

Strategic Prayer

A giant tree stood on the banks of the Awash River in an arid valley about a two hour drive from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It had been there for generations and seemed eternal. Unable to bring the water in the river to the higher level of the land, the people who lived in the surrounding district had suffered through famines over the years. In their suffering, the people looked to the tree for help. They worshiped the towering giant, believing a spirit had given it divine powers. Adults would kiss its great trunk as they passed by. They spoke of the tree in hushed, reverential tones and the children said, "This tree saved us."

When World Vision began a development project in 1989, including an irrigation system to make the valley's parched earth bloom for the first time, the great tree stood like a forbidding sentinel of an old order. It presided over the community of people, enslaving them through fear. The people were convinced that the spirits must be propitiated with animal sacrifices and the strict observance of taboos. The World Vision workers saw how the villagers worshiped the tree and recognized that it was an idolatrous barrier to the entrance of Christ's kingdom and the transformation of the entire community.

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menacing Goliath. Soon, the whole community knew that the Christians were praying about the tree. Six months later, the tree began to dry up. Its leafy foliage disappeared, and finally it collapsed like a stricken giant into the river. The people were astonished. "Your God has done this!" they said. "Your God has dried up the tree!" Within a few weeks, about a hundred villagers received Jesus Christ because they had seen His power displayed in the spectacular answer to the Christians' prayers.

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The Spiritual Nature of Social Problems

Christians have been divided for years over the most effective means of transforming our world. Is it through verbal proclamation of the gospel or with social action? In truth, the two cannot be separated. Without both, there simply is no good news. One thing ties them together - prayer. When prayer to our God of temporal justice and eternal salvation is emphasized, evangelism and social action are linked in the most essential way. The God who inspires prayer for the world stirs the hearts of His people both to share His good news and to dispense love and mercy. When we see people coming to Christ, health improving, economic opportunity increasing, and kingdom values growing, we find that believers have been praying. Because of the nature of evil in the world, prayer is essential.

As we seek to help the poor and to stand against injustice, Christians sometimes forget that we are also fighting against principalities and powers. Since the Garden of Eden, human beings have gained control over other individuals and whole societies by cooperating with Satan and his evil spirits. This has led to wide-scale famine, disease, poverty, slavery, injustice and suffering. Whenever we try to help the victims of these tragedies, we enter a fray that involves the great socio-spiritual forces that rule the world's massive institutions, social structures and systems. Both Satan and his powers are dedicated to destroying the human beings who are made in the image of God. Satan is the master deceiver, the author of idolatry, who seeks to dominate the world by undermining faith in God, twisting values and promoting false ideologies. He infiltrates institutions, governments, communications media, educational systems and religious bodies, using them to seduce humankind over to the worship of money, fame, success, power, pleasure, science, art, politics and religious idols.

Socio-spiritual forces of evil clench societies in a dark, destructive grip in two related ways. The first is by openly idolatrous and cultic covenants and the second through false patterns of thinking which blind people to the reality of God and the hope He brings.

The Devastation of Idolatry

Throughout much of the Old Testament, Satan induced Israel to drift from their allegiance to God and dally with the false gods of the Egyptians, Amorites, Canaanites and Edomites. The Israelites suffered the consequences God had assured them would come about if they did so - oppression, slavery, foreign invasion and poverty (Judges 6:6; 10:16; Deut 28). The same sin, and its consequences, afflict the world today.

Northern India is one of the world's darkest regions. Indians estimate there may be more than three hundred million gods in that region. Kali, the goddess of destruction, is a regional deity worshipped in Calcutta, West Bengal. Anyone who has been to Calcutta knows the devastating impact she and her worship have had on the people of that city. Elsewhere in the world, the occult is behind some of the most brutal injustices of the century. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge - who killed as many as two million people in the 1970's - were based in two occult strongholds. Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and regeneration, and Naga, the serpent god, are worshipped in these northern locations. During Liberia's civil war, SIM missionaries reported that many of the combatants practiced *juju*, a kind of African magic or witchcraft, to gain power. They wore fetishes, called spirits to come into them, got drunk and murdered whole villages of innocent people.

The Despair of Strongholds

When Satan is not influencing people through open idolatry or fear of spirits, we still find that people are controlled by false ways of thinking which lock them in spiritual darkness. The Apostle Paul mentions this kind of bondage in 2 Corinthians 10:4. He talks about "arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God." George Otis, Jr., writes that, from the context of this passage,

"these strongholds are not demons or geographical locations, but psychic habitats. The word *argument*, often translated *imagination*, is an interesting one, taken from the Greek word *logismos*; it is defined more precisely as calculative reasonings over time (as opposed to random, occasional thoughts). This definition makes these arguments or imaginations look more like what they almost certainly are - religious or philosophical systems."

In the above passage, Paul uses the Greek word *hupsoma* which is translated as "pretension" or "high thing." It was an astrological term meaning "the sphere in which astrological powers hold sway." This indicates that Paul considered the patterns of thinking of those who opposed the gospel to be influenced by such powers.

Francis Frangipane also identifies these strongholds as within the mind, "the spiritual fortresses wherein Satan and his legions hide and are protected." He says that "these fortresses exist in the thought-patterns and ideas that govern

individuals and churches as well as communities and nations."

For example, the idea of fate in Hinduism imprisons millions of people in spiritual and economic poverty. This insurmountable force of fate supposedly determines the caste you were born into, and if you were born into a poor caste, there is little chance you can better your life by becoming an attorney or an accountant. This thinking is a satanic stronghold, a deception that keeps people in bondage to poverty. Development efforts among people who are imprisoned by fatalistic world views are limited in their impact because these people are convinced that nothing will ever change.

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Besides hindering people from achieving their God-given potential, strongholds in the mind can be used by the evil one to unleash horrific destruction. When Hutu extremists took over the government of

Rwanda in 1994, they used dehumanizing ethnic stereotypes by speaking of the Tutsi people as "cockroaches" that needed to be exterminated. In only three months, up to a million Tutsis, along with moderate Hutus who refused to take up arms against their Tutsi neighbors, were murdered by bands of roving killers.

What shall we do in the face of socio-spiritual evil? Undoubtedly, we must share the truth of God's word to offset such deception, but we must also be aggressive in prayer.

Dealing with Supernatural Evil Forcefully

Evil spirits cannot be reformed or negotiated with. They can only be expelled in a forceful way that has to be considered an act of spiritual violence. We think of Jesus as the standard for a peace-loving, non-violent approach to one's enemies, but he taught it was to *human* enemies only that we are to turn the other cheek, not to demonic foes. He never allowed Satan and the demons to have their way. Instead he took a

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forceful, authoritative, even violent posture, at every turn rebuking, resisting and casting out these evil forces.

He also spoke of the violent struggle and counterattack that would attend the coming of the kingdom. He said, "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force" (Matt 11:12). Many biblical scholars agree this means that the kingdom has been under attack from violent foes.

Human beings and their institutions captured and killed John the Baptist. Religious leaders in league with the Roman authorities opposed Jesus and had him executed. Behind these human forces, however, Jesus saw the one He often called the "prince of this world." He speaks of Satan in Mark 3:27 and says this strong man must be bound if his captives are to be liberated. Binding a strong man involves violent combat, yet it is a battle the Church can win through the power of God. Jesus Himself promised that "the gates of hell will not prevail against my Church."

The Apostle Paul, too, emphasized that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). Prayer is the decisive weapon in this struggle and is often aggressive and violent. The structures and forces of injustice, oppression and war are so overwhelming that all our efforts to help will fail unless we first invite God into the fray. Until we have achieved victory in prayer, it is hopeless to engage the outer world in combat.

I am not saying that prayer is all that is necessary to change the world. Many evangelical Christians have used prayer for too long as a substitute for action - dumping back on God the responsibility for doing what He has already commanded us to do throughout Scripture. Yet neither is social action a substitute for prayer. There is still a profound air of mystery surrounding prayer and how God uses our praying to transform the world. Theologian Walter Wink writes that

"prayer is not magic; it does not always work; it is not something we do, but a response to what God is already doing within us and the world. Our prayers are the necessary opening that allows God to act without violating our freedom. Prayer is the ultimate act of partnership with God."

Paradoxically, the most aggressive and powerful spiritual warfare must be waged out of great personal brokenness and weakness. Jesus' triumph over the forces of darkness through the utter humiliation and powerlessness of the cross is the primary example. Similarly, we are strongest against evil when we come to the cross with Jesus confessing and renouncing our own complicity with the powers of darkness.

Lessons in Prayer

In 1994 a group of Cambodian Christian leaders told me about the intensity of their spiritual battle and requested support from a team of outside prayer leaders. The following March, I took a team to assist sixty Cambodian pastors and evangelists in prayer for their nation. We quickly encountered the influence of the spirit of murder, exemplified in the worship of Shiva, god of destruction, and Naga, the serpent god who was said to be the guiding spirit of the

Cambodian people. On the second day of the conference, the Spirit of God spoke through one of the members of the team saying, "Some of you have blood on your hands." In the room, were former Khmer Rouge killers who had executed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people. Great weeping followed, with confession of heinous acts in the killing fields.

This self-humbling and open confession led to a time in

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which the Cambodian Christians renounced the ancient covenants that were made by the Cambodian kings with the powers of darkness in the temples at Angkor, in the northern part of the country. This deep outpouring of emotion and confession of sin began a process of reconciliation that led, in turn, to the formation of a national Christian fellowship. At this writing, the number of churches has grown from about 100 to over 500. In addition, the Khmer Rouge have been badly weakened, if not destroyed, as a terrorist movement.

There were several features of this prayer initiative which can be a valuable lesson for other prayer efforts:

1. *There was much prayer preceding and accompanying this effort.* Our team and the Cambodian Christians were not praying alone. We were supported by thousands of people who interceded for us around the world. United prayer - joining the prayers of God's people around the world in a special focus for particular places and people is a powerful combination.
2. *Local leadership carried out the dramatic acts of identificational repentance.* Our team sought to be servants and catalysts, recognizing that God had given the local leaders the primary authority to break the pacts of spiritual darkness.
3. *Humility and brokenness were essential for all who took part.* There was no smug triumphalism on the part of either our team members or the Cambodian Christians.
4. *We depended on God's leading at every point.* Everyone involved in our prayer effort sought to be led by God's Spirit. We prepared ourselves with objective information about the present situation in the country, as well as its history, then waited for the subjective direction of the Holy Spirit.
5. *We prayed in a holistic manner.* We prayed for the government, the various people groups - many still unreached - and the social needs of the nation, as well as for the unity and vitality of the church. We prayed for God's

shalom to come upon Cambodia with a lasting spiritual and social transformation.

6. *Effective prayer is persistent prayer.* Long after our team's visit to Cambodia, those who took part continued to pray. Recent disunity and outright conflict among different factions in the government have made it clear that intercessors must never let down their guard. They must watch over their nation like sentinels upon the wall; otherwise, the evil one will come in the back door, creating division and destruction when least expected.

Can Anything Good Come Out of Cali?

In answer to the prayers of intercessors, God's *shalom* and transformation has also been at work in Cali, Colombia.' Until recently, this Latin American city was in the grip of the infamous Cali drug cartel. It has been called the largest, richest and best organized criminal group in history - controlling most forms of government and huge amounts of money and perpetrating the most obscene violence. Anyone who opposed them was simply liquidated. In sheer desperation, the pastors of Cali agreed to meet every week to pray for the city, beginning in January 1995.

In May of that year, the pastors' association hosted an all-night prayer vigil at the civic auditorium which seats about 27,000. They had hoped a few thousand people would turn out and fill the bottom section. Instead, 30,000 showed up to pray throughout the night! In the words of one organizer, "The primary purpose of the vigil was to take a stand against the cartels and their unseen spiritual masters. Both have been ruling our city and nation for too long. After humbling ourselves before God and one another, we symbolically extended Christ's scepter of authority over Cali - including its bondage over cocaine, violence and corruption."

The first result of the prayer meeting was that immediately after it the city went an entire day without murder. This was a newsworthy event in that the average had been multiple homicides per day. (There were fifteen thousand murders in Colombia during the first six months of 1993 giving it the highest homicide rate in the world, eight times that of the United States.) During the next four months, 900 cartel-linked officers were fired from the police force. Then, several intercessors reported dreams in which they saw angels apprehending the leaders of the drug cartel. Within six weeks of these visions, the Colombian government declared all-out war on the drug cartel bosses. By August of that year - only three months after God's revelation to the intercessors - Colombian authorities

had captured all seven cartel leaders.

The believers in Cali decided to hold a second all-night prayer rally. In preparation, they surveyed the political, social and spiritual needs in 22 administrative sections of the city. Then they prayed in specific terms about what they had learned. Again, dramatic changes followed. Colombian authorities launched an anti-corruption investigation - not only within the city government of Cali, but even up to the office of the nation's president.

Since that time, the city of Cali has grown economically with more than 25 percent improvement. Upon seeing the impact of the believers' prayers, the mayor of Cali announced, "This city needs Jesus Christ to bring peace." The city authorities have provided sound systems and platforms for 22 concurrent evangelism crusades with 40 national and international evangelists. Crime statistics have dropped. And the incidence of AIDS, which had been the highest in the Latin American continent, has been lowered.

The churches in Cali have grown tremendously in a "spiritual explosion." According to church growth specialists, Peter Wagner, Cali has become a cutting edge city, since its spiritual awakening is spreading to other cities. But a price for this has been paid in spiritual backlash. In the past two years, over 200 pastors in Colombia have been killed by guerrillas or paramilitary forces.

Reaching Unreached Peoples

Aggressive, strategic prayer is an essential component in reaching unreached people groups for two reasons. First, unreached peoples are, by definition "churchless" people. However they may be delineated by ethnic, linguistic, or

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social features, unreached peoples are those which do not yet have a flourishing church planting movement announcing and demonstrating the gospel of the Kingdom. God intends for churches to be an open display of obedience to

Christ. Satan works to deny that obedience by trapping a people in society-wide presumptions about reality. We're not sure how these strongholds get their start; probably by trapping people in their own high-minded speculations as they pursue self-sufficiency. But we can see that in settings in which Christ is not obeyed - where there is no church - such strongholds go unchallenged, sometimes for centuries, gaining strength with every passing generation. Bold, determined spiritual warfare is required to weaken and dislodge these fortresses of presumption which are blockading "the knowledge of God" and denying "the

obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:3-5). No amount of human persuasion can liberate an entire people from such darkness. Prayer is utterly essential. Only God can move by His mercy to open such society-wide blindness to the light of Christ.

The second reason prayer is paramount for unreached peoples is for God to send laborers. Usually unreached peoples have been neglected or resistant so there are few, if any, missionaries working to reach them. Christ ordered His first followers to examine the places where the harvest was great but the laborers were few and then to boldly entreat the Lord of the harvest to do what only God can do: Raise up and send effective laborers. It is thrilling to see wonderful breakthroughs among unreached people groups. In every case, we can find sustained strategic prayer on behalf of the people group preceding the breakthroughs. Mission history is replete with astounding stories of God summoning laborers from all over the world, opening doors of access, thwarting the threats of enemies, and demonstrating the gospel in power with precise timing. As we act in coordinated, strategic, united prayer, we are more able than ever to see that such moves of God are matched by prayers that have asked God to do these things. We can only conclude that the Lord of the harvest intends to send laborers among each of the peoples of the world.

In our day we see immense cooperative efforts to pray for unreached peoples. The "Pray Through The Window" efforts of 1993-1999 linked the prayers of tens of millions for specific unreached people groups. Hundreds of teams traveled to prayerwalk among these peoples, like the aforementioned venture to Cambodia. Such prayer journeys simply help people pray in the very places they expect God to bring forth His answers. If God is the true initiator of prayer, and we see people praying in such abundant ways, we should not be surprised to see some of the greatest moves of His hand - reaching nations and transforming societies - in the near future.

God Listens and the World Changes

In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John describes a God-given vision of humankind's history. It is filled with images of God and celestial beings interacting with one another and with our world. In these verses, the Lamb of God opens seven seals each affecting the history of this planet. By the end of chapter seven, all of heaven is singing and worshiping God, wondering what will happen next in human history. However, at the beginning of chapter eight, all fall silent. Seven angels with seven trumpets stand before God ready to announce the unfolding fate of the world, but they must wait until the eighth angel offers God incense which includes all the prayers of the saints - prayers for justice and victory. Nothing can happen until the fragrance of these prayers rises

before God.

Prayer is the most powerful form of social action because God responds directly to prayer. Prayer is the most powerful part of mission to unreached peoples, because God does what only He can do. Even in the most hopeless of situations, He breaks through the false dominion of the enemy, bringing spiritual light and breathing life for lasting social transformation.

God uses the act of praying both to change us and to change the future. As Walter Wink puts it,

History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being Even a small number of people totally committed to the new inevitability in which they affix their imaginations can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future are the intercessors who call out the future, the longed-for new present; they believe the future into being.