

## Practical input

## loving nations through prayer

*This resource was first created as a seminar handout for a session Liz Baddaley led at Mosaic Church Leeds' LOVE:NATIONS conference in February 2012 and has been adapted for more general use.*

## 1. why pray for nations? because God's mission and heart is for nations

God cares for families, people groups and nations as well as individuals. Throughout the Bible genealogies, history books, prophecies and wisdom writings all communicate this heart.

- **building a people** God called an individual – Abraham – to follow him, but God's promise was to make Abraham's descendants into great nations (e.g. Genesis 17:4).
- **rescuing a nation** Exodus 2:22b-25 describes God as hearing the heart-cry Israel, and responding to deliver her. This is one of several times that God comes to the rescue of Israel and other nations (e.g. the beginnings of the return from exile (see the books of Nehemiah and Ezra) and Jonah's mission to Ninevah (see the book of Jonah)).
- **the intention for Israel** God always desired that Israel (the Jewish people) would be a witness to other nations – their laws, worship, and lives were all supposed to be counter-cultural – demonstrating the one true God to neighbouring nations.
- **Jesus' mission** Jesus came to be a light to all nations because God so loved the *world* (John 3:16). Isaiah, which contains one of the key Messianic prophecies includes:
 

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations... In his law the islands will put their hope.”
- **Jesus' example** Jesus cared hugely about individuals, but his heart was also for cities, people groups, whole nations, and the worldwide family of believers who would grow to follow him. (See Matthew 23:37/Luke 13:34; John 17.) Even now, he is interceding for us constantly – all of us (Romans 8:34). His love sought out the outcast, and crossed the boundaries between races, people groups and nations (e.g. the Samaritan woman (John 4) and the Roman Centurion (Matthew 8)).
- **the Church's call** In Jesus' great commission (Matthew 28:18-20/Mark 16:15) he made it clear that his disciples had a global mandate. In Acts, we quickly see the early church, and particularly Paul, proactively going to, and suffering for, different nations, in order that they might hear the gospel. Nothing has changed – we are still called to be a people with an international vision.
 

In addition, not only are we called to reach out to other nations, but we are part of a global family – and this should be reflected in our faith. We are told that if one part of this (global) body suffers we all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26); to pray for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18) and to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those that mourn (Romans 12:15).
- **the ultimate vision of redemption** In the book of Revelation, there is a definite international flavour to the visions of the throne-room of God and the New Jerusalem. We are told that “every nation, tribe, people and

- language” is represented (Revelation 7:9) and that there are trees by the river with leaves that are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:22). God’s redemptive purpose through Christ is absolutely for individuals – but it is also for nations! Just as there will be an end to pain, tears, injustice and death for individuals, so there will be an end to nations caught in cycles of conflict, poverty or exploitation.
- **loving neighbours in a global society (particularly those in need)** In Matthew 22, Mark 12 and Luke 10 Jesus summarises the “whole law” as loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves. The Jewish understanding of “neighbour” is literally “anyone you have anything to do with”. The nations are part of our daily lives like they never have been before; our actions and lifestyles have huge effects on others who we may never even meet. They are now “neighbours” in a new way.  
Bearing this in mind, we should be especially concerned about nations which are poor, vulnerable, or under exploitation. Throughout the Bible God makes it clear that he is especially concerned about our treatment of the poor, the vulnerable (often described as orphans and widows) and the stranger (e.g. Micah 6:8, Isaiah 58, Amos 5:24 and James 1:27) and the context of the “who is my neighbour?” question is from the parable of the Good Samaritan who undertakes an act of mercy for someone from a different race.  
Contemporary poverty and injustice are international issues – whole people groups and nations are affected by the choices, practices and lifestyles of our society. If we are to care for the poor today, we will have to engage with the nations. Poverty affects people in the UK, but this is relative – extreme poverty remains a largely international issue.

## 2. why pray for nations?

### because prayer is a powerhouse for transformation

- **our battle is spiritual** Ephesians 6:12 tells us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” This verse is then followed by the instruction to put on the full (spiritual) armour of God and the immediate application in verse 18 “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests”. Prayer reminds us what’s behind the issues we’re praying about, giving us a right perspective and reminding us that we cannot do things in our own strength. And the way we tackle these issues must be prayer.
- **prayer is God’s gift to us** A close friend of mine, who has recently spent time setting up a social enterprise in one of the most challenging nations and cultures in Asia said to me recently “prayer is the best kept secret ever – hardly anyone, even in the church, seems to realise what a gift it is.” Prayer is relationship with God; and relationship means closeness, comfort, sharing strategy, receiving affirmation, working together... the list goes on! With some nations, and some issues, “all” we can do is pray – we need to realise how special and powerful that “all” is.
- **prayer changes things** It’s a great mystery that an all powerful God desires us to pray in agreement with his will as part of bringing it about but it’s true! Earnest prayer – for ourselves and others – moves the heart of God. Our intercessions can even affect the destinies of cities and nations. (See Genesis 18:16-33 and Exodus 32.)
- **prayer gives us God’s heart and strategy** Prayer is about relationship and conversation and that means that God can reveal answers to problems, and strategies of how to work so that we can reach people with his message, and bring the transformation to their circumstances that we – and he – so desperately long for.
- **prayer changes us...** Spending time with God; catching his heart for people and nations; carrying the needs of others in our hearts – these things change us. We often start to find we want to be part of the answer. And our prayers start to affect our actions too – whether that’s physically going; giving; speaking out; or changing our shopping practices - our actions and lifestyles start to look more like our prayers.

### 3. Prayer, love and action...

#### 3.1 prayer as an end in itself and...

Many of us struggle to pray. Why? Perhaps it's because of the disappointment of perceived unanswered prayer in our past, and wrong beliefs we have based on this. Or perhaps it's because we think we should be getting on and doing instead... if it's the former we need to ask for God's help and healing for we are losing out on a huge source of strength and power for our personal discipleship and our mission. If it's the latter, we need to realise that we are called to a "both... and" lifestyle where prayer leads us to action, and action is always bathed in prayer.

- **prayer – the most sincere form of love?** Bill Hybels, Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church says "Intercessory prayer is one of the most sincere forms of love – someone is pleading your case when you're not even around." Perhaps, we could also add to that, that out of love, we're bringing a person or a nation to the very source of love, who has all the inspiration, all the motivation, and all the power to bring transformation, healing and restoration.

#### 3.2 prayer as the fuel for mission

- **building a sincere heart to go** We are told that if we don't have love, all the great acts we might do, and all the impressive spiritual gifts we might use, don't mean anything (1 Corinthians 13). Sometimes, if we're honest we go in guilt, duty or from other motives rather than love of God and love of others. This can lead to burn out, or just simply empty, hollow works. If we are to truly love, we need to be constantly drawing from the source, and ministering out of the overflow of God's love.
- **partnering with Jesus, doing what the Father does, and drawing on the Spirit as we go** Jesus went about "his father's business" by doing what he saw the Father doing, and partnering with that (John 5:19). It can be tempting to do what we think we would like to do, or to be drawn into trying to meet every need we see before us. Going about mission (whether acts of mercy or preaching the gospel) prayerfully means we wait for what God reveals he is doing already, ask to partner with him, and then join him in that, constantly drawing from his strength as we serve, love and speak.

### 4. Where do I start?

#### 4.1 by seeking

The task of praying for the nations can seem overwhelming... after all, depending on which source you go by, there are as many as 200 countries in the world. This can sometimes intimidate people out of starting at all... but you can start close to home, and you don't need to feel the burden of covering every nation off your list!

- **ask** Spend some time asking God what nations he would like to lay on your heart and see if he brings anywhere to mind. If you are considering some already, offer these to God and wait to see if he guides you further.
- **where do you know and love?** Which nations have you visited, or do you have connections with? Which speak the languages you speak? Have you learnt about any others during study or in connection to issues you care about? Where were you and other family members born? Where has been in the news recently? Start here.
- **what need or issues do you see or care about?** Are you particularly passionate about certain issues – such as extreme poverty, the persecuted church, or places which are affected by natural disasters? Are you especially concerned about sex trafficking or gender equality issues, or people with disabilities? Find out which countries are focal points for these issues, or have inadequate means or will power to tackle them and pray for these nations.

## 4.2 remember...

- **this is a journey of a life-time** It's ok to pray for one nation for a while and then swap... it's ok to start small... you have your whole Christian life to develop this area. Start with where you're at and ask God to keep moving you closer to his heart for the world.
- **the whole body on their knees...** You aren't the only Christian praying for the world – he's placed believers all around the globe, living in different nations, and with different countries, experiences and issues on their hearts. *Between us* we are interceding for every nation.
- **when there are no words** Don't panic. Jesus is interceding for us, and the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with groans too deep for words (Romans 8:26). You may find as you begin to receive God's heart for a nation that it touches your emotions – possibly without explanation – don't worry about this... just keep focusing on Jesus and his love for you, and the place you are praying for. And if you have received the gift of tongues, use it in prayer for the nations.

## 5. How do I start?

### 5.1 heart-change

You will never develop a genuine love for the nations, and a fervent prayer life for them without the work of the Holy Spirit transforming your heart to be more like Jesus'. It's helpful to have practical tips and to try new things, but you need his power to see a real change. By default we all return to insularity and our own personal story – but a genuine, heart-felt outward focus is possible with him at work in us.

- **ask and seek** Thank God that he is showing you the importance of praying for other people and nations, and then ask him to reveal this to your heart as well as your mind. Seek his heart for the nations and wait for him to give you this, and grow it in you.
- **watch and cultivate** Try and check in on your progress in this area every once in a while, thanking God for what he has done already, and seeking more of him. If you assess yourself every day you might get discouraged, but you'll be amazed how much God develops your heart, and prayer life, over months and years. When you see progress thank God for it, and look for patterns such as places you seem to find it easier to pray etc – seek to do more of what is helping.
- **osmosis** There's a slightly trite phrase in circulation in many churches that says worship and prayer are "more caught than taught" – there's some truth in it. If you desire a heart for the nations, seeking out others who seem to demonstrate they have this, or are also seeking it, is a good discipline. Praying with others can also often be easier and really encouraging.

### 5.2 conscious change

Heart-change is always what's crucial, but the danger can be that we sit around and wait for it to happen! We need to also be intentional, and recognise that while we're getting on with praying differently, our hearts will start to change too.

- **finding out more** It's a great idea to spend time finding out more about specific nations, and international issues. You can do this by reading books, watching the news, talking to other people who know more, or linking in with Christian organisations working in particular regions, or to address particular needs. There are loads of great things out there to help. For example, you might like to investigate signing up to receive information and prayer diaries from organisations such as Christian Aid and Tearfund (poverty and development), Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the Barnabus Fund (the persecuted church) or Stop the Traffik (modern day slave trade

and sex industry). In addition, you might like to explore using resources such as WECC's book, *Operation World* or 24:7's country outlines, or simply using Wikipedia.

- **making space and time** To avoid a drift back to the status quo, it's important to consciously put things in place to help you. This is partly about time – you might decide to have a specific new slot in the day or week when you pray for nations, or you might begin “tithing” existing prayer times which have previously been more inwardly focused – for example, could you start by setting aside 10 or 20 per cent, for example, of this time? It is also partly about space and stimulus... if you have worship music on while you are praying, or indeed use this to pray, and it's always songs about Jesus and you, it will be harder to focus more widely... you might find having a specific place you go to pray in this way, using visual stimulus such as maps or photos, or listening to songs about the nations, will help you focus.
- **accountability** As with any area you're looking to grow in, it's good to share with other Christians you trust so that they can pray for you, and help you monitor your progress.

### 5.3 a virtuous circle

The more you intentionally change things, the more your heart will change. And the more your heart changes, the more you will want to change what you do naturally and as God leads you to... the important thing is beginning and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in you, and to take you on the journey step by step.

## 6. What do I pray for?

As with anything new and unfamiliar, we are often worried about “doing it right” and this is a particular trap with praying for the nations. Many are unfamiliar, or have complex political situations, and so sometimes we'd rather not pray than end up praying for the wrong thing.

- **ask** If you're stuck on what to pray for don't panic. Spend some time waiting on God, and asking him to bring to mind what's on his heart for that nation. Is there anything he is leading you to pray for?
- **from the heart** Pray what's on your heart for that place... prayer is about relationship and honesty so what do you want to say to God about that nation?... Remember that he looks at the heart not at the outward things. He hears your heart-cry and he understands the situation better even than *Time Magazine*, so you can relax and just come to him. If you're watching the news and certain individuals, groups or issues within a bigger issue move you especially, start by praying for them and see if that spreads wider.
- **in line with scripture** Use scriptures, such as the Psalms, to form your prayers... and also as a test to see that you are praying in line with God's heart and word. Always remember love and mercy – even when you are praying about, for example, evil regimes, remember that God's heart of mercy is for the oppressor, as well as the oppressed. This is really hard but judgement, whilst part of God's character, belongs to him and not us. We must speak up and defend, we must cry out for change; but we should seek to do so with soft hearts that seek mercy and hold righteous anger in the context of love.
- **put simply...** The simplest prayers are often the best! It doesn't matter what your political opinion is, or how much you know – you can always pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done” – which is the most important thing anyway.
- **Your weakness, his strength** Lack of knowledge, or huge situations that leave you unsure needn't leave you silent or disengaged... you can bring your questions to God, and spend time thanking him that he is sovereign, that he knows exactly what is going on and what is needed, that he's already working there, and agreeing with his will for that place. You can always pray a blessing, and ask for godly people to be raised up with God's solutions, even if you're not sure of what those specific solutions might need to look like.

- **in line with God's character** There are some situations so complex, entrenched, or upsetting, that it's really hard to know how to pray. But you can always come back to God's character, and the kingdom's characteristics – truth, peace, love, goodness, joy etc – and pray for more of these, and an end to anything that would rob or destroy these things. God is just so we can pray for justice; Jesus is the Prince of Peace so we can pray for peace...
- **for people to come to Christ** Christians are called to both preach the gospel and work for the good and transformation of society. And therefore our prayers should focus on both the advancement of the gospel, and prayers for justice etc. However, ultimately – as is particularly evident in some situations – the only perfect hope is for people to come to know Christ, and experience his transforming love which will give them the power to lay down their agendas and/or reform their actions. In saying this we're not talking about the growth of religion and church, but that the best chance of hearts, communities and nations being transformation is for them to encounter Christ, and to begin to follow him as the Holy Spirit guides them. Christians are not perfect, but Christ is, and in him the nations can put their hope (see Isaiah 42:1-7 again for example).
- **what you have faith for** Praying for change on an international scale can be difficult to have faith for... so it's good to think about your experiences of answered prayer personally, and use these testimonies of provision, mercy etc as encouragements to pray into similar areas for people groups in need of breakthroughs in this area too. Similarly, it's right and good to pray for big issues, and things that are on a massive scale, but try also to pray about smaller and more specific things too so that you can see answers to these. (Linking up with cross-church Christian organisations, such as the ones listed in 5.2 can really help with this as they have access to information and feedback not featured in the news.)

## 7. how should I pray?

- **with expectation** Again this comes back to the heart, and your faith levels, but ask God to help you remember that what you're doing matters, that he is always listening, and that time on your knees is never wasted.
- **Regularly** As with anything, the more regular, and routine you make your prayer times, the more natural and easy they become. It will be harder at first to set a pattern, but in the long-term it will help you. Don't worry if you miss slots – there's unending grace - but seek to build something up intentionally.
- **in the way you find easiest (especially at first)** If you're new to praying for the nations regularly, be nice to yourself! Start with the prayer language you find easiest. It may be that you choose to make a playlist of songs about the nations and then worship through this each time if you find sung worship and prayer the easiest way to connect with God... you might like to do a big piece of art and prayerfully create something which expresses your heart-cry... or you could vary your postures at different points in prayer, use maps, or go out walking...
- **creatively – set prayer free!** As you move forward in your journey with prayer, explore lots of different ways to pray – you'll find God shows you new things through new "languages" and that you avoid going stale. At the start of a prayer time, consider pausing for a few minutes, and asking God whether there's a particular way to worship and pray that he's leading you to use that day.

## 8. want to know more? or ask questions?

Visit [www.thesanctuarycentre.org](http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org) or blog <http://journey.thesanctuarycentre.org/> for free songs and resources or email [info@thesanctuarycentre.org](mailto:info@thesanctuarycentre.org) with questions or to request updates. In particular, as a specific follow up to this resource, we'd recommend you taking a look at our *Walk with the world* creative prayer resources, available at [www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer](http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-prayer) and our *Outward focused song list* which you can download from [www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-othersongs](http://www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-othersongs)