
Praying in the Closet

By David Wilkerson

October 23, 2006 I have a question for you: What can God's people do in times of impending judgment to move the heart of the Lord?

We're seeing natural calamities on such a scale as never before: tidal waves, hurricanes, fires, floods, droughts. I think of the world-shaking devastation wrought by the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, earthquakes in India and Pakistan.

I think also of the fear and despair caused by manmade calamities: the events of September 11, 2001, the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, nuclear weapons in the hands of madmen. Even the most skeptical commentators say we're already seeing the beginnings of World War III.

Even now, Islamics in nation after nation are threatening they'll destroy Christianity. When I was in London recently, I heard two young Islamic men say in a radio interview: "Our religion is not like Christianity. We won't turn the other cheek. We'll cut your head off."

I ask you: in perilous times like these, is the church powerless to do anything? Are we to sit and wait for Christ to return? Or, are we called to take drastic action of some kind? When all around us the world is trembling, with men's hearts failing them for fear, are we called to take up spiritual weapons and do battle with the adversary?

All over the globe, there is a sense it's futile to try to solve the mounting problems. Many feel the world has reached a zenith of hopelessness. Alcoholism is on the increase worldwide, and more young people than ever are binge drinking. I see an equally disturbing trend in the church, as Christians turn to materialism. The message their lives preach is, "There's no hope left. God has given up."

Tell me, should this be the role of God's people in dark times? Are Christ's followers supposed to fall in line with the rest of the world, grabbing for a slice of the pie? No, never!

The prophet Joel saw a similar day approaching Israel, one of "thick darkness and gloom." According to Joel, the day of darkness that was approaching Israel would be one such as never seen in their history. The prophet cried, "Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from Almighty shall it come" (Joel 1:15).

What was Joel's counsel to Israel in that dark hour? He brought this word: "Therefore...saith the Lord, Turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him...?" (2:12-14).

As I read this passage, I am most struck by two words: "Even now." As gross darkness fell over Israel, God appealed to his people: "Even now, at the hour of my vengeance — when you've pushed me out of your society, when mercy seems impossible, when humankind has mocked my warnings, when fear and gloom are covering the land — even now, I urge you to come back to me. I am slow to anger, and I have been known to hold back my judgments for a season, as I did for Josiah. My people can pray and propitiate my mercy. But the world won't repent if you say there is no mercy."

Do you see God's message to us in this? As his people, we can plead in prayer, and he will hear us.

We can propitiate him and know he will answer the sincere, effectual, fervent prayers of his saints.

I have a word of warning to the church at this moment: Beware! Satan comes precisely at such a dark hour when nuclear disaster looms over the earth, when the heathen rage and terrorize nations. The devil knows we're vulnerable, and he throws out this lie: "What good can you do? Why try to evangelize Islamics, when they want to kill you? You can't change anything. You might as well give up on the sin-saturated world. There's no use praying for an outpouring of the Spirit. All your repenting is futile."

But God comes to us with this word from Joel: "There is hope and mercy, even now. I am of great kindness and slow to anger. And now is the time for you to turn to me in prayer. I may hold back my judgments and even bring blessing to you."

Even now — in a time of murderous Islamic extremism, of militant homosexuality, when our nation has lost its moral compass, when courts are driving God out of society, when fear grips the whole earth — it is time to turn to the Lord in prayer. Though his judgments fall all around, with vials of wrath being poured out, the Holy Spirit is still wooing and calling to humankind, right up to the final minute of the very last day.

What exactly are we to pray in such times as these? Here was Joel's prescription for Israel in that day of gloom and darkness: "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children... Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them: wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God?" (Joel 2:15-17).

Here was the call to the church: "Don't be discouraged or give in to despair. You are not to believe the devil's lies that there is no hope for an awakening." Instead, according to Joel, the people's cry was to be, "Lord, stop this reproach on Your name. Don't let your church be mocked any longer. Stop the heathen from lording it over us, taunting and asking, 'Where is your God?'"

You may think, "What God promises here is only a possibility. He says he *might* hold back his judgment. That's nothing more than a 'perhaps,' a 'maybe.' Everything he calls for from his people could be in vain."

I don't believe God tantalizes his church. And he won't send his people out on a fool's mission. When Abraham prayed for God to spare Sodom (where his nephew Lot lived), the Lord's heart was moved to save that city even if only ten righteous people lived there. And Abraham prayed this as destroying angels were walking into the city. I'm convinced God's people today are to propitiate the Lord in the same way.

Zechariah tells us God has assigned three places where his people are to petition him in prayer. According to Zechariah, there are three places where prayer is to be made: (1) God's house (the church), (2) every home, and (3) the secret closet. The Lord told Zechariah: "I will pour upon the house of David... the spirit of grace and of supplications... And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of *the house of David apart* [signifying the church]... the family of *the house of Levi apart* [the family or home], and *their wives apart* [individuals]" (Zechariah 12:10, 12-13, my italics).

As Zechariah spoke this, Israel was surrounded by enemies bent on destroying them. There was great

trembling and fear, but in the midst of it came this wonderful word: “God is coming to deal with those evil powers who are against you. So, start earnestly praying in the sanctuary. Start praying in your home. And pray in your secret closet. The Holy Spirit is coming, and he will supply you with the spirit of supplication and grace, enabling you to pray.”

Do you see God’s message to us in this passage? He is telling his church in every age, “In times of terror and trembling, I want to pour out my Spirit on you. But I must have a praying people upon whom to pour it.”

1. Prayer begins in the house of God. All the Old Testament prophets called God’s people to corporate prayer. Jesus himself declared, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13). The fact is, world history has been shaped by the prayers of Christ’s church.

Think of it: the Holy Spirit was first given in God’s house, at the Upper Room. There the disciples had “continued with one accord in prayer” (Acts 1:14). We’re told that Peter was released from prison by an angel, while “many were gathered together praying” (12:12). Corporate prayer had been made continually for Peter’s release.

Clearly, God releases much power because of the prayers of his church. Thus, the call to such prayer cannot be underestimated. We know the church has been commissioned to win souls, to do charity, to serve as the gathering place for God’s Word to be preached. But first and foremost, the church is to be a house of prayer. This is its primary calling, since all these other aspects of church life are birthed in prayer.

Yet corporate prayer is limited. It is limited to time schedules and to the types of prayer God calls us to. For example, the church isn’t the place for crying out our prayers of failure and anguish, where we name our lusts before the Lord and repent of them. Sometimes corporate prayer can become an excuse for avoiding this kind of private prayer, where heart examination takes place. Some may claim, “I have just come from a two-hour prayer meeting,” or, “I’ve been fasting with my church for the past three days.” But that isn’t the only kind of prayer the Lord desires of us.

2. Our homes are also to be a place of prayer. “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 18:19). Some Christians call this “agreement praying.” You are deeply blessed if you have a devoted brother or sister to pray with. Indeed, the most powerful intercessors I’ve known have come in two’s and three’s. If God has blessed me at all in this life — if he has used me for his glory — I know it is because of a few mighty intercessors who pray daily for me.

The place where this kind of prayer takes place most powerfully is the home. My wife, Gwen, and I pray together daily, and I believe it holds our family together. We prayed for each of our children during their growing up years, that not one of them would be lost. We prayed about their friendships and relationships, that God would send away boyfriends or girlfriends if they had been sent as traps. We also prayed for their future mates, and now we’re doing the same with our grandchildren.

Sadly, very few Christian families take time for prayer in the home. I personally can testify that I’m in the ministry today because of the power of family prayer. Every day, no matter where my siblings and I were playing, in the front yard or down the street, my mother would call out the front door of our home, “David, Jerry, Juanita, Ruth, it’s prayer time!” (My baby brother Don wasn’t born yet.)

The whole neighborhood knew about our family prayer time. Sometimes I hated to hear that call, and I griped and groaned about it. But something clearly happened in those times of prayer, with the Spirit moving amid our family and touching our souls.

Maybe you can't see yourself holding family prayer. Maybe you have a spouse who isn't cooperative or a child who's rebellious. Beloved, it doesn't matter who chooses not to be involved. You can still come to the kitchen table and bow your head and pray. That will serve as your household's prayer time, and every family member will know it.

3. The third place of prayer is one that Jesus practiced and recommended to his disciples: closet prayer. Closet praying happens when we're alone, in secret. "Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:6).

Lately, the Holy Spirit has been speaking to me about this kind of prayer. In the past I've taught that because of the demands of making a living, we may have a "secret closet of prayer" anywhere: in the car, on the bus, during a break at work. In measure, this is true.

But there is more to it. The Greek word for "closet" in this verse means "a private room, a secret place." This was clear to Jesus' listeners, because the homes in their culture had an inner room that served as a sort of storage closet. Jesus' command was to go into that secret closet and shut the door behind you. And it's a command to individuals, not the kind that can happen in church or with a prayer partner.

Jesus set the example for this, as he went to private places to pray. Over and over Scripture tells us he "went aside" to spend time in prayer. No one had a busier life, as he was constantly pressed by the needs of those around him, with so little time to himself. Yet, we're told, "In the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" (Mark 1:35). "When he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone" (Matthew 14:23).

Consider the command Saul was given in Acts. When Christ apprehended this persecutor of the church, Saul wasn't sent to a corporate church meeting, or to Ananias, the great prayer warrior. No, Saul was to spend three days alone and apart, praying and getting to know Jesus.

We all have excuses for why we don't pray in secret, in a special place alone. We say we have no such private place, or no time to do it. Thomas Manton, a godly Puritan writer, says this on the subject: "We say we have no time to pray secretly. We yet have time for all else: time to eat, to drink, for children, yet no time for what sustains all else. We say we have no private place, but Jesus found a mountain, Peter a rooftop, the prophets a wilderness. If you love someone, you will find a place to be alone."

According to Scripture, God often afflicts us to bring us back to the prayer closet. David testifies, "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word" (Psalm 119:67). He was acknowledging that when all is calm and serene, and we face few troubles, we're bent toward growing cold or lukewarm about prayer. We say we love God, but in our good times we may in effect apostatize, neglecting communion with the Lord. So, at times, God allows sharp arrows of affliction to wake us up.

Many godly church fathers have addressed this subject. John Calvin said we never offer obedience to

God until we're compelled to do so by his chastening. And C.S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to wake up a deaf world. Pain removes the veil."

Sometimes we take prayer too casually. But in times of trouble we find ourselves wrestling with the Lord in prayer every day, until we are assured in our spirit that he has everything under control. The more we want to be reminded of that assurance, the more we go to our prayer closet.

The truth is, God never allows an affliction in our lives except as an act of love. We see this illustrated in the tribe of Ephraim in Israel. The people had fallen into great affliction, and they cried out to God in grief. He responded, "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus" (Jeremiah 31:18).

Like David, Ephraim testified, "Thou has chastised me...as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me... for thou art the Lord my God" (31:18). In other words: "Lord, you chastened us for a reason. We were like a young, untrained bull, full of energy, but you chastened us to tame us for your service. You brought our wildness under control."

You see, God had great plans for Ephraim, fruitful, satisfying plans. But first they had to be instructed and trained. Thus, Ephraim declared, "I repented; and after that I was instructed" (31:19). They said, in effect: "In the past, when God had us in the classroom preparing us for his service, we couldn't take correction. We ran away, crying, 'It's too hard.' We were stubborn, constantly slipping out of the yoke he put upon us. Then God put on us a tighter yoke, and he used his loving rod to break our stubborn will. Now, we yield to his yoke."

We also are like Ephraim: young, self-centered bulls that don't want to be put under a yoke. We avoid the discipline of plowing, experiencing pain, being under the rod. And we expect to have everything now — victory, blessing, fruitfulness — by merely claiming God's promises, or "taking them by faith." We chafe at being trained in secret prayer, at having to wrestle with God until his promises are fulfilled in our lives. Then, when affliction comes, we think, "We're God's choice people. Why is this happening?"

The prayer closet is our schoolroom. And if we don't have that "alone time" with Jesus — if we've eased off from intimacy with him — we won't be ready when the flood comes.

Not all afflictions in our lives are God's chastenings. There are other reasons for our afflictions that are far beyond our understanding. Yet, we know his love is always at work in our afflictions. God says to us, "Through all your suffering, I have you on my mind. You are my precious child. I feel your pain, and I will surely have mercy on you."

Most importantly, in our worst afflictions he sends the Comforter to us: "The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost...shall bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you" (John 14:26-27).

How does the Lord bring us comfort and peace in our affliction? He leads us to the secret closet of intimacy with him. It is there, Jesus reminds us, the Father touches us personally: "When you pray, go into your closet and shut the door. Pray to your Father, who sees you in secret. And he will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:6, my paraphrase).

Recently, a dear friend of mine — the bishop over the Pentecostal movement in Hungary — was

tragically killed in a freak accident. His cooking grill caught fire and he was burned badly. He was treated and thought to be okay, but a few days later he died suddenly from blood clots that had formed.

Friends around the world are standing with his widow in prayer and support. Yet true comfort for her will come from above. No psychologist can help her through her deepest pain. The Comforter is faithful to meet her in her secret place with him.

I know a precious minister and his wife who run an orphanage in Central America. A few years ago they took in a baby boy who was virtually half dead. That precious boy became the beloved “little prince” of the orphanage. Then recently, in a freak accident, a gear shifted in a parked van and the little boy was run over and killed.

That couple is in despair over their loss. The other children in the orphanage, who saw the accident happen, have been inconsolable also. What can be said to them that will touch their deep pain? Nothing from my fifty years of ministry can touch such a place in these dear friends. They have loving arms around them, but true comfort will come from the Father, who sees their pain in secret.

I realize I can't reach the thousands of hurting believers who write to us. We received a letter from a pregnant wife who is married to a pastor. She has just discovered that her husband is a pedophile. She writes, “I don't know what to do. I believe I have to divorce my husband. I don't want him molesting our child.”

There is one thing every hurting brother and sister can do: Take it all to Jesus, shut themselves in with him and find comfort in his presence. The Lord says, “I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul” (Jeremiah 31:25). How does God do this? He meets them there in the secret place: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1).

Do you see the importance of setting your heart to pray in a secret place? It is not about legalism or bondage, but about love. It is about God's goodness toward us. He sees what's ahead and knows we need tremendous resources, daily replenishing. All of that is found in the secret place with him.

You may think you don't know how to pray. But you can begin by simply praising him. What matters is that you are there by faith, by obedient love, and your Father will see you there. He will reveal his love to you in secret, and he'll reward you openly with the fruit of his kingdom. The Holy Spirit will pray through you and give you expression. □