

Discerning the Calls

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Every now and again, prayer requests do the rounds on social media, and they seem to follow a variation of the following pattern: *“God woke me ... gave me an image/revelation ... bloodshed in this nation ... need to pray against ... sense of urgency ... we serve a mighty God.”*

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A call to prayer is always a good idea, and I don't doubt the good intentions and sincerity of those issuing the calls, but given the increasing frequency of these calls, it would be prudent to discern the nature of these prayer requests and compare it to what we see in Scripture.

We live in an age where there is no shortage of spirituality, but there does seem to be a shortage of discernment. It is rather disturbing the number of 'prayer hoaxes' that Christians have been passing on to one another (if you want some examples, go to www.incontextinternational.org and click on the Hoaxology tab). Scripture instructs us to discern and test (e.g. 1 Thess 5:21) what people claim to say in the name of God. We cannot, if we want to be God-honouring disciples, just simply accept every 'revelation' (this in itself is a warning bell as it implies that the current revelation of Scripture is not sufficient) that comes along. Remember, Satan knows full well how to appear as an angel of light, and he is an absolute master at giving deception the appearance of truth – Jesus simply calls him a liar (John 8:44). If we take the words of our Lord seriously, we need to examine our hearts in coming to the Lord in prayer.

Let us not be naive; Satan does not mind people praying if they are praying with a wrong spirit. It was Jesus who warned us that there would be many on that day who will cry out about how they did mighty things in the name of Jesus, and His answer will be “I never knew you” (Matt 7:21-23).

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I want to encourage the body of Christ to pray in accordance with Scripture.

Given the spiritual warfare nature of these calls to prayer, let us look at some 'spiritual warfare' examples in Scripture. Let us look at the example set before us by men who were intimately familiar with knowledge of the spiritual world: two from the Old Testament (Elijah and Daniel), one from the New Testament (Paul) and, of course, Jesus our Lord.

Let's consider the epic stand-off between **ELIJAH** and all the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. You know what happened. There was one prophet of God, Elijah, and 450 prophets of Baal on that mountain. The goal of this meeting was simple: to determine who was God. Was it Baal? If so, then follow him! Is it God? If so, then follow Him! How would the people know? The one who answered by fire.

The prophets of Baal engage in their frenzied worship, and Elijah does have some fun at their expense (v. 27). But no fire came. I'm pretty sure Satan knows how to light a fire. Any thoughts as to why he couldn't?

Then Elijah arranges for the altar and sacrifice to be drenched in water (v. 33-35). Please take note of Elijah's prayer: there is no binding of the spirits of Baal, no coming against them in any form: just a simple prayer of faith to a powerful God. *“O Lord,”* Elijah prays... *“God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God, and that You have turned their hearts back.”* The result? Fire fell.

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There is so much to be learnt in this! What do we see? We see a willing, obedient and believing servant, (1) coming humbly before God, (2) desiring the glory of God, and (3) entrusting the outcome to God. Elijah knew the real miracle and display of power was not in the binding of spirits, but in changing the hearts of the people. Let's not forget that in James 5:17 we are told that Elijah was a man like us. We don't have to have the epic stand-off scenario to pray like Elijah. We too can live in obedience, come humbly before God, desire His glory to be manifested and pray not for spirits to be bound, but for hearts to be changed.

What about **DANIEL**? Daniel was forcefully removed from his homeland as a teenager, placed in a pagan palace in Babylon, got given a new pagan name (Beltshazzar – Daniel 1:7) and had to learn a new language along with the practices of this culture, which was polytheistic and steeped in sorcery and astrology. Daniel definitely understood the reality of a spiritual world.

In fact, in one of his fantastic apocalyptic visions, Daniel matter-of-factly gets told by an angel that he got delayed in responding to Daniel because he was held up! Does this sound a bit strange to you? *“The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia...”* (Daniel 10:13) It is primarily this verse that has been used to bolster the notion of binding

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territorial spirits, but nowhere do we see Daniel being instructed to engage in such an activity or that he actually does anything like that. What is telling is Daniel's approach to prayer: it was a way of life. In the context of keen sensitivity to the spiritual world, Daniel's approach is not to bind anything or come against anything, but to submit to God and to be a faithful witness within his context and pray for God's purposes to be fulfilled. Daniel's prayer life was anchored in the sovereignty of God. He didn't curse the darkness, but instead sought to be a light.

The **EARLY CHURCH** knew the reality of the spiritual world, and we read about it in the book of Acts. I am always amazed at how, in the context of persecution, we do not find prayers that come against the authorities, but rather instead we find prayers for boldness to preach and live out the gospel witness. In Acts 4:23-31, we again see prayers to a Sovereign God and a willingness to be used of God for the honour of God.

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What about the **APOSTLE PAUL**? Paul lived and ministered in the context of the Greco-Roman world with its pantheon of gods. He also knew about the spiritual world, having during the course of his ministry cast out a few demons (although he never went looking for them), to the extent that we even read about the sons of Sceva trying to drive out demons via the names of Jesus and Paul (Acts 19:11-20)! Paul's approach to witnessing in a hostile context? Proclaim Christ.

Perhaps Paul's most famous teaching on the issue of spiritual warfare is his "armour of God" image in Ephesians 6. We find that the real focus of the battle is not the earthly political sphere, but, in the light of all that he has written before in this letter, the Church. Children of God, collectively called the Church, represent a "supernatural community which God indwells by His Spirit" (2:22).¹ We certainly do engage in battle with the demonic realm, but not in the way that popularly gets promoted. We don't fight from a distance via spiritual Bluetooth, but we instead wrestle (v12)! And the areas we need to watch out for? Verse 11 tells us: the schemes, or to use a more literal translation, the "stratagems" of the devil. The same word is used in Ephesians 4:14 in the context of calling Christians to grow in biblical knowledge so that we *"may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."* So – we need to be discerning!

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Again, in the context of this passage of warfare where the weapons boil down to the Church simply carrying out its calling of proclaiming and living the gospel and trusting God, the atmosphere of prayer is not about binding spirits or coming against anything or anyone, but rather the bold proclamation of the gospel. The gospel has a way of sorting people out. Remember that the real battle is about establishing the rule of God in the hearts of men! People are not the enemy; Satan is (more on him below...)

But there is something else very interesting. There is another mention of the devil in this book of Ephesians, and it also in chapter 4, and it's in connection with something far less esoteric and far more real. It's in v. 26-27 and it says the following: *"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil."* Did you get that? Through anger the devil can be given a foothold.

¹ Tinker, Melvin *Evangelical Concerns*, p174

Now think about the seeds that get sown in your heart through some of these calls to prayer via social media. We get told to pray against this person or that spirit... and don't you find yourself just getting so angry over that person or that spirit? And then, don't you find that anger has a knack for leading you into fear? Oops.

The command "do not fear" appears throughout Scripture for the child of God. Why? Because God is sovereign over all. Why pray against a defeated enemy when we can instead pray for the establishment of an already-won victory? Isn't it interesting that the objective of the battle laid out in Ephesians 6 is not disarming principalities and powers, but to stand. Why? Because Jesus has already defeated the principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15).

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A victory won at Calvary, and I want to close this reflection by briefly looking at the example of our Lord.

When **JESUS** walked this earth, His disciples soon became aware that there was something different about the prayer life of Jesus, and so they asked Him to teach them. What always astounds me about the prayer of Jesus is this description in Hebrews 5:7. Before I quote it, please remember that this is the description of the prayers of Jesus, the Son of God: ***"In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence."***

Does that make you marvel? It should! And let us not forget the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: ***"Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done"*** (Luke 22:42).

And when He taught us to pray, He taught us to pray to **our** Father (that means Jesus sees us as His brothers and sisters). He taught us to pray for God's name to be revered (and that begins with us), for the establishment of God's kingdom and will (again, that begins with us), to ask for our daily needs (so that we remember that we are dependent on God and we can be grateful for His provision), to please forgive us (recognising that we need it) just as we forgive others (it's hard to hold onto anger when you seek to forgive), and to lead us not into temptation (because we know our weakness in being tested) and to deliver us from evil (which could only happen through Calvary).

So, the next time you hear a call to prayer, ask yourself the following:

- Does it encourage a humble, reverent dependence on a Sovereign God?
- Does it sow the seeds of faith or fear?
- Does it desire the revealing of the glory of God through the transformation of hearts... or is it maybe just rather wanting to get rid of a potential threat to our comfort?

When I look at Scripture, I would, if I could, issue a call to prayer along the following lines:

Father God, You alone are Lord. You alone hold the hearts of men and women in Your hands. You have both the authority and the power to change hearts, and we ask You to do so. Please give us hearts of compassion and courage to live and speak Your gospel. We look at what is happening in our land. We see people promoting hate and violence, and we want to lift them up to You. We pray that You will create gospel opportunities for these men and women who promote hate, that they will encounter You in the fullness of Your holy love, and that they will see the wickedness of their own heart by comparison and desire You to instead be Lord of their lives. We thank You that You are at work. Forgive us for our complacency and being more concerned for our earthly kingdom than Your eternal one. We do pray that You will continue to work in our land, and more especially in our hearts. We even pray that Parliament will be filled with a passion for righteousness. But most of all, help Your people to advance Your Kingdom, and may it begin with me. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.
