Pray for clear and bold communication

Here is a continuation of his plea to the Colossian church:

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And 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*” (Colossians 4.2-4 italics mine).

Under Roman house arrest and awaiting trial, Paul had many opportunities to boldly proclaim the gospel. He also knew that the time would come when he would be speaking, as he had before, to the most influential people of his day in the imperial courts of Rome. He wanted to make a maximum impact for the Lord and asked the Colossians to pray that he would proclaim the gospel with clarity and conviction.

He asked the church in Ephesus to join him in praying for boldness in preaching the gospel. “I am in chains now for preaching this message as God’s ambassador,” he reminded them, “But pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him, as I should” (Ephesians 6.20 New Living Translation).

Today’s missionary has no less a challenge, especially with the multiple distractions in a “message saturated” culture. Missionaries are thinking and speaking in a second or third

language, with the nuances and special meanings of words, phrases, and expressions of speech. They want to “get it right” and clearly communicate Christ to others. They realize that they are dealing in spiritual matters that will transform lives.

Let us pray that missionaries clearly and boldly communicate!

3. Pray for responsiveness to the gospel

Just as there are multiple differences in human personalities and among different groups of people, there are also different ways in which people respond to the preaching of the gospel. After Peter’s message on the Day of Pentecost - the first recorded public proclamation of the gospel in the Book of Acts – there were varied responses to the message. Some were bewildered, others mocked. Others were struck with conviction and asked what they were to do (Acts 2.12-13, 37). Some were resistant, others were ready.

Paul understood how volatile and fickle a crowd could become. On different occasions and in various places, Paul and his team had either been welcomed as gods or stoned as heretics. When writing back to the Thessalonians, he remembered their warm response to the message of Christ and mobilized their prayers for others. “Finally, brothers, pray for us,” he requested, “that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you” 2 Thessalonians 3.1.

Missionaries long to see barren and unproductive ground become fruitful. They desire and pray for the day when their adopted people and nation is transformed by the power of God. Jack Campbell was one of them. Campbell was a missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, serving in Guinea, West Africa who:

...shared the joyful experience of seeing a substantial number of people come to the Lord from the tribal group with which he worked. Fifty years of previous missionary efforts had produced only a handful of believers. The turning point, as he shares in his testimony, was when a large group of people began to fast and pray specifically for the responsiveness of this tribal group. God began to answer the specific prayers of his people.⁶

Let us pray for responsiveness to the gospel by the unconverted!

4. Pray for physical and spiritual protection

Jesus predicted persecution for his followers and warned them that others would hate and misuse them (Matthew 5.10-12). Paul and the early missionaries had experienced the abuse of persecutors and intense opposition to the gospel message. He asked the believers in Thessalonica to, “...pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men...” (2 Thessalonians 3.2), and the Roman church to, “Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea...” (Romans 15.31).

⁶ Buhler, “Paul’s Missionary Prayer Requests,” p.48.

These prayers are reminiscent of the cries of King David who prayed, “Deliver me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of evil and cruel men” (Psalm 71.4). Paul himself, “...was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” (1 Timothy 1.13) but, as a redeemed follower of Christ, he echoed his master’s words when he urged the Romans to, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12.14). He reminded the believers in Ephesus that the “day of evil” would come (Ephesians 6.13) and that they must, “...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” (Ephesians 6.18).⁷

We pray for missionaries “over there” in the same way as we would pray for our own spiritual leaders and family members closer to home. Praying for the physical and spiritual protection of missionaries can include:

...various aspects, including physical and spiritual dangers, as well as the health of the missionary. It can include praying for missionaries as they drive through dense jungles, whether they are in the middle of nowhere, or in the middle of a concrete maze. It can include prayer against evil men or groups that would kidnap and hold missionaries and their families for ransom. It especially includes praying for the protection of missionary families and their children.⁸

David Wang of Asian Outreach highlights the importance of preparation for spiritual warfare and the value of missionaries enlisting intercessors at the very outset of their application for missionary service:

‘Don’t come, please. At least, not yet,’ I said to the prospective missionary family. So critical is intercessory prayer to the success of missionaries on foreign fields, I recently asked this young family to mobilize 20 people to pray for them, even before they applied to join Asian Outreach as missionaries. This couple was initially surprised at my insistence on this condition. But as I explained my reasons for doing so, I could sense that they were beginning to see their need for prayer warriors. Just the week before I had met with them, we learned of a missionary family being kidnapped in the region to which they wanted to go.

This was not an isolated incident. Almost on a yearly basis, missionaries are being captured, kidnapped or even killed in that part of the world. And here I had this beautiful, enthusiastic family preparing to go to the same area to serve their Lord and His people.⁹

Let us pray for the physical and spiritual protection of missionaries!

⁷ Grant and Janice McClung, “How to Pray for Persecuted Believers,” in Church of God Evangel (April 2011), pp. 16-17); also found at www.MissionsResourceGroup.org, “Resources/Articles.”

⁸ Buhler, “Paul’s Missionary Prayer Requests,” p. 49.

⁹ David Wang, “How To Pray for Missionaries,” <http://coglmr.blogspot.com/2011/09/how-to-pray-for-missionaries-by-david.html>. See also links to praying for missionaries at the website of Church of God World Missions www.cogwm.org.

Prayers “closer to home”

Whatever “family status” or place in their life cycle, every missionary needs prayer for their personal spiritual life, and prayer for their family. The missionary may be single, married with children at home, married with grown children and grandchildren living in their country of origin, etc. If single, pray that the missionary is not lonely and finds “family” in their adopted homeland. If married, pray for the missionary and his/her spouse, that their marriage relationship will grow and be blessed.

Pray for missionary kids. Pray that they will have solid, deep, and stabilizing experiences with God at an early age. Pray that they will be saved, sanctified, baptized in the Holy Spirit, and “find their place” in their local church. Pray that they will adapt well to their new language and culture and find good, wholesome friends. Pray that the Lord “puts a spiritual hedge” around them from evil influences. As they grow, pray for them as they make choices for college, career, marriage, etc.

Pray for the missionary family in the same way you would pray for your own family as it transitions through life’s changes and challenges. Long-term career missionaries face the separation from children and grandchildren back home and try to be “long distance” grandparents. Others have to work through the realities of aging parents back home, or behavior difficulties with their children with them on the field – problems that sometimes cause an early return or interruption in their service. They need the encouragement of continued prayer during those transition times when they have to return temporarily or permanently back home.

Conclusion

As a young missionary, I went through one particular time of discouragement and spiritual attack. It was during this time that I received a phone call from my father, Lloyd McClung. Dad was a truck driver, dedicated layman, and a special encourager. He seemed to have a special knack for calling me at just the right time. His twin brother, Pastor Floyd McClung, Sr., was a spiritual icon in the McClung family.

Dad related in the phone call how he had called the parsonage a few days earlier to speak with my Uncle Floyd. He was not at home but the phone was answered by my Aunt Enetha. She told me father, “Please give this message to Grant. Yesterday I was walking down the hallway of the house and I heard Floyd praying intensely. As I put my ear to the bedroom door I could hear Floyd praying for Grant.” To know that someone so special to me had been burdened and led by the Holy Spirit to pray especially for me was a great encouragement. I will never forget it.

We may not be on the field with missionaries in the far-flung corners and outposts of our world but we can “walk” with them daily through intercessory prayer. Let us not cease in making intensive intercession for missionaries and let us encourage and equip them by reminding them that we have prayed for them today!

Grant McClung, President of Missions Resource Group (www.MissionsResourceGroup.org), is Missiological Advisor to the World Missions Commission of the Pentecostal World Fellowship and International Missionary Educator with Church of God World Missions.

