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

**Praying With Missionaries Instead of For Them**

*BY STEVE HAWTHORNE*
I 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 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 *synupourgō*. 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: *ergon*, “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” (*syn-upo-urgō*). 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 to 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 do this? Among many purposes in His global mission is to make people pray, and when they pray 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 grateful, 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 angelic 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, has such a dream. If so, Dave suggested, perhaps he could explain what he had been doing His deeds for them.

As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission. As we pray, we discover our mission.

Considering 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.

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 superheroes sainted 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 grateful, as if God had been doing His deeds for them.

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