

Knowing God in the Real World

by Jon Paulien (Pacific Press, 2000)

Chapter Five

“A Lesson from the Gulf War”

In this chapter we continue examining the role of prayer in a living relationship with God.

As we noted in the previous chapter, a Christian experience that will make a difference in the secular world will be conscious of God's presence and His leading in everyday life. But prayer can affect more than just individual lives. It can be a force that unleashes God's active power in the wider world context. In this chapter we will examine this wider significance of prayer and its influence on the larger events around us. The analogy that will help us to grasp the significance of this special category of prayer is based on military strategy.

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard that the Gulf War had started? I was at Walla Walla College, teaching an extension class for Andrews University to about thirty-five ministers. Along with teaching the class, I was expected to do some recruiting for the graduate programs of the Seminary. It was around four in the afternoon on the fifteenth of January. I was interviewing a student when Ernie Bursey walked by the open

door to the interview room.. Ernie, one of the religion teachers at Walla Walla, is known for his opposition to war. As he walked by it seemed that his chin was dragging barely above his shoe tops.

“What’s the matter, Ernie, you look terrible,” I chirped.

“Haven’t you heard,” he responded, “They just started bombing Baghdad a few minutes ago.”

A sense of numbness came over me as I felt the impact of what was actually taking place seven thousand miles away from where I was. I had lived through the Vietnam years, but the war in Vietnam had been different than this. Although it was a horrible experience for all who had to participate, the government and the media had always portrayed Vietnam as more of a police action, or something like that. But the Gulf War was all out war along the lines of World War II or the Korean conflict, a kind I had never experienced in my lifetime. Tens of thousands of Iraqi people, most of whom were totally innocent of Saddam Hussein’s aggressions, would likely be dead by the time the war was over. Hundreds of thousands of my fellow Americans were facing a situation of unparalleled peril and stress.

Suddenly nothing else seemed to matter anymore. I couldn’t wait to get back to my motel room and do exactly what Saddam Hussein was doing at that time, turning on CNN to figure out what on earth was going on.

The first piece of news to come out was a huge shock. Military analysts had anticipated that the losses in an initial bombing attack on Iraq would be in excess of ten per cent of allied planes involved in the attack. Since 1700 military aircraft were involved in the first attack, as many as 200 were likely to be shot down before Iraq’s air defenses could be degraded. So the

news that all but one of the planes in the first wave had returned safely to base was an enormous surprise. The success was not only beyond expectation, it was beyond the bounds of imagination. Losses at that level were unheard of in all the history of military aviation.

Right at that point I sensed that this war was going to have a much bigger impact on our perceptions of the world than I had expected. Along with most Americans, I waited eagerly for the Cheney-Powell briefing on the initial attack that was scheduled for nine PM, Pacific time. I particularly assumed that the first mission of the allied assault was to take out the Iraqi air force and the military airfields.

But I was way off. When Cheney and Powell came to the podium, they were not talking about airfields or Iraqi aircraft at all. The primary focus of the attack was totally different. They said that the number one target of the initial air attacks in the Gulf War was “command and control.” In fact command and control remained the primary target for several weeks. What on earth was that all about?

Command and control was not particularly concerned with the weapons that the Iraqis might use to contest an attack. Command and control had to do with lines of authority and communication within the Iraqi military and the wider Iraqi society. What Cheney and Powell were saying was that they weren’t very afraid of the Iraqi aircraft or tank units. They were more concerned with the Iraqi ability to command and control their personnel and equipment, their ability to communicate. Communication was the number one priority of the allied attack, not weapons systems. This was like no other war I had ever heard of. And you know the result of that strategy. When the ground war started, it was no contest at all. All objectives were achieved in a matter of hours and with a minimum of losses.

Now this was anything but a given before the war started. You see, the Iraqis were much more competent than the results would seem to indicate. The Iraqi army was actually the fourth largest in the world at the time, and it was one of the best equipped. It had aircraft, tanks and other weapons of high quality and in large numbers. Few countries could have done better against the kind of forces that were arrayed against Iraq on that occasion. The reason that the Iraqi army looked so pitiful and helpless was that it had lost communication, the ability to command and control that tremendous force. As a result, when the ground attack came, every Iraqi unit felt that it was fighting alone against an overwhelming force that was coming against them and them alone. It is no wonder that they surrendered quickly in massive numbers.

A specific example of the power of communication in modern warfare was published in *Newsweek* magazine article about six months after the war was over. It told the story of a commando team of three American soldiers that was air lifted about 160 miles deep into Iraq just before the war started. The goal of the commando team was to observe Iraqi movements and report back on the radio.

When it was dark the commandos used night vision goggles to move around and make observations. As morning came, they would dig a hole in a good location for observation, get into it and cover it up with vegetation for camouflage. They would stay in the hole quietly all day, then come out at night again and make some more observations. One morning they had located their observation post just outside an Iraqi village.

Not long after daylight one of the commandos became curious about what was going on outside the hole, this turned out to be a big mistake. As he lifted up one or two of the branches that provided camouflage he found himself face to face with an Iraqi girl about seven years of

age. His mind immediately went over the options available to him. The rules of engagement he was operating under required him to kill her on the spot and drag the body into the hole.

Remaining undetected by the enemy was the highest priority of the mission. But as he looked into those young eyes, so full of life, he just couldn't do it. She might be an "enemy" but at that moment he saw her humanity also. He considered pulling her quickly into the enclosure, but even if he could keep her quiet, her absence would soon be missed. So he tried a third option, to tell her in sign language that they were playing a game and she was not to tell her father or anyone else that they were there. Then he let her go.

She, of course, went straight to her father and pointed out the location of the commandos. In a matter of moments the foxhole containing three men was surrounded by a force of several hundred Iraqis. The bullets were flying all around and heavier equipment was on its way. The situation of the three commandos appeared totally hopeless. Except for one thing. Command and control. One of the commandos got on the radio and signaled desperately for help.

In Saudi Arabia backup forces moved immediately into action. A heavily-armed Blackhawk helicopter rose from the ground in less than a minute, and took off for Iraq at about 200 miles an hour, flying at just a few feet off the ground to evade detection by Iraqi radar. In fact, the helicopter was flying so low that the pilot had to jerk it up into the air at one point to avoid a camel that happened to wander into its path! The Blackhawk arrived over the foxhole less than an hour after the girl had discovered it, and circled around the foxhole several times, spraying ammunition in all directions. It then quickly came down to the ground, the three commandos jumped in and had a wild Disney ride all the way back to Saudi Arabia. When the helicopter arrived at home base not one of the men was hurt.

That is a powerful example of the impact of what Cheney and Powell called command and control. Communication is the key to modern warfare. The difference between the allied coalition and the Iraqis was the ability to communicate and co-ordinate forces at the decisive moment. As I read various reports after the Gulf War I asked myself the question, “Is there a spiritual lesson here somewhere? Can the Gulf War teach us to have a similar level of success in the Christian life? Is there a command and control in Christian experience?”

I turned to the New Testament, looking for answers. I discovered that warfare is a common metaphor for the struggles that Christians experience in everyday life. It is also a metaphor for the kinds of challenges God’s people will face during the final events of earth’s history. A critical text is Rev 16:14-16:

“For they are the spirits of demons
doing signs,
which go out to the kings of the whole inhabited world,
to gather them for the battle
of the great day of God almighty.

Behold, I come as a thief.
Blessed is the one who watches
and keeps his garments
in order that he might not walk naked
and they see his shame.
And he gathered them to the place
which is called, in Hebrew,
Harmagedon”

The word translated “battle” in verse 14 makes it clear that these verses employ military language. But notice verse 15, placed right in the middle of this passage!

“Behold, I come as a thief.
Blessed is the one who watches
and keeps his garments
in order that he might not walk naked
and they see his shame.”

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the thief, watching, and keeping your clothes on are images of spiritual readiness for the second coming of Jesus. So right in the middle of these Armageddon texts is a call for faithfulness to God. Revelation does not use military language to satisfy our curiosity with regard to future political events. This glimpse of the future is given to prepare us to live right in the present! The battle of Armageddon is ultimately a spiritual battle. It is not about Russia and the United States, or a battle for Middle Eastern oil; the battle of Armageddon is battle between Christ and Satan for the allegiance of human minds.

The Christian's experience in the last days of earth's history, therefore, is described in military terms in the New Testament. This is even clearer when we read the statement of Paul found in 2 Cor 10:3-5:

“For though we walk in the flesh
we do not make war according to the flesh—
For the weapons of our warfare
are not fleshly weapons
rather they are powerful before God
For the tearing down of strongholds—
Tearing down arguments
and every exalted thing
that lifts itself up against the knowledge of God
and making captive every thought
to the obedience of Christ.”

Although not a part of Revelation this is, in a sense, the clearest Armageddon text in all of the Bible. Christians have a warfare like the rest of the world, but it is not a fleshly style of warfare. The weapons we fight with are not fleshly weapons. What are fleshly weapons? AK47 rifles are fleshly weapons. F14 fighter bombers are fleshly weapons. M1A1 tanks are fleshly weapons. What do these weapons do? They tear you to pieces. According to the New Testament, Christians don't fight with those kinds of weapons. The weapons we fight with are

not fleshly weapons, on the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.

What kind of strongholds? Spiritual strongholds, not fleshly ones. According to Paul in 2 Corinthians, Christians have divine power to enable them to demolish arguments and all kinds of boastful pretensions that set themselves up against the knowledge of God. But even further, the Christians warfare is described as taking captive every thought and making it obedient to Christ. You see, the Christian warfare is a battle for the mind. A battle between supernatural forces that want to move us toward service of Christ or service of Satan. Have you had a battle for your mind going on this week? A battle over the thoughts in your mind? That's what Armageddon is all about. That's what Christian life is all about.

So the Bible uses warfare as one mental picture of Christian life. But Christian "warfare" is also very different from the "fleshly" kind. While warfare is a violent image, biblical warfare conquers by "loving one's enemies, blessing those who curse us, praying for those who hurt us," and "going the second mile" when asked for a favor. Christian warfare "overcomes evil" in the way of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, not the way of Attila the Hun and Norman Schwartzkopf. True Christians bomb people with love and mercy, shoot grace at others, and shield themselves with authenticity and vulnerability. To use a common expression, Christian warfare is about "killing with kindness." This is crazy at first secular glance. But while the gospel's claims seem absurd at first glance, the Bible declares that the "weapons" of the gospel are more powerful than even the fleshly weapons of mass destruction, and that they will have a greater impact on the course of human history!

How is this possible? How can the weakness of spiritual warfare be stronger than all the fleshly weapons of the human race? I believe, in light of these Bible texts, that the events of the

Gulf War can help us answer this question. The power of the allied attack did not lie in the explosive power of bombs, or the shredding impact of bullets, but in a simple thing called command and control! Is there an analogy here that will open the way to the secret power of Christian faith? What is the command and control of Christian warfare? What is the crucial element that makes the difference between victory and defeat in the Christian life?

I have come to the conclusion that the best Christian analogy to the effect command and control had on the Gulf War is nothing other than intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is when we intercede with God, not for ourselves, but in behalf of others. Intercessory prayer creates a chain of concern that not only links us to God, but also links us to each other. It is that aspect of Christian existence that most closely parallels the chain of command as well as the interlinked communications of modern warfare. And intercessory prayer is often misunderstood. There are three things about intercessory prayer that will be covered in this chapter; (1) intercessory prayer works, (2) it is dangerous, and (3) it is good for us.

Intercessory Prayer Makes a Difference

First of all, intercessory prayer works. It is not merely about the effect that my prayer has on me, it is very much about the effect it has on others. Intercessory prayer is based on the belief that my prayers can somehow make a difference in matters over which I have little or no control. This can be difficult to accept intellectually. Doesn't God already know the things you are praying about? Doesn't He want to intervene positively as much or more than you want Him to? What difference could my prayer possibly make in the life of someone far away from me? In spite of these difficulties, I have experienced powerful and unexplainable results from

intercessory prayer, not just once or twice, but consistently over decades.

I was once assigned to a church as pastor. Before I met with the congregation, I thought it would be helpful to get some feedback on the church from the previous pastor. I was not prepared for what he told me. He said, “This church is impossible to work with. You can do absolutely nothing for these people. Work on your car, get a lot of reading done, working with these people will get you nowhere.” He went on to tell me, “I have never been able to preach more than ten minutes in this church. By the time I get that far this incredible sense of darkness comes over me and I just can’t go on.” He concluded, rather humorously, that the only thing that could be done for that church was to tie a cable around it, drag it out to sea and then cut the cable.

I saw before me a broken and defeated man, slumped in his seat. As a young pastor fresh out of seminary I thought to myself, “Well, maybe he couldn’t handle it, but he’s not me. I’ll show what can be done in circumstances like this!” So in confidence and stupidity I marched off that Sabbath to boldly preach my first sermon to that church. When I got up to preach I instantly realized that he knew exactly what he was talking about, this was no game. There was a demonic presence in that Adventist church! I felt a choking sensation, and it seemed to be getting darker and darker.

The most incredible aspect of this experience was that there was an inch-thick plate glass completing dividing between the pulpit and the congregation. So nothing I said was getting through. Now I know that the glass wasn’t actually there, yet I could sense it fully as if it were. I looked through that glass to the congregation and what I saw was bizarre. Children were climbing up over the back of the pews and underneath, then back out the front. Adults were

talking to each other and paying no attention to me at all.

Nothing I said was getting through, and all the time I was feeling choked and sensing this darkness coming over me. But all was not lost. My wife sensed immediately that there were serious problems in the church that morning. She began to intercede with God for me and for the congregation, without my knowledge. About twenty-five minutes into the sermon, I heard a bell. The bell had a rather distinctive sound, somewhat like the mass bell in a Roman Catholic church. At the instant I heard the sound of the bell, the glass that had separated me from the congregation vanished. Suddenly every eye in that church was wide and fixed directly on me. The last few minutes of that sermon were as powerful as any other I have ever preached. Intercessory prayer works. I did nothing special on that day, but because my wife prayed, something very special happened.

A few years later, in Australia, a pastor and his wife came to me. They wanted me to pray with them for her healing from a terminal-type illness. I told them that I don't feel called to do that kind of thing as a rule, but that I was willing to try. I also decided to have the conference president join us because he knew the couple and he was a man of prayer. I was holding a series of meetings at the time along with Roland Hegstad, who was editor of *Liberty* magazine. We decided that he would preach while the rest of us met for prayer in a back room. We prayed and it felt special, but there was no immediate sign of healing.

When I came out on the platform, Elder Hegstad demanded to know what was going on in the back room. I asked him what he was talking about. He told me that in the previous hour he had experienced an incredible sense of the Lord's presence and power, such as never before in his life. It was as if a radiation was coming out of the back room. I was tempted to feel a bit of

pride at the power of my prayers until I discovered that my wife had felt moved to pray at that very time back in the United States. Since that time I have learned to sense when my wife is praying for even me on the other side of the world. Her prayers in the USA that night (guess it was the morning of the same day for her) made a powerful difference in Australia. A difference that others beside myself could sense. And perhaps most exciting of all, I met that pastor's wife again six years later, and she was doing much, much better! And she claimed that her turn for the better had started within a day of that prayer.

Some time after my experience in Australia, I was teaching an extension class at Walla Walla College, the same occasion referred to a bit earlier. I did a really stupid thing on this occasion (not unusual for me). The plan the Seminary laid out for me was to teach for five days, then spend five days recruiting theology seniors. But I didn't want to spend ten days away from home. So I decided to do both things at the same time so I could get home earlier. That meant that I would teach every day from eight in the morning until three thirty in the afternoon. Then I would spend the rest of the day talking to the student prospects. When would I prepare for the classes? Oh, I guess I could squeeze that in here and there. Dumb idea!

Not only had I saddled myself with a nervous-breakdown level of responsibility, the Gulf war broke out right in the middle of it all. On top of all the stress related to my work was the concern about the world situation. By the time I came home I had developed such an excruciating case of bursitis that I could hardly move for a week (that's the way my body often responds to overwhelming stress). I don't think, therefore, that I have ever taught a class where I was more tired, more distracted, or more unprepared. The amazing thing is that when the evaluations came in at the end of the week, I found out that I had never taught a class that was

more highly regarded by the students.

What was going on? It certainly wasn't me. I was a wreck. When I arrived at home, I discovered that my wife and my daughter had hatched up a plot. The two of them felt impressed (although I hadn't said much) to get together throughout that week and pray for me at regular intervals. The results were far beyond any human calculation. Intercessory prayer makes a difference. We don't have to understand why to experience that difference.

My local church in Buchanan, Michigan has a custom every Sabbath of taking time to share joys, praises, sorrows and requests. One year, without telling anyone, a psychologist in our church took notes on the various comments and tabulated them. In January he got up and surprised the church with his project and the results that he had discovered.

"Week after week, you do this," he said, "And you have no idea what is actually going on. I have been keeping track of every prayer request mentioned for the last year. Then I listen to see if anything happens. Do you realize that over the last year 80% of all requests have been clearly answered in a positive way? We have got to take this part of the service even more seriously than we have. Your prayers make a difference. Your prayers are changing the world, whether you realize it or not!"

Clinically speaking, for our group at least, this was overwhelming evidence that intercessory prayer makes a difference. Since that time I have become aware of scientific research that places this insight on an even stronger empirical basis. In 1995 Dwight Nelson reported to the Andrews community the results of a "double-blind" study performed at San Francisco General Hospital and reported in the *Southern Medical Journal* (vol. 81, no. 7). For ten months 393 heart patients (in critical coronary care) were randomly assigned to two different

groups. Neither patients nor attending doctors knew which patient was in which group.

One group received normal scientific treatment for their conditions. The other group received the same treatment, and in addition was assigned to anonymous “intercessors,” born-again Christian individuals who believed in and practiced intercessory prayer. All the intercessors knew about their assigned patients was their first name, diagnosis and general condition. They prayed daily for a rapid recovery and for the prevention of complications and death. And when the study was over, those patients who had been prayed for, apart from their own awareness of that fact, did significantly better medically than those patients who were not prayed for!

According to the article, those patients receiving prayer treatment “had less congestive heart failure, required less diuretic and antibiotic therapy, had fewer episodes of pneumonia, had fewer cardiac arrests, and were less frequently intubated and ventilated.” You can question my own personal experiences all you want. Don’t believe something just because someone else says so. But research studies utilizing significantly large groups are begin to confirm what prayer warriors have suspected all along, intercessory prayer makes a difference, a big difference.

Don’t ask me why. I know there are people who get very nervous about intercessory prayer, as if God is somehow being compelled to do something in other people’s lives. Intercessory prayer may not be logical. I don’t understand why it works, but I know that it does. And the Bible clearly supports its validity. I think of 1 Tim 2:1-2, where the apostle clearly urges believers to pray for “kings” and all those in authority, many of whom we will never influence personally. And Paul expects those prayers to make a difference, “That we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim 2:2 NIV). I also think of Dan.10, where one

man's prayers succeeded in turning a whole superpower around.

I'm not sure why things like that happen, but I know that they do happen! Somehow, in the course of a great controversy between light and darkness, the free-will intercessions of moral agents like ourselves provides a context in which God can act against Satan with an authority that would not otherwise be possible. This is clearly not because God is unable or unwilling apart from our prayers. But somehow our prayers change the circumstances in which God works. Dwight Nelson offered a suggestion, "Maybe in the great battle for human allegiance, the forces of light and darkness have somehow mutually bound themselves to the rules of fair play. Could it be that our intercessory prayers actually provide God with permission to intervene with power and love in the life of someone else being victimized by the forces of evil, someone else who does not have the presence of mind or the strength of faith to solicit God himself?" (*Andrews University Student Movement*, January 10, 1995, p. 11) Whether or not we buy that particular suggestion, the results of intercessory prayer are worthy of our attention.

Intercessory Prayer Can Be Dangerous

While there is abundant evidence that intercessory prayer works, there is also evidence that it is dangerous. It seems to increase the vigor of Satan's attacks against us personally. While he is a defeated foe, he can certainly be irritating at the least, and frighteningly dangerous at the worst. Let me clarify this complex dynamic with another illustration from the realm of military action.

Unlike the Gulf War, which was characterized by mass military movements along the lines of World War II, the War in Vietnam was fought to a large degree by relatively small units.

Typically, a patrol of a dozen or so men would leave their base to go out on patrol, searching for small units of the enemy. Normally all of the men were heavily armed except one, the radio man. He would be lightly armed because he had to carry a heavy pack containing the equipment for radio communications.

Veterans tell me that when the enemy came along and saw the patrol, they rarely fired first at the members of the patrol who were most heavily armed. They went after the radio man first, if they could identify him. The reason they did this was because they knew that the radio man was the key to the skirmish. What could the radio man do without heavy weapons of his own? More than anyone else on that battlefield. With a simple call on the radio, he could totally change the battle odds.

If the patrol found itself faced with a regiment of more than a thousand men, for example, the radio man would go immediately into action. He could call in an air strike with helicopters or heavily-armored “tank-killer” aircraft. He could call for an artillery strike from heavy howitzers, giving exact locations to insure accuracy. He could arrange for massive reinforcements of personnel and equipment. He could suggest a helicopter airlift or an air drop by paratroopers, to surround the enemy by surprise. In other words, all by himself, the radio man could bring the decisive numbers to the decisive point of the battle. He was as valuable as any general in the type of engagement that was typical for Vietnam. It is no wonder that the job of radio man was so dangerous to him personally. The enemy feared him more than it feared anyone else!

But there were even more reasons for the enemy to be concerned. Communication is a two-way street. The radio man could do more than just call for help, he could also operate as forward intelligence. He could detect enemy signals and communications. He could answer

questions about the battle situation that would affect the decisions made by the officers back in camp. He could find out exactly where the enemy was and pass that information along. He could determine how strong the enemy was and what kind of attack was coming. The radio man was the key to keeping the commanders in control of the situation. At the point of battle, he was better than a hundred spies without the ability to communicate quickly. No wonder it was so dangerous to carry the radio! In guerilla warfare, silence and secrecy are crucial. The radio man had the capacity to undermine the operations of the enemy all by himself in ways that no one else could do.

Just as in the Gulf War, the key was command and control. The commanders needed “intelligence,” their decisions depended on knowing exactly what was going on at ground level. In today’s world this information is increasingly obtained from satellites. But during the Vietnam War, the radio man in the field was the decisive figure in most small engagements. “Intelligence” makes the difference between success and failure in many a battle.

I remember when President Reagan was in his first year of office. He complained one day that his work was greatly hampered by his predecessor’s decision to downsize the Central Intelligence Agency, America’s best-known spy agency. In one of his early speeches, he made the kind of self-effacing verbal slip for which he was beloved, “Ever since I became president, there has been a serious lack of intelligence in the White House!” Commanders need good information in order to make the right decisions. The result of effective communication in battle is victory, even when the units in place would suggest defeat.

Like military communications, Christian command and control has two sides. One side is intercessory prayer, the sending out of calls for help, but on the other side is sensing what God is

saying back to us. Intercessory prayer provides the network of encouragement and support that empower the Commander's actions in the field. Impressions are a major way our Commander-in-Chief guides the troops in the field.

But there is a dark side to this reality. The command and control of Christian warfare is as perilous a mission as the role of the radio man was in Vietnam. My wife can tell you of times where she herself has felt the attack of Satan in the context of intercessory prayer. Just as Satan did all he could to destroy Daniel's prayers for his people (the lion's den story occurs around the same time as Daniel's mighty prayer of intercession for Israel-- compare Dan 5:31 and chapter 6 with Dan 9:1-19), similar attention is devoted to those who are making a difference in prayer today. He will do all he can to assault intercessors with fears, random physical pains, and sometimes direct manifestations of his presence. If he can get people to stop praying, the battle is largely won. But although intercessory prayer creates complications for those who exercise it, command and control is the key to victory and we must not allow ourselves to be deterred from the very thing that makes the decisive difference in so many spiritual engagements.

Intercessory Prayer Is Good For Us

The previous sections suggest that while intercessory prayer does great things for other people, it comes at a high cost to the one who prays. Prayer can be difficult enough to sustain when one has a vending-machine view of God. If intercessory prayer brings us negative attention from Satan we may feel that it is not worth the cost to us. But there is a third dimension to intercessory prayer that counterbalances the spiritual danger that comes in the context of prayer for others. Intercessory prayer is not only beneficial for others, it is very beneficial also to those

who pray. There are a number of reasons for this.

For one thing, when we pray for others, it changes our attitude toward them. It is certainly difficult to maintain hard feelings toward someone you are praying for every day. When we seek God for good in behalf of those who have rejected Him, the Spirit of God draws near and brings us a taste of the infinite love of God for such souls. When we seek God in behalf of those who dislike us, we receive a taste of His love for those who dislike Him. As we come in touch with God's attitude toward the lost, our own attitude begins to change. Prayer for others changes us as well.

There are other benefits to those who pray. When we pray for others, we ourselves receive in kind. When we pray that someone else should come to Christ and be forgiven, we become more able to sense our own forgiveness before God. As we learn to pray for people who have hurt us, we ourselves can experience forgiveness for the times we have hurt others. When we pray for others, our own relationship with God grows. The two things seem to work together: if we pray for others, we ourselves are blessed.

Another benefit of intercessory prayer is that when we pray for others we become more and more like Jesus who prayed for His enemies as well as for us. And by praying for us, Jesus has set an example that we should pray for one another. As we pray for one another, we develop a deeper relationship with the Lord, we gain a deeper appreciation of His concerns for others and their situations.

Perhaps most important, intercessory prayer can give us a tremendous sense of fulfillment as we realize that something we are doing is making a difference in the world. One of the deepest of human needs in every generation is the need for fulfillment in life, for some way to

make a difference. Intercessory prayer is one of the most powerful ways to make a difference.

Let me share an example with you.

A few years ago I decided, while traveling in another part of the country, to make a phone call to the pastor who baptized me when I was 12 years old. As a kid I had always been in awe of him. He was such a man of God. I saw in him a model of what I might become if I would go into ministry. He was always earnest and serious, but there was a quiet friendliness toward children that always attracted me to him. By the time of this incident He was retired, in his lower 80's, and living near the place were I was staying. I placed the phone call, not knowing what to expect. When I connected with him I asked him what he was doing with his life. I was totally unprepared for his answer.

“Nothing! I do nothing!” he said, “I do nothing, I am nothing, I am like garbage! Every day I just sit around and do nothing, just waiting for tomorrow to come. Sometimes I go out into the garden for a half an hour or so, but otherwise I just sit and do nothing. I wait for the Lord to take me home and give me rest.”

I was stunned. I didn’t know what to say. I sent up a quick prayer asking for guidance, and then caught an idea. I asked him if he still prayed.

“Yes, of course,” he said.

I asked him if he knew that intercessory prayer makes a difference.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said.

I asked him to pray for me and my ministry wherever I go. I shared how much the prayers of others had made a difference in my ministry. I told him that while his body wasn’t capable of doing much for the Lord any more, he could still make a major difference. He could

pray for the General Conference, the Lord knows they could use all the help they can get. He could pray for his conference president. I told him that the administrators of the church were very busy people. They loved the Lord and knew the need to pray for the work in their areas, but they were extremely busy. They didn't have time to pray as much as they would like. But he had time to pray. Perhaps God was keeping the old pastor alive because He needed individuals who would take the time to pray for His cause in that area.

I shared with him some of the things you have read in this chapter, of how intercessory prayer made a difference at various points in my experience. An amazing thing happened. As the phone call went on, I began to detect a smile creeping into his voice. Then he became more and more excited, and a sense of hope began to arise in force. He began to believe that the Lord was giving him time so that he could pray.

"It is easy when you get old to feel as if your best days are behind you," I said, "but if God has kept you alive this far, maybe it is because your greatest days are still ahead of you! Maybe your conference has been dying for lack of the prayers that only you can pray. Maybe you are the key to the work of God in this area and you don't know it!"

By the time that phone call was over, he was on fire to live. He was no longer waiting for the Lord to take him home. The Lord was already with him in his home. His life now had a mission and a purpose. What a difference the concept of intercessory prayer can make! Perhaps you are also "over the hill." I know that I am not so far away myself. Like my former pastor, I also wonder sometimes what difference I am making in this life. I also wonder if my best days are behind me. I too forget that there's a way to make a massive difference in this life. It isn't the weapons that we carry that make the difference in spiritual warfare, it's the command and

control that wins the battle.

Barriers to Prayer Life

If intercessory prayer is the key to spiritual victory, why do we do so little of it? Is it because really deep down inside we have a secular mentality? Do we somehow believe that prayer is a waste of time, that it doesn't really make a difference? Or is the problem that we are essentially self-sufficient? Do we feel that in spite of the claims of the Bible, God is not really plugged into what is happening in this world, and so nothing is going to get done unless we do it? Ask the Iraqis how well self-reliance works.

Do we neglect intercessory prayer primarily because we are forgetful? We intend to pray but we just forget? Do we get distracted like small children whenever we vow that we are going to spend more time in prayer? Or is it the tyranny of the urgent? "Yes, I will pray as soon as there is a little bit of time. I'm a little busy right now, but next week I'll start. I know I should pray, but I have this deadline tomorrow and it will just have to wait." How can we change those ingrained habits of letting intercessory prayer be the last and the least?

It seems to me that intercessory prayer is the place, above all others, where we become exposed to our own secularity. What is the point of praying for others if we don't believe it will make any difference? What is the point of praying for others if we are not sure whether or not God is real? Any desire we may have to reach out to the secular people in our world will ultimately fail unless our compassion finds expression in prayer for them. I myself have stumbled in this area many times, but over the years I have learned a few strategies that have helped.

Getting Our Prayer Act Together

The first thing that will make a difference in the area of intercessory prayer is to set a regular time for prayer. This may seem rather elementary, but it is crucial. Set a specific time for intercessory prayer, if possible the very same time each day. One of the best spiritual disciplines is to develop a habit of prayer. Habits develop out of regularity and repetition. When you do something over and over every day, it eventually becomes a habit. When things become a habit, they become much easier to do.

A second suggestion is to make a prayer list, but to avoid some of the pitfalls in list-making. Most people make the mistake of putting together a long list of the names they would like to pray for. Long lists are easy to do. People love to have others pray for them, and it is not comfortable to decline such a request. But the plain reality is that long lists are exhausting for most people, and the end result is often that the list exists but gets very little attention. After a while praying over a long list becomes too much work for most people.

I would suggest, therefore, keeping the list short, at least to start with. Three names is probably enough, especially if you have never succeeded at intercessory prayer for long. At the top of the list, I would suggest putting the most difficult person you know. I'm talking about the person that bugs you more than anybody else. The one that makes your stomach churn whenever they are around. The one who doesn't take your feelings and needs into account. The person who blasts through your life like a steamroller crushing everything in its path. Hopefully I'm not talking about your boss or your spouse here.

There is nothing arrogant about recognizing the negative impact that some people have in your life. Some of it is related to clashing personalities. Much of it may be beyond the

awareness of the other person. No doubt you are on the top of somebody else's list so, it's smart to be humble about this. But God wants us to have the experience of praying for difficult people, just as Jesus did for His disciples in John 17. An amazing thing happens when you pray for someone who is difficult. It changes your feelings about that person over time. As you view that person through God's eyes, you see value and possibilities that you didn't see before.

Along with the name at the top of your list, put down a couple of more promising types. Seeing some results right away is extremely encouraging. When things change in the lives of the people you are praying for, you may want to replace one or more people on your list with someone else who is in greater immediate need. Some may prefer to have a second list, a longer one, that gets attention from time to time, but the primary list should be relatively short and manageable.

The most important aid to a consistent prayer life, finally, is accountability. Very few people accomplish anything in life without accountability. If you want to succeed at an exercise program, for example, there's nothing better than having a friend meet you at a particular time and place and jog or work out with you. The key to the battle is often how you answer your alarm in the morning. The bed is so inviting and the exercise seems so difficult. But then you remember that your friend will be waiting for you in ten minutes. That gets you up when nothing else will. And it doesn't even matter that the friend would probably not have made it either if you hadn't promised to be there! Accountability can replace weak spots in our will power with just enough steel to get the job done. And the result is benefit to both parties!

How does accountability work in relation to intercessory prayer? There are several possibilities, I will mention three here. One type of accountability is to meet regularly with a

group for prayer. A set time and a set place for prayer with people you care about. The downside of a group is in the area of gossip and confidentiality. Groups can sometimes lose their focus on the main task. But the upside of a group is the variety of styles and interests resident in a gathering of people with a common concern. This can keep the prayer focus from getting into a rut or seeming stale.

Another type of accountability occurs when you team up one-on-one with a prayer partner. Meeting together regularly provides accountability to the task. There is a special bonding that takes place between two people in a common relationship with the Lord. Since there are only two of you there is less chance that the prayer time will digress into gossip or side issues. You can come to know each other well enough to take the accountability to a deeper level than is possible in most groups.

But a regular meeting with one or more friends doesn't work out for everyone. In some cases the best kind of accountability is to have an understanding with a hard-nosed friend. I have a few hard-nosed friends and I thank God for them. What do I mean by hard-nosed friend? The kind of friend who cares enough about you to confront you when you need it. Suppose you tell a friend that you plan to spend fifteen minutes every day in intercessory prayer, from seven in the morning until seven-fifteen. You ask that person to hold you accountable to that. A hard-nosed friend is someone who calls at 7:17 in the morning to check whether you did or not! That kind of friend can make a big difference in your prayer life. All three forms of accountability can help us maintain the kind of consistency we long to have.

Prayer Can Move Mountains

In the book The Master's Plan of Prayer (p. 186), the story is told about the aftermath of the Rodney King beating and the subsequent trial of the police officers involved. Rioting broke out in Los Angeles during April of 1992. New York City anticipated similar troubles. TV news crews were prepared to cover the story. But instead of riots, news teams found people all over the city praying.

It seems that a month before the riots began in Los Angeles, a number of New York City pastors felt a strong urge to begin a prayer offensive in behalf of the city. Churches began opening nightly and as many as a thousand persons attended, praying for the city's needs. People prayed for the poor, prayed for racial harmony, prayed for God's protection in behalf of New York. The day after the L.A. riots broke out, a weekend of eight Community Concerts of Prayer involved three hundred metro churches. And instead of rioting, calm prevailed.

There may have been an even greater and more long term result than those originally involved were aware. An amazing drop in crime statistics over the last decade has made New York City one of the safest places in the country. I experienced the new atmosphere in the city myself this summer, returning after eighteen years. I saw women in large numbers walking alone at night, something that occurred rarely when I lived there in the sixties and the seventies. The change was remarkable.

Many have attributed the changes in New York City to the mayor and a new philosophy of crime fighting. But recent events demonstrate that New York City police make mistakes, just like the police in Los Angeles do. Others have cited demographic trends as the reason for the changes. But these same trends have not had such a stunning effect in Chicago or L.A. that they

have had in New York. Both factors have no doubt have played their part. But isn't it equally possible that a city-wide commitment to prayer can have as great an impact in driving back the forces of evil as police and demographics? Perhaps the city that prays together stays together!

Why should God's command and control be any less effective than Colin Powell's?

More and more I have come to believe that my life and ministry would be a total waste if no one prayed for me. God has given me many talents, yet I have less and less confidence in my abilities as the years go by. I see more and more that prayer is the key that opens spiritual doors and moves spiritual mountains. Since that is true, I am one of the luckiest men on earth because I have a wife who prays for me when I need it most. Along with her there are many other people on all six continents who have made a decision on their part to pray for me and my ministry and I can only begin to imagine the kind of difference that makes.

You may want to consider the possibility that God is calling you to be a key player on His command and control team.