

# The Uncomfortable Middle

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INTERCESSORY PRAYER is the bridge between lostness and salvation. Some believe that anyone can come to Christ anytime—no intercessory bridge is necessary. Reject Christ today, accept Him tomorrow. The sinner decides. We increasingly feel our intervention is inappropriate, our intercession unnecessary.

Jesus declared, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44 NKJV). The Greek word means “to drag.” God, through the Holy Spirit, drags the person to Jesus. Pretty dramatic. In the same conversation, Jesus repeated this assertion: “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (v. 65 NKJV). Salvation begins with God. We don’t come; we are drawn.

Years ago, evangelists often warned, “Today [right now] is the day of your salvation. To ignore this opportunity could be perilous.” That’s too dramatic for our more casual modern taste. The Apostle Paul called such moments “the time of [God’s] favor” (2 Corinthians 6:2 NIV); “the accepted time” (KJV); “just the right time” (NLT). There are doors for salvation that open and close. Coming to Christ is neither our idea nor due to our initiative. It is a divine invitation.

John the Baptist said, “The ax is laid to the root” (Matthew 3:10 NKJV). The tree, Israel, was coming down. Then Jesus came and preached repentance, declaring to the Jews, “But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:5 NIV).

We, too, are under judgment, collectively and individually. To not repent when God is calling, offering grace, is a serious matter. Repent today; don’t delay. Repent while the Holy Spirit is speaking, convicting, drawing (John 16:8). We have no promise of tomorrow (see Luke 12:16-20). Resisting God’s drawing becomes easier each time until our hearts are “seared,” our ears “dull,” and we no longer hear (1 Timothy 4:2; Matthew 13:15).

There is a point of no return (Romans 1:28). Every delay results in missed blessings: “Repent . . . turn to God . . . that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19 NIV). The Lord declared, “Your sins have deprived you of good” (Jeremiah 5:25 NIV).

“Then [Jesus] said to His disciples, ‘The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray’” (Matthew 9:37-38a NKJV). Why are altars barren? Why is there such a dearth of converts amid a plenteous harvest? The problem is not the resistant harvest but insufficient laborers, traced to the lack of prayer. As we pray, something happens both in the harvest field and to the harvest force. Doors open widely. Jesus is seen more clearly, and sinners are drawn to Him. Their capacity to hear is heightened; God’s grace compels them.

Barren altars are not the primary issue. We have a worker problem, traceable to a prayer problem. Evangelism begins with prayer. Jesus’ command to proclaim the Gospel to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19) was subordinate to another. First, wait “until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven” (Luke 24:49 NLT). Wait in prayer. Wait at the intersection of evangelism and enablement by the Holy Spirit. That prayer encounter made the 120 believers

ready laborers, and 3,000 people were saved (Acts 2:41)! There is no other explanation for their responsiveness. It was the effect of the Spirit's work. Through prayer, hearts were changed that otherwise would not have even considered the Gospel.

Fifty days earlier, the city had crucified Christ. Now the whole city was transfixed on the news of the resurrected, exalted Christ. Eyes were opened by the Spirit, out of prayer. The disciples were themselves changed by the Spirit. The harvest is always plentiful, but it needs transformed disciples, praying laborers, and a spiritual atmosphere of conviction and grace.

R. A. Torrey said, "The most important human factor in effective evangelism is prayer."

The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy about church structure, said, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people" (1 Timothy 2:1 NIV). The church is an intercessory community obligated to Gospel engagement. As we pray for "all those in authority" (v. 2 NIV) the spiritual and moral climate of our communities is affected.

The problem is not the darkness, but with the salt and light. Paul urges us to be intercessors focused on the lost. "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (vv. 3-4 NIV).

Our intercession tends to be self-serving. We trade prayer requests concerning one another's aches and pains. That's only the edge of intercession. In contrast, intercession's uncomfortable middle wrestles over the souls of lost people. It stands between God and the unsaved—people as they are and as they could be. It interferes with Satan's plans and purposes.

An interim pastor told his small congregation, "I will be here for a short season. The greatest contribution I can make is to pray with you for your lost loved ones." He asked them to provide a name, a photo, and brief information about individuals needing salvation. Above all, to join him in prayer.

Twenty-six names were collected. He prayed, and they prayed. Six months passed. The first name on the list had not made a commitment to Christ, and the pastor was leaving the next day. The elder who had submitted the name could not sleep. He prayed through the night. That night, the unconverted man could not rest. He struggled with conviction. When morning came, he asked his wife to pray with him to receive Christ. The first man on the list became the last of the 26: All had come to Christ during the six-month prayer vigil!

"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 4:4 NIV), so we pray such blinders off. We pray, and people understand. The Gospel is rational, but it is spiritually discerned. We pray, and God quickens dead hearts to life. We pray, shackles fall off, and men and women are freed.

Paul pled, "Continue steadfastly in prayer. . . . Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word" (Colossians 4:2-3 ESV). He knew that preaching to a closed door—hearts not open—was futile. The request went further. Paul asked prayer for guidance that, when the door opened, he would share what was needed at that moment—"make it clear" (v. 4 ESV)—in the

most effective way. Half of evangelism is prayer—the positioning, the divine orchestration connected to prayer.

We pray hearts open, but such doors do not always remain open. Prayer affects the unsaved and sensitizes us to not miss opportunities to share the Gospel. Salvation is never winning a rational argument; it is a spiritual transformation. The seed of the Gospel can be sown (Matthew 13:3), but the condition of the heart determines the end result. Intercessory prayer invites the Holy Spirit to soften hard hearts—to stop the interference of the demonic, symbolized by birds (v. 4); to break through hearts overwhelmed by trials (vv. 5-6); to overcome the encroaching influence of the world, symbolized by thorns (v. 7).

The intercessor, Jesus, is praying now for a lost world. Will we join Him?

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