

# Discipleship *and* Prayer



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Dan. 9:2–19; Matt. 14:22, 23; 26:36; John 17:6–26; Heb. 2:17; 1 Pet. 4:7.*

**Memory Text:** “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (*John 17:20, 21, NKJV*).

Whatever else we do in the work for souls, whatever outreach programs we create, we are to earnestly pray for those whom we are seeking to reach. This is central to what it means to be a Christian, even more so a disciple-maker. What powerful changes might occur if constant, fervent prayer was central to our methodology in seeking to make and keep disciples!

“Let the workers grasp the promises of God, saying, ‘Thou hast promised, “Ask, and ye shall receive.” I must have this soul converted to Jesus Christ.’ Solicit prayer for the souls for whom you labor; present them before the church as objects for the supplication. . . . Select another and still another soul, daily seeking guidance from God, laying everything before Him in earnest prayer, and working in divine wisdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, pp. 244, 245.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 18.

## Time-tested Compassion

Frequently, prayer assumes a self-centered posture. Believers present their wish lists before God, hoping to get that which they ask for. Though, of course, we are told to set our petitions before God, sometimes our motives are not pure. After all, are not our hearts corrupt, wicked, and deceitful? Might not our prayers, at times, simply reflect the sinfulness that lies within?

Intercessory prayer, however, focuses on another person's needs, thus removing the likelihood of selfish motivation. Throughout history, intercessory prayers have represented the highest expressions of spiritual discourse. Untainted by the desire for personal gratification, these conversations demonstrate selflessness, compassion, and earnest longing for the salvation of others.

**Read Daniel 9:2–19. What burdens Daniel throughout this prayer? What role does confession play within the prayer? Because of his advanced age, Daniel would not likely personally benefit from Jerusalem's restoration. Therefore, what motivated this prayer?**

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Seventy years have passed since Jeremiah uttered the prophecy that Daniel now considers. After so many years, Daniel's Jerusalem friends have likely already perished. Jerusalem's restoration would not restore Daniel's personal fortunes, either. Nothing in Daniel's prayer suggests selfish concerns. The ancient prophet expressly implores God regarding the future of the exiled Jewish nation and the reputation of Jehovah Himself. Extended confession precedes his requests. In confession, Daniel includes himself among the disobedient. The prophet is unwilling to presume his own innocence. Daniel himself takes responsibility while primarily pursuing restoration in order to benefit others.

**Think about your prayer life: what you pray for, why, and for whom. How much death to self is involved in it? How can you learn to be less self-centered in your prayer life? That is, how can your prayers, even the ones for yourself, be less selfish?**

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## Time for Prayer

Think through what prayer really is: fallen, sinful beings, worthy of death, are able, instantly, to have direct communication with the Creator of the universe—our Holy God.

Also, when God in Christ clothed Himself in human flesh, accepting humanity's limitations, He, too, sensed the necessity of prayer. Though not standing before the Father in the same position that we as fallen sinners are, Jesus as a human still saw the necessity for prayer.

**Read** Matthew 14:22, 23; 26:36; Mark 1:35–37; and Luke 5:15, 16; 6:12, 13. **What characterized Jesus' personal prayer life? Describe the circumstances that surrounded Jesus' praying. What lessons can we glean from the particulars of Christ's prayer life, such as the frequency, location, and timing?**

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Christ certainly modeled the prayer life that He enjoined on His disciples. Mornings, evenings, after preaching, before preaching, whenever possible—Jesus prayed. Gardens, mountains, solitary places, wherever distractions subsided—Jesus prayed. Separated from the Father's presence spatially, Jesus united with the Father through prayer spiritually. Christ's spiritual lifeblood came coursing through the spiritual artery of prayer. Should Christ's modern followers—weakened by sinful tendencies, choked by worldly cares, frustrated by failures—settle for something less than Jesus' prayer life?

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 93.

**Read** Mark 11:22–26, Luke 11:13, John 14:12–14. **How are we to understand the promises written here about prayer? How have you experienced what Jesus said here? At the same time, how have you learned to cope when things you have prayed for haven't happened the way that you had hoped?**

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## Timeless Teaching

Prayer miraculously bonds finite souls with their infinite Creator. Prayer is spiritual adhesive. Bonded with the heavenly Father, believers transcend their earthly natures and sinful tendencies. This transformation separates them from the world. Should Satan successfully recast prayer into a self-centered mold, thus robbing prayer of its potential for our transformation, we might be powerfully compromised and our witness stymied.

**Read** Matthew 6:7, 8; 7:7–11; 18:19, 20. What do these verses teach us about prayer?

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The sincere believer trusts in God’s ability to honor His promises. Never has anyone lodged a request that intimidates God. His authority is unlimited, His strength unmatched. God’s people approach heaven’s portals with trust in the Lord—that He will do what is best for us, even if we can’t see it at the time. Faith is not simply trusting in what we can see; true faith is trusting God when we can’t see the outcome that we want and anticipate (*see Heb. 11:1–7*). No doubt, as long as you serve the Lord, as long as you walk in faith, you will have to trust in God even when you don’t see things working out as you had hoped, or even prayed for. Even a quick reading of the Bible will show you that you will not be alone, either.

**Read** Matthew 6:9–15, 26:39. What do these verses teach?

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Trust should not be confused with arrogance or insolence. Boldly approaching God’s throne involves no sense of entitlement. The believer’s demeanor is characterized by boldness and humility. In Gethsemane, Christ plainly declared His preference but concluded, “ ‘Not My will, but Yours’ ” (*Luke 22:42, NKJV*). In addition to complete surrender, a forgiving spirit is another indication of humility. We ourselves, having been forgiven so much, must do the same to others.

**Are you angry with someone, finding it hard to forgive? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Pray for yourself that you will learn to forgive. Pray for that person. Over time, what do you think will happen?**

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## Timeless Compassion

Christ was the embodiment of perfection; that is, all God's perfections were revealed in Him. Thus, was anyone ever more compassionate than Christ? Who possessed a stronger desire than Jesus to alleviate human distress?

We, therefore, ask, What relationship did Christ's compassion and intercession have with discipleship?

**Read** Luke 22:31, 32 and John 17:6–26 (*see also Heb. 2:17*). **How did Jesus' identification with humanity influence His intercessory prayers? What are the ultimate objectives of Christ's intercessory prayers?**

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Jesus could effectively intercede on His disciples' behalf because He was actively engaged in their lives, thoroughly understood them, and passionately desired their good. Effective intercession today demands nothing less. The twenty-first century disciple-maker will discard time-consuming pursuits that interfere with his or her relationships with lost souls. Making money, achieving fame, even educational excellence must become subservient to the greater goal of the redemption of the lost. This is an important truth that so easily slips from sight, because we are so often caught in the daily grind of living.

Jesus invested Himself in the lives of His disciples. He visited their homes, became acquainted with their relatives, spent leisure time in their company, and worked alongside them. Nothing significant to their lives escaped His notice. Disciple-making today requires more than tract distribution and airtight biblical argumentation. Praying in a sympathetic consciousness of another's distress, and with a passionate desire to alleviate that distress, is still the standard of intercessory prayer in effective disciple-making.

Though it can sound quaint, there's a lot of truth in the statement "People care little about what you know until they know how much you care."

## Timeless Compassion Replicated

The sincerest offering of praise is imitation. Christ's earliest disciples imitated their Master's prayer life. Naturally, they prayed for personal safety, for their daily necessities, and for individual spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, intercessory prayer became an important component of their discipleship.

**Read** Acts 1:13, 14; 1 Timothy 2:1–4; James 5:13–16; 1 John 5:16; Jude 20–22; and 1 Peter 4:7. What role did prayer assume in the early church? What were some of the specific situations for which they prayed? What can we learn from these examples?

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Constant prayer anchored the early church. Whenever Paul departed for missionary purposes, he was commissioned through prayer (*Acts 13:3, 14:23*). Even their farewells were clothed in prayer (*Acts 20:36, 21:5*) Frequently their prayers assumed the form of intercession. They prayed for government leaders, fellow believers, and, generally speaking, everyone! Paul interceded for the father of Publius, the chief official who suffered from dysentery. Even when he lay dying, Stephen interceded for his murderers. The centrality of prayer among the earliest believers can hardly be overstated. Scripture says that prayer pleases God because He desires salvation for everyone and seeks the advancement of truth. Through prayer—combined with apostolic teaching, fervent preaching, miraculous wonders, and loving fellowship—the early church rapidly multiplied. Despite vigorous persecution, Christianity enveloped the empire. Thousands upon thousands accepted the gospel. Transformed lives burned as living lights from Caesar's palace to points unknown.

**How much time do you spend in intercessory prayer? Think through your answer. Better yet, perhaps the question should be, How much more time should you spend in intercessory prayer?**

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**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “A Reformatory Movement,” p. 126, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9; “By Personal Efforts and Living Faith,” pp. 244, 245, in *Medical Ministry*.

“He who does nothing but pray will soon cease to pray, or his prayers will become a formal routine. When men take themselves out of social life, away from the sphere of Christian duty and cross bearing; when they cease to work earnestly for the Master, who worked earnestly for them, they lose the subject matter of prayer and have no incentive to devotion. Their prayers become personal and selfish. They cannot pray in regard to the wants of humanity or the upbuilding of Christ’s kingdom, pleading for strength wherewith to work.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 101.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why does an absence of intercessory prayer stunt the growth of the church? Conversely, how does an active intercessory prayer life stimulate disciple-making activity? What are the keys to effective intercessory prayer? How can the intercessor know what to pray about?
- 2 What should members do on behalf of those for whom they pray that would go beyond their private petitions at home? How can members build relationships with the neighbors, relatives, and coworkers for whom they pray? Why should private prayers for others always be accompanied by sustained efforts to be friends with those same people?
- 3 What steps should twenty-first-century Christians take to experience dynamic prayer lives? What is the relationship between successful disciple-making and the encountering of God’s divine presence through prayer? Can prayer change those prayed for without first changing those who pray for them? How might the subject matter for prayer be altered by having passion for lost souls? What impact does personal holiness and prayer have on the would-be soul winner’s capacity for the sharing of truth?
- 4 What specific things can believers do to expand their contacts with those who have not accepted Christ? What can Christians do to get beyond surface relationships with their peers so that they will know specific needs for which to pray?

## Walking by Faith

Rex lay in bed, unable to move his legs. The doctor's words hung heavy in the air. "You'll never walk again," he had said.

*What will happen to my family?* Rex wondered. Rex knew that his own stubbornness had put him where he was.

Two years earlier, Rex's uncle had offered to pay his daughters' tuition if Rex enrolled them in the Seventh-day Adventist school. Rex agreed. Soon the girls asked to attend Sabbath School. His wife went with them, but Rex said he had to work.

Rex went to special meetings at church after work, and he became convinced that what Adventists taught was the truth. But he resisted the invitation to surrender his life to God. He smoked and he drank, and he wasn't sure he could quit. But he did agree to study the Bible with a believer during his lunch hour.

When Rex's wife wanted to be baptized, Rex urged her to do so. "I may follow one day," he'd said.

Then after months of studying the Bible, Rex agreed to be baptized. He hoped that baptism would change him. But it didn't. He was the same man he had been before. He didn't let God rule his life.

Then the accident changed everything. Rex had tried to solve his problems himself. Now he was helpless. The pastor and church members visited Rex and encouraged him to trust God. Rex prayed for forgiveness, and again he surrendered his life to God. But this time, he meant it. Rex asked God for healing and promised that no matter what, he would put his faith in God and attend church as soon as he was able.

During his months in bed, Rex spent hours praying and reading his Bible. As he grew spiritually, he felt his body grow stronger. A year after the accident, Rex took his first wobbly steps. Six months later, he could walk without pain.

Rex kept his promise and attended church with his family. He praised God for every degree of healing. He found work. It didn't pay as much as his old job, but Rex found that even after returning tithe and offerings, the money went further.

"The accident that crippled me brought healing to my soul," Rex says. "I'm grateful that God used the Adventist school to help my family find salvation in Jesus."

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REX and his family live in southeastern India.