

Pray for Us • Hebrews 13:18-19

In the fall of 1948 Paul Okken, a missionary to what was then the Belgian Congo, came back to the United States at the end of his first term of ministry to have surgery. In the pile of mail waiting for him upon his arrival was a letter from a woman in Michigan who had heard him speak in her church and had entertained him in her home. The letter said:

... you will think it strange to get a letter from me. I almost hesitate to write. In fact, I did write you right after it happened, but it sounded so fantastic I ripped the letter up. But this time I felt I must tell you. I was at home one morning last winter. The phone rang. It was a message that my son was very ill and not expected to live. I dropped to my knees to pray that the Lord would spare my boy. As I began to pray, I saw you, Mr. Okken, standing in my living-room begging me to pray for you. And so I did, even more than for my own son.

It may sound foolish. That's why I ripped up my first letter to you. But I had the inescapable feeling that I must tell you. I

shall never forget that day. It was January 8th . . .

Paul Okken would never forget January 8 either! Near dusk that day he and missionary Paul Uhlinger were lost over the tough terrain of the Belgian Congo, flying in a Piper Super Cruiser. There was increasing fog and clouds and darkness was setting in. A crash seemed inevitable. Then, to their absolute amazement, they saw below them an airstrip. They safely landed at Luvungi, an emergency government airstrip that had not had a plane land there for five years. Okken figured that 6 p.m. in the Congo was the morning

of the 8th in Michigan, the same time that the woman had prayed.

But that wasn't the only reason he remembered January 8th. Four days later, on January 12th, that same plane was carrying Paul Uhlinger and two other missionaries to an educational committee meeting. This time they made an apparently perfect landing on somewhat swampy ground and after they landed the plane burst into flames, killing all three missionaries.

As Okken looked at that letter he began to wonder and he wrote down his thoughts:

On January 8th we were lost in the clouds above the rugged terrain. We had no place to land and darkness was about to swallow us. But then someone in America felt a burden to pray for us . . . and did! Somehow I wonder what happened four days later. I wonder what happened when those other three missionaries were in such grave danger above the Congo. I think God probably sent a prayer burden to someone in America to pray for them . . . but they didn't!

A true story like this drives home for us the powerful importance of Hebrews 13:18-19 where it says, *"Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon."*

The message is simple: Pray for others. In this pair of verses we are instructed five times to pray for others. It starts out very simply that we are to pray for others when asked. Hebrews is one of the few books of the Bible where we don't know the name of the author. But whoever he is, he very directly requested specific prayer on his behalf from his readers. That plea for prayer immediately obligates the readers to listen and pray.

But those are not just words for two thousand years ago. Those are words for us today. We must take seriously all requests to pray.

When we agree to pray for someone it is not just a routine matter, it is a commitment before God.

Every Sunday morning in this church people take registration cards and write prayer requests on the back of them. These prayer requests are then made available so that the entire church can have access to them and pray for these specific requests. They must be more than communication of information. We must pray when we are asked! People are depending on us.

How would you feel if your child was desperately ill and you asked someone to pray for your child but they never did? When someone asks you to pray for them, give them a straight answer. If you don't plan to pray, tell them. If you promise to pray, do it. Write a note. Set a time. Pray when you are asked! When we agree to pray for someone it is not just a routine matter, it is a commitment before God.

We must also ask for prayer. We are sometimes unable to pray for others because they never ask. Too often Christians are engaged in spiritual battles where prayer is desperately needed, but they never tell anyone. Christians have disintegrating marriages, financial reverses, employment problems, illnesses, emotional stress but they never ask for prayer. They need someone to uphold them in prayer, someone to come along side and bring that spiritual power to their lives, someone to articulate before God their need . . . but they never ask.

When you need prayer, ask! And when you are asked to pray, pray! We must have both a commitment to pray for those who ask us to pray and a commitment to share our prayer requests with others.

Apparently there was some kind of a problem between the author and the readers of Hebrews; otherwise, verse 18 has to be one of the stranger verses in the Bible. It says, "*Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.*" Does that not seem to you a rather defensive statement? When someone says "*we are sure that we have a clear conscience*" you can bet that person has been criticized for something.

If a pastor were to stand behind the pulpit on a Sunday morning and say, "I just want everybody to know that I have an absolutely clear conscience about what I did this past week," you know that any visitor to that church would quickly conclude

the pastor was being criticized for something he did or he wouldn't have said that.

All of this makes for some interesting points. First, they were to pray for him even though they were critical of him. Also, they were to pray for him even though he wouldn't accept the criticism. Here is this author who has done something that they see is a cause for criticism and he is unwilling to admit that he is wrong. But they're to pray for him nonetheless. This is a great reminder to us that we are to pray for those whom we criticize. We are to pray for those we think are wrong. We are to pray for those who reject our criticism as invalid.

Years ago I learned this as a very practical and powerful lesson of my Christian life. I decided to daily pray for those I tended to criticize and to pray daily for those who criticized me. It has transformed my relationships and attitudes toward people. I have prayed months and years for some people with whom I have had differences. I have seen my love for them grow and I have seen my prayers answered. The time to pray is when we are critical.

What about you? Who don't you like? Who do you think is out of line? Who have you criticized this past week? Who are you critical of right now? Pray for them! Plead their case before God. Ask God to bless them and help them and touch them. In fact, make it a practice of your Christian life. Whenever you feel criticism of others coming on, change that criticism to prayer. Pray for others when you are critical! Any fool can criticize but it takes a godly Christian to pray!

According to Hebrews 13 we ought also to pray when it is seemingly unnecessary. It must have seemed unnecessary to those long ago readers of Hebrews 13 to pray for the author of Hebrews 13:18. Whoever he was, he certainly knew the Old Testament because there are references throughout the book of Hebrews to the Old Testament. Whoever he was, he was surely a disciple of Jesus Christ or he wouldn't have authored a book of the Bible. Whoever he was he was certainly controlled by the Holy Spirit who inspired all scripture. And, whoever he was he was clearly recognized as an apostolic leader or the early church would never have included his book as part of the New Testament.

Does this guy really need prayer? After all, he was a Bible scholar, he was a disciple of Jesus Christ, he was controlled by the Holy Spirit, a leader of the church and part of the circle of apostles. Who would guess that he needed prayer? He ought to be praying for everybody else!

But, he did need prayer! Even though it was seemingly unnecessary, it was essential.

Even Jesus needed prayer! He asked only one thing of his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane . . . prayer! But they fell asleep. To them it must have seemed unnecessary to pray for the Son of God, the Messiah. He the one who changed water to wine and raised the dead back to life! But, no matter how it may have seemed, even Jesus needed intercessory prayer.

Don't be deceived by the external perception. Don't assume that because someone has a leadership position they need your prayers any less. Don't assume that the person who looks healthy and happy and is employed and has friends doesn't need prayer.

When Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister of Great Britain his friends all thronged around him to congratulate him. He said, "It is not your congratulations I need. It is your prayers."

It is also important to pray when good can be done. The author writes his personal commitment at the end of verse 18 when he says he "*desire(s) to live honorably in every way.*" His primary prayer request was not to overcome evil but to do good.

That is not usually the way we pray. We are far more prone to pray for people when they are in trouble than when things are going well. Surely that is necessary, but Hebrews 13:18 calls for prayer so that good can be done and not so that evil can be stopped.

We must pray for people not only when they are sick but when they are healthy that they will use their health for God's glory. We must not only pray for our children when they are failing in

school but when they are doing well in school that their learning will better equip them to serve God. We need to pray for the church, not only when finances are down and attendance is slumping and spiritual life is disappearing, but also when God is abundantly blessing and granting great success. Perhaps if our prayers for others were as much for their good days as their bad days the bad days would be far fewer. Pray for others when good can be done.

Finally, we are to pray when there are obstacles to be overcome. The author to the Hebrews does have a problem. He finally refers to it in verse 19 when he writes, "*I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.*"

We can only guess at his problem. For some reason he was separated and unable to get back to his Hebrew people. Some say he was in prison. Others believe that it was some kind of a serious illness. Whatever it was, it was beyond his control and he needed God's help.

We all have obstacles standing between us and

the way we should be. Some are in continual pain for which modern medicine has no remedy. Some are agonizing over family problems and conflicts that seem to get continually worse. Some are facing social obstacles such as loneliness, shyness or being

ostracized by other people. Still others have mountainous obstacles of debt or temper or depression or failure or fear or something else. Whatever it is, it seems beyond our control to do anything about it and we need God's help.

These are precisely the circumstances where God shines so brightly. It is the toughest problems that God takes and solves best. It is the things we could never pull off alone that are so obviously his doing. It is the impossible obstacles that God alone overcomes.

The A-Team was a program on television that told the story of paramilitary misfits who got into unbelievable situations where there was no possible way out. But, somehow, each week within an hour's time, everything turned around and de-

Even Jesus needed intercessory prayer.

feat was always turned into victory. At the end, Hannibal, the leader, would always say, “I love it when a plan comes together”—as if he had it figured out all along!

Well, with God it is fact, not fiction. He really does have it all figured out from the beginning. Then, when we are in the midst of insurmountable obstacles where defeat seems to be the inevitable end of the story we go to God and pray for the obstacles to be overcome. Then God comes in and intervenes and brings victory out of defeat. It’s as if God is the one who then says with delight, “I love it when a plan comes together!”

We all know people who are up against obstacles. It might be health issues, marriage, money, kids, parents, school, church, prison, fears or failures. You name it. They need God’s help! Pray for them. Pray when obstacles need to be overcome.

Let’s not just talk about it. Let’s do it!

Prayerfully think about who you need to pray for. Who has asked you for prayer? Who have you criticized? Who doesn’t seem to need prayer? Who is trying to do good? Who needs to overcome an obstacle? Pray for them!

Then, would you consider one more kindness? Send a note to someone for whom you have prayed telling them that you have prayed for them. Do it this week.

Our Father, we will do what you have called us to do

by praying for others. We will pray for others whom we have

criticized. We will pray for those who seemingly may not need

prayer. We will pray for those who are seeking to do good and

for others who have obstacles to overcome. We will pray for

them, Lord, because that is your will for us.

Please hear our prayers. We pray this in Jesus’ name.

Amen

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