Praying for Others

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Sometimes when someone is praying for you, you can sense God's love and power at work. I am grateful to be the pastor of a praying church, and one night at the end of a prayer meeting recently I shared with them a challenge I was facing. I was surprised by what happened next. One by one by one, people around the room began to pray. And the ways they prayed were so helpful and so specific to my needs in the moment—the very things that were on my heart but I hadn't told them. And it became clear to me that the Spirit of God was moving through them as they prayed; and I felt new strength and encouragement. It was as if God was pouring into me right then and there.

Oh, how we need to pray for each other! Our prayers are one of the best gifts we can give. One of the best ways we can love each other is through our prayers, because then we are inviting God's power and presence to help one another in the ways that only He can.

As we begin this lesson on praying for others, I'd like to encourage you to think about who it was that prayed for you to come to faith in Christ. Was it a parent or a brother or sister or a close relative or a coworker or a friend? Think about how God used their prayers in your life and the difference they made. Where would you be without them? Wouldn't you love to be that person for someone else, the person God used to make a beautiful difference in someone's heart and life through your prayers? God has placed in our hands this tremendous opportunity for good to see His power and love move through us as we love others with our prayers.

So let's get started. But before we do anything else, let's pray.

> *Lord, help us. Bless us. Help us to learn how to love you and love others when we pray. Amen.*

Sometimes when it comes to praying for others, we can feel so inadequate or even guilty. Maybe we feel like we haven't done it as

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much as we could, or that our prayers could never be as effective as someone else's. But the beautiful thing is that God meets us right where we are, so we don't have to worry about what's behind us. Our goal today is to encourage you to pray for others by first pointing out some practical ways to do it, and then by looking at four different blessings that we receive when we love others with our prayers.

The beautiful thing about prayer is that you can do it anywhere—in your room, in the car, on the treadmill, in the middle of a busy restaurant. Now, whenever we pray, it helps to begin by praising God, because praising Him reminds us of all that He is and all He can do, and helps us to pray with more faith. It also gives Him the honor and priority He deserves. The ways we pray for others can be as creative as you'd like to be. Sometimes the needs of others weigh so heavily on our heart that we remember them through the day. Some people have a list of those they pray for that they can look at anywhere; others use a journal or a church bulletin or directory. Some start with their immediate family and then work outward to their church and missionaries and school or work. Some pray by simply glancing at others wherever they are and asking God to bless them. Some use pictures of those they're praying for, others place their names on cards and shuffle through them. Tools like that can be great to jog our memories, but it's also important that we mix it up a bit and keep it fresh and ask God to lead us.

The other night I was awakened at 3:30 a.m. with an acquaintance whom I hadn't seen in several months on my mind, and I was moved with compassion for him. I started praying for him and later in the day sent him a text to check in. He told me that his son had been in a car accident not long ago and suffered a life-changing head injury. God had clearly led me to pray. There are so many different ways we can love others with our prayers. I recently agreed with a friend to pray daily for his daughter while he prayed for mine, and we saw wonderful blessings in their lives as a result. Scripture also contains powerful prayers we can pray for others—one of my favorites is Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in 3:14–21, which contains these words: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." Some years back a pastor and author I admired suggested we pray the entire prayer for each other for thirty days, and it was life-changing. You might try the same thing with a friend. There are so many ways to pray—we could go on and on. The important thing is just that we do it. So, for the rest of

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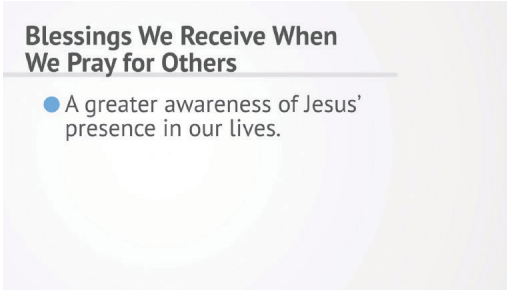

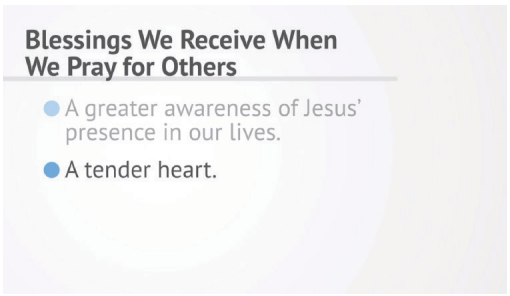

this lesson I'd like to enumerate some of the incredible blessings we receive to encourage us as we pray and help us to do it.

Blessing number one. When we pray for others, we receive a greater awareness of Jesus' presence in our lives. I had a friend call me the other day, a police officer who lives in our neighborhood. I and another neighbor have been praying for months for him to draw near to Jesus. His wife and son and daughter already attend our church, and this happened after we started praying for him. Our church was helping him help a group of people in the community who were victims of crime, and he was amazed at something that happened as a result, something that was clearly God at work. He told me, laughing, "Ever since I've met you I've seen so many coincidences. What's up with that?"

I had to laugh as well. Because "coincidences" have a way of happening more frequently when we pray—and of course that means they're not coincidences at all. God was at work, and my friend was starting to see that. James 4:8 tells us, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." When we love others with our prayers, we follow Jesus' example and join Him in His work. Go to the seventeenth chapter of John and you'll see a prayer that Jesus prayed for His disciples and also for all of us. It was the last thing He did before He was arrested and taken to the cross, which shows how important it was to Him.

We see Jesus praying for others time and again, even when He was dying on the cross (Luke 23:34). And as we've seen in a previous lesson, Romans 8:34 tells us that He's still praying, still interceding for us. We are all called to do this as His followers, even though we may feel that we're not very good at it. Think of how the early church prayed fervently for Peter in Acts 12:5 when he was in prison. They must not have had a lot of faith, because they didn't believe it was really him when he came to the door that very night. But God still answered. Or think about Paul's advice to Timothy: "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people" (1 Timothy 2:1). Those words "first of all" indicate top priority. God loves it when we pray for others; and as we follow His lead in this we will receive more of His peace and a deeper awareness of His presence in our lives.

A second blessing we receive when we pray for others is the blessing of a tender heart. When we pray for others, God often helps us to care more deeply. A great example of compassion in

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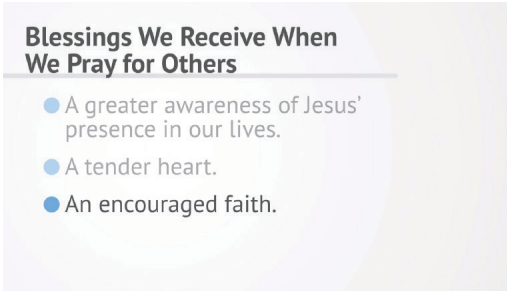
prayer is Abraham. When he learns that God plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the eighteenth chapter of Genesis tells us about this fascinating conversation where Abraham asks the Lord, "What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?" (Genesis 18:24). Then he asks about forty-five, and then forty, and then thirty, and then twenty, and then ten. And God tells him that He will not destroy the cities for the sake of ten righteous people. Do you notice how God interacted with Abraham there? Another biblical example of compassion in prayer is Moses when he prays for God to have mercy in Numbers 14:19. He says, "In keeping with your magnificent, unfailing love, please pardon the sins of this people." And God forgave them as a result! Still another example of compassion in prayer was Epaphras, about whom Paul tells the members of the church in Colosse, "He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (Colossians 4:12).

One more thing. Have you ever noticed when you pray for someone, God may remind you of a special need in your own life? This often happens when we're praying for someone with whom we're having difficulty. There have been so many times in my life where I prayed for someone to change, and then found that God was convicting me of my own sin, or a need to forgive, or to be more patient and less judgmental. The Holy Spirit will lead us in these ways as we pray, and the result of this is more compassion and humility in our own hearts.



Now for the third blessing we receive when we pray for others: The blessing of an encouraged faith. Paul prayed for the church in Thessalonica, "May our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement . . . encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17). Few things are more encouraging than seeing God answer your prayers for someone you love. When you see a life transformed by Jesus' love or an illness healed or a marriage restored or a need met, you want to praise Him for it; and it helps you look expectantly for what He will do next. You find yourself saying, "Do it again, Lord!" because you understand that God *really does* answer prayer. It helps to think about how many times we've seen God's answers and to keep thanking Him for them. That builds faith in us and creates expectation about what will happen if we pray more.

Some months back my wife and I received a message from a childhood friend with a photo of a page from her Bible. It was the

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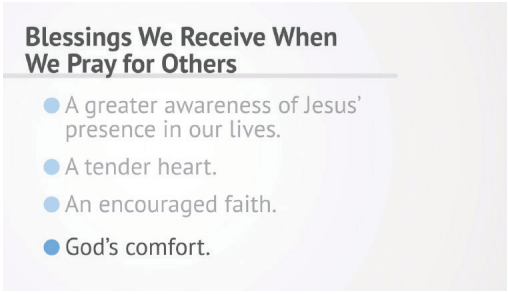

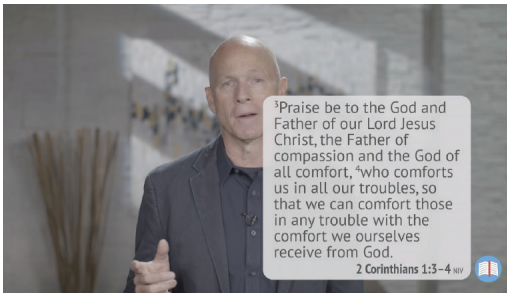

Bible she had when she was in college, and my name was written in one of the margins. Her message said, "I used to pray for James often in the past and wonder why." Beside my name three years were written—and as soon as I saw those years I immediately knew why. My friend and I were out of touch at that time. She was at another college, and that was a time in my life where I was a student in another country and my faith was challenged unlike ever before. It was also the time when I was starting college and running from God's calling on my life. You can imagine my friend's encouragement when we told her that and shared how God had used her. Her first words back to us were "Amazing love," referring to what God had done in prompting her to pray. Not only had I received a beautiful gift—the gift of her prayers—even years later, she did as well: the encouragement that God gave her. God builds us up as we pray for others. When we ask Him to bless them, we reap what we sow, and our blessings come back to us.

And so, we come to a fourth blessing that we receive when we pray for others: the blessing of God's comfort. Paul prayed in 2 Corinthians 1:3–4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." When we pray for others, God's comfort can come in surprising ways. When our son struggled with heroin addiction and we were wrestling in prayer for him, my wife, Cari, told me one day years ago, "I don't know why, but I believe God is going to use Geoffrey in ministry someday." I couldn't see it at the time. I didn't receive that particular comfort as I prayed for our son, but the amazing thing about it was that she was right. Today he is a youth pastor in a large church and God is using him in others' lives in beautiful ways. In those moments when Cari prayed for him, God gave her a special insight, a front row seat to what he would one day do. And that comfort helped her through some very difficult days. It was something very special that was just for her—and He does that. He encouraged me in other ways; and the point is that God's Spirit will minister to our personal needs as we pray for others.

An awareness of Jesus' presence, a tender heart, an encouraged faith, God's comfort—those are just four of the blessings we receive when we pray for others, and there are many more. But just imagine the blessings that others will receive as we pray for them. Those are beyond counting.

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