

PRAYING WITH MISSIONARIES INSTEAD OF FOR THEM

AS A CHILD I OFTEN HEARD church folks “pray for missionaries.” Missionaries were usually described as struggling in some way, somehow in desperate need. Our prayers, it was often said, were the “lifeline” of the missionaries.

Despite my imagination of missionaries dangling by a fraying rope over crocodile-infested rivers, the “lifeline” prayers intoned in routine fashion seemed particularly lifeless to me. The generic prayers for protection and supply seemed a dreary but necessary duty. Little wonder I grew up with a profound respect for missionaries but no real interest in praying for them.

My attitude toward praying for missions changed dramatically in just one morning when some friends invited me to a Saturday morning prayer gathering. I understood there

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SUPER- SYNERGY

was going to be a prayer time for Asia—and I had recently become a bit interested in that part of the world. I had nothing better to do, so I went, equipped with a convenient excuse for needing to leave early, should the gathering prove to be a tedious bore.

I was surprised. The middle-aged leader with a British accent introduced us to some of his colleagues who were

working at that moment in Asia. He described their personalities with stories about what God had been doing in their midst—replete with hints about their hopes and fears. The morning seemed to fly by as he mixed references to biblical truths with bursts of prayer, and with numerous half-finished stories of what missionaries were struggling to accomplish.

He intentionally left the stories half-finished by telling us what was going on up to the present moment. He guided us to pray as if our prayers were the continuation of the real-time stories unfolding—something like books that have a choose-your-own-ending format. We also did a good deal of anticipatory praise for what God was about to do.

We found that instead of merely

praying *for* missionaries, we were praying *with* missionaries. Instead of merely praying about the life circumstances of the workers, we were praying that the work itself would be accomplished. We were praying for the mission itself, not just the missionaries. By praying the very prayers that the missionaries themselves were probably praying, we gained a tangible sense of expectancy. We were playing a part in what the living God was enacting on the other side of the planet.

And that's why praying with missionaries can be so important. By praying *with* missionaries, you begin to realize that you are co-working with them. And beyond that, those who pray with missionaries find themselves co-working with the living God.

SUPER-SYNERGY

Paul urged some friends in Corinth to pray about a very difficult mission situation. He had faced opposition so horrific that he wasn't sure he would survive. He had every right to ask that Christians pray *for* him to survive the dark circumstances. But instead, he urged them to pray *with* him: "On him [God] we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many" (2 Cor. 1:10–11, brackets added).

In the phrase, *as you help us by your prayers*, Paul used a rare and potent Greek word to describe his praying friends as co-workers with him. The word is *synupourgeō*. It's very close to an English word we use today that comes directly from Greek: *synergy*. It describes the dynamic of working together. The word *synergy* comes from two Greek parts: *ergeo*, "to work," and *syn*, "with." Paul embellished this word in 2 Corinthians 1:11 by adding a third piece to the word: *hupo* meaning "under" (*synupo-urgeō*). This extra bit adds a huge

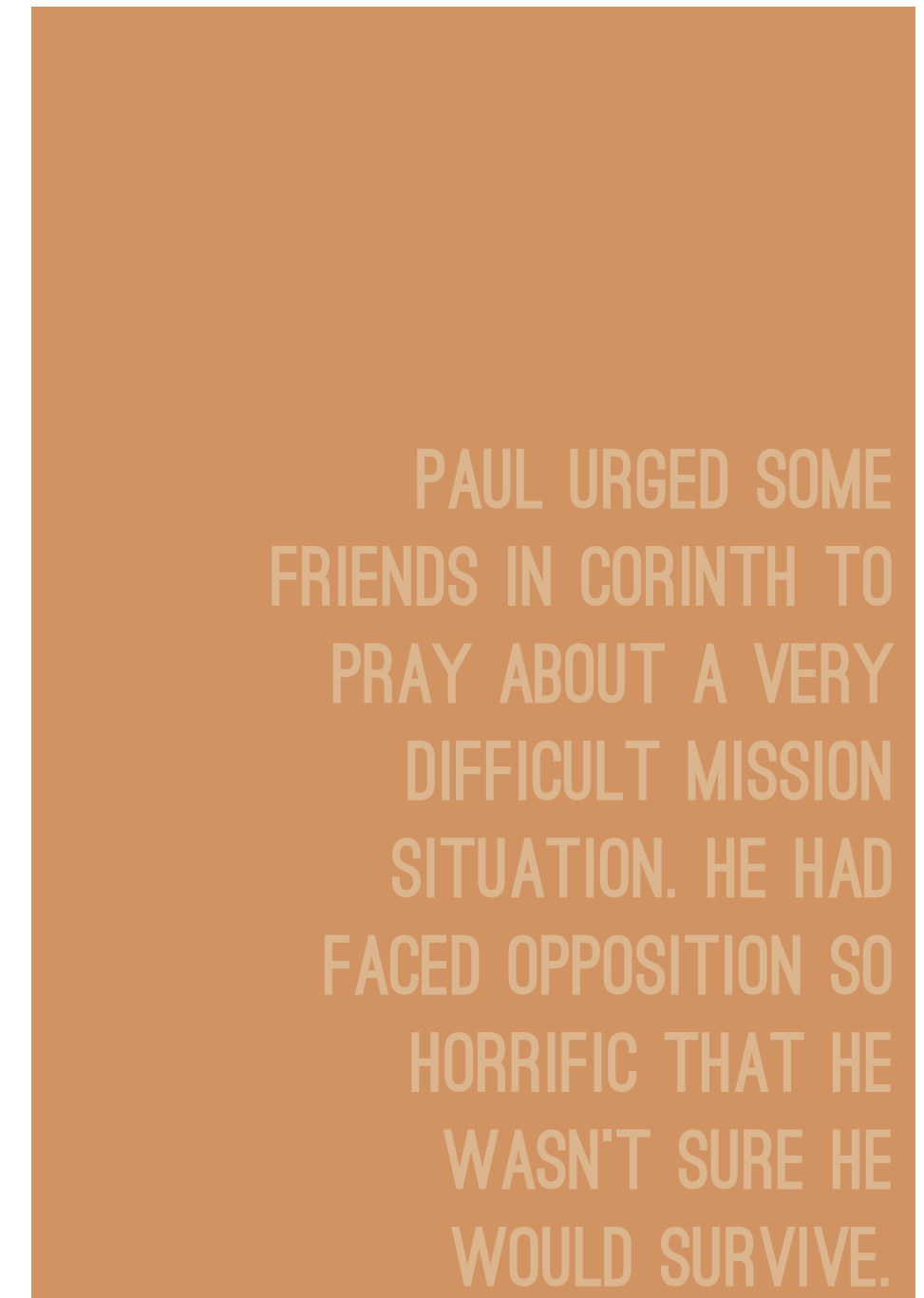
dimension of serious, supportive collaboration.

Paul was assuring his friends in Corinth that while they were praying, they were accomplishing load-bearing effectual labor, just as if they were right beside him carrying the weight. The word Paul chose was effectively describing what we might call "super-synergy."

By praying with Paul, they were collaborating with him in a profound and substantial way.

EXPECTED SURPRISE: GOD MOVES IN MIGHTY GRACE

The expected outcome of many people collaborating in prayer was twofold:



First, there would be a move of God's own favor and power "granted" to Paul's missionary team. It would be a spiritual gift (the Greek word *charisma*) that would be recognized as the operative power of God.

What shall we pray when praying with missionaries? We are accustomed to focusing on prayer points and specific requests. We may pray for specific actions and ask with precise timing in mind. This is wise and right. We should be as specific as we can in our praying. But ultimately God gives us better than we ask. We almost always find that God answers our prayers differently and better than we prayed. How does He always outdo our best praying?

God's mighty acts of grace (Greek, *charis*) among the nations can often be described as a specific gift (Greek, *charisma*) of His operative power working through the people He sends. When we do not know what to pray—and even when we know what we need—our best prayer may be for God Himself to move by His gifting, loving, powerful grace.

PURPOSE: GOD RECEIVES GLORY IN THANKSGIVING

The second outcome of many people collaborating in prayer with Paul is that there would be a great deal of thanksgiving. Why is this significant? God's ultimate purpose in His global mission is to be loved, honored, and glorified in every place and people. If that's the final goal, then it should be no surprise that God orchestrates His dealings so that He can be recognized, honored, and explicitly thanked.

The joy of giving God glory is certainly part of why He even designed His mission to be accomplished by prayer—not by a few superhero saints but by many ordinary people super-synergizing with God by their prayers. When many people pray, and when they pray many prayers, only then can there be many expressions of thanks to God. He can

be thanked to the extent that they call upon Him in prayer. Those who pray get front-row seats to view the move of God's hand. They become personally invested by their praying so that they are not merely glad to see God's work but personally grateful and gratified, as if God had been doing His deeds for them.

It may help to state what should be obvious: We are not necessary. God could use angels to do all the necessary evangelism and probably evangelize the whole world in a weekend or less. Think about it. Angels, made to be messengers, have what we would call superpowers, so they easily take on cultural particularities and travel with lightning speed. They seem to be fluent in all languages. They're not in short supply. God has myriads of them.

But I've never seen in the Bible or heard anyone report an instance of an angel presenting the gospel to a human. There are many stories of angels telling people where to go to meet with the humans God has pre-arranged to present the gospel to them. People are often evangelized by Jesus Christ Himself, appearing either in vision or dream, speaking the words of life. But I have yet to hear about angels doing evangelism.

Why is this significant? Because God has reserved the honor of evangelism for His people. We are not enlisted into God's mission because we, or our prayers, are somehow necessary. Instead, God is generous to grant us a part in His mission because those whom He loves, He desires to honor.

ALL ABOUT GOD'S GLORY

Praying with missionaries will position us to pray for the fulfillment of God's mission. As we pray, we discover our summons into a vital, collaborative role alongside missionaries and with Christ Himself. It's crucial that we pray. But the more we pray, the more we realize God Himself is acting before and beyond our prayers. He is fulfilling His ancient promise. His mission is defined by His promise

to bring forth worshiping communities of Christ-lovers amidst all peoples.

These movements will bring transforming blessing everywhere for the glory of His Son. God designed His mission to be accomplished by His Son, with many accomplices co-working with Him. This is what Paul assures his Corinthian friends as he discussed his own shaky plans in God's mission: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 1:20). The risen Christ is actually the one who fulfills God's promises, and thus God's mission, as He works amidst His people. Co-working with our Lord in prayer exalts us to the astounding honor of beholding Christ at work and glorifying Him in real time.

PRAYING OUR WAY INTO THE STORY

A friend (let's call him Dave) set out to work where Christ was still unknown in a Muslim country. I remember praying with him, just as he had asked, that he would encounter responsive people who would not only receive Christ but lead their families to follow Him. Only a few months after Dave asked for that kind of prayer, he began to run into a few people who had dreamed of a man in bright white who spoke to them with great love, urging them to turn and follow Him. They weren't seeing angels. They knew that they were meeting *Isa al-Masih* ("Jesus the Messiah" in Arabic). Very fruitful evangelism ensued.

After that, Dave began to actively look for people who recently had similar dreams. One day he got in a taxi, asking the driver to take him across town. During the drive Dave told the driver about the dream that others were having. He asked if the taxi driver knew anyone else who'd had such a dream. If so, Dave suggested, perhaps he could explain who the person in the dream was and how to follow Him.


Almost every time Dave has done this, the taxi driver has known someone who's had a similar dream. Fruitful evangelism almost always follows. And it has sometimes turned out to become a breakthrough in an entire family or neighborhood.

Perhaps most of us have heard astounding stories of dreams in the Muslim world. But after hearing this report from my friend, it's hard not to believe God is giving these dreams partly in response to my prayers. I prayed something simple. God answered in ways better than I had asked. I didn't exactly ask for dreams, but I did ask for something marvelous to come about. Now it's easy to thank God.

At the same time, I have also prayed for Dave and his family more than ever before. He has kids who have special needs. The family has struggled getting visas. Finances have been tight. Somehow

praying *with* them has convinced me to also be vigilant in praying *for* them in these kinds of challenges.

CONSIDER IT JOY

Consider it an honor to pray for great things to be fulfilled among the nations. Consider your praying with missionaries to be God's way of setting you up to be grateful in a very personal way for what He does in distant lands. Consider it joy to be engaged in the unfolding of matters of such immense significance. 



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