

When the Holy Spirit moves – Part 4

As we continue to investigate what happens when the Holy Spirit moves across a community and a nation, I want to take you back thirty three years. I was at Theological College at the time and part of our pastoral training included a week-long mission trip somewhere in our State. This trip was to Tuggeranong Baptist Church in Canberra. It was a week which God used to show me something I could hardly believe at the time, but it has been a source of great encouragement ever since.

After I had been there a few days I observed a spirit of unity I had never really seen before. Like some Churches now, there was a great diversity of backgrounds in the members of this Church. This congregation included former Anglicans, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians and of course many rusted-on third generation Baptists. That was very interesting, especially thirty three years ago when such diversity was very rare in a Baptist Church. As I got to know some of these people I soon realised that many of them had actually not changed some of their very different theological positions and yet they still enjoyed a rich and fruitful fellowship together.

For example, there were a number of full-on Pentecostals who exercised some of the 'revelatory' gifts such as tongues, words of knowledge and prophecy. However, they enjoyed close fellowship with other believers who firmly believed that such gifts were only for the establishment of the Church and ceased with the Apostolic age! Two of these people I met who held such opposing views were actually in the same weekly home group and were really good friends! There were many other diverse views held in this congregation and yet the unity and singleness of purpose in Christ was so clearly evident and so powerfully present.

I remember asking the Pastor at that time, Rev. Laurie Purdy, what the secret was and how did he manage to have such a growing, vibrant Church full of people who didn't agree with each other on some issues which have been dividing Christians for centuries. He told me that he preached on unity and grace in some form or another almost every week over many years, but then he said, "*If you want to know the main reason for this miracle Church, then come with me and I will show you.*"

Somewhat intrigued, I followed Laurie down a long hallway and into his office. He went to his book shelf and reached up and took a photo album off the top shelf and opened it on his desk. This album was full of many photos of his Church family involved in a variety of activities over the years. He flicked through the pages until he came to a photo of two dear old ladies whom he said were in their 80's at the time of the photo. As he pointed to these ladies, his voice softened and he became a little emotional as he said, "*There is your answer. That is the real reason why this Church is growing so consistently and has such an amazing unity in the midst of incredible diversity.*"

He went on to explain that these two ladies had been two of his greatest intercessors – they had a deep burden for the Church and the mission of Christ and they prayed more than anyone he had ever known. One of them, he said, prayed for up to eight hours some days and both of them would never spend less than three hours in prayer every single day.

Also, as a result of their commitment to prayer, they had also been used by God to inspire the entire congregation to pray far more than they ever had before. Pastor Laurie said he learned a lot of things about God and about the ministry of the Church in his many years at Tuggeranong Baptist, but the most important thing he learned was the purpose, priority and power of prayer – sustained, fervent, believing prayer.

He said to me with great conviction in his voice, "*The reason the Holy Spirit has been moving so powerfully among us in recent years is because those two beautiful women showed us and taught us the priority of prayer.*" That was over thirty years ago and those two ladies and their Pastor are with the Lord now, but that Congregation is still the same miracle of grace and unity it was back then because those who followed on, were marked by God with the same commitment to prayer.

Now let me take you back 165 years. In 1857 Jeremiah Lanphier was at a crossroads in his life. He was a single, middle-aged businessman with no children or family. Following his heart to reach the neediest people around him, he put aside his regular business and began to work with the North Dutch Church in Manhattan New York as a lay missionary. At that time, there were 30,000 men idle on the streets of New York. Unemployment was at record levels; drunkenness was rampant and the nation was bitterly divided by slavery.

Ministering in the dark slums of Hell's Kitchen, Lanphier poured himself into the lives of people who were homeless, helpless and hopeless. Month after month he went door to door sharing the Good News, distributing gospel tracts and holding Bible studies with anyone who would listen. Jeremiah would begin each day going from office to office, house to house and shop to shop; but by midday he was physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted.

So he soon realized his need and so he returned to a room in the Church building to cry out to God for spiritual strength and God restored him miraculously. This fresh, personal experience of the power of prayer suggested to Lanphier that there might be others, especially those engaged in business, who would profit from some time in prayer. So he printed, at his own expense, 20,000 flyers advertising the first noonday prayer meeting on Wednesday 23rd September 1857.

The time for the prayer meeting to start passed and thirty minutes later, Jeremiah Lanphier was still alone praying. Just as he was about to conclude that none of the 20,000 flyers he paid for and handed out personally had touched anyone, he heard footsteps coming up the staircase and another person joined him. Then another and another until Lanphier was joined by five men. God let him wait half an hour and almost lose hope, so that his joy over just six people in a prayer meeting was overwhelming. The following Wednesday that six increased to twenty. The following week there were sixty gathered in prayer. Three months later there were eight hundred. Eight months later 6,000 people were gathering for prayer in the middle of New York City.

After a while they decided to meet daily, and within weeks the word spread and the Spirit of God brought thousands of business leaders together for prayer every single day. Before long over 100 Churches and public meeting halls were filled to capacity with noonday prayer meetings. God moved so powerfully as prayers were being answered every day and similar prayer meetings sprang up right across America. By the end of the first year of this mighty move of the Holy Spirit, there were 800,000 people praying at noon every day in the middle of cities right across the USA.

For many months there were over 10,000 conversions to Christ each week in New York City alone, and it is estimated that nearly one million people across the United States were transformed during this incredible move of God which has now been called *The Layman's Prayer Revival*. It was a move of God which did not begin with the Clergy, or with some gifted evangelist – it began in the heart of one layman who refused to give up and who discovered the purpose and the power of persistent, fervent prayer.

Now let me take you back even further. It was on a Saturday afternoon in August 1806 that five young men from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, met together to pray near a grove of maple trees north of the campus. As a thunderstorm rolled in overhead, lightning and rain forced the students to run and take shelter in a haystack. As the storm raged and the lightning flashed overhead, the students prayed that God would send them across the seas to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a lost world. God heard their prayer.

Two years later, the Haystack Prayer Group and other Williams College students began a ministry tasked with establishing missions locally and abroad. In 1810, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was created and it soon sent its first missionaries to the non-Christian world - to India. In its first fifty years, ABCFM sent out over 1,200 missionaries.

Samuel Mills was the most influential among the Haystack Group to direct the modern mission movement. He played a role in the founding of the American Bible Society and the United Foreign Missionary Society.

Why did all this happen? What caused the explosion of American interest in global evangelism and missions after 1810? Well it was simple really. A handful of college students who were completely sold out to God in the summer of 1806, gathered to pray and experienced the presence of God. In the presence of God, the students at the haystack took personal responsibility for the lost souls of their generation and committed that burden to prayer and didn't stop praying until God acted.

Now I could keep going for hours, if not days, sharing accounts like this throughout history and I hope to do so more in the days ahead. But let me just take you back to the very beginning, which was over 2,000 years ago at the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, our Lord and Saviour. After the resurrected Christ had appeared many times to the disciples He said something very important to them and we can read His words in the first chapter of the book of Acts.

Acts 1:4-5,8 “*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

Those were Jesus' last words as man before He left the earth. Then notice what the disciples did:

Acts 1:12-14 “*Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*”

I find it fascinating to see how many thousands of sermons have been preached and books written on Acts 1:8, which contains Jesus' promise of the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon His people to be witnesses to the ends of the earth - and rightly so - it's a great verse! But you won't find too many sermons and books on Acts 1:14 .. “*They all joined together constantly in prayer ...*” I think this has always been the case in the Church but it has increased as we have moved further and further into this 'instant' age in which we now find ourselves. Sadly, the concept of 'waiting' or doing anything 'constantly' over time, stands in stark contrast to our whole culture.

Today we can just type a few words on a keyboard and click a plastic thing we call a mouse and be anywhere in the world or in human history in seconds. Years ago that required hours in a public library and even then the information was never totally up to date because it took years for reference books to be re-printed and updated. Today we can now remove a frozen meal from a container, zap it with microwaves and be eating it in five minutes. Years ago we would need to have taken the meat out of the freezer the night before and started preparing our evening meal early in the afternoon for it all to be ready by dinner time.

So much of our world has been turbo-charged and lots of things happen quickly now and so people's tolerance of those things which take time has lessened. These days many of us don't even have the ability to think about doing something over and over again without an instant result, because so much of our world only requires us to do something once and the result is there! Waiting on God and waiting for God to act in His time; trusting God to move in our midst and around the world; praying fervently, persistently and constantly for days, weeks, months and even years – these are the key characteristics of the mighty men and women of God we have seen down through the ages.

Now of course God is certainly able to act quickly and sometimes He does so when we least expect it. However, God is far more committed to the journey with us in partnership than we seem to be in our time and culture. We just want the results. But from God's perspective, what happens to us in the process is a result in itself. God is certainly concerned about the destination, the goal and the outcome. But He is just as concerned about the process, the moment by moment faith journey which He calls us into and that's why Billy Graham once said, "*The mystery and wonder of prayer is that God often waits until someone asks.*"

God does not *need* us to pray in order to act and God does not *need* us to pray over and over and over again in order to act. He doesn't need convincing. He's not hard of hearing. He's not stubborn and needs us to wear Him down. God calls upon us to wait on Him in constant, fervent, believing prayer because of what it does in us and to us. Prayer is not just asking God for something and expecting Him to give it. If that is all prayer was, then we would only ask once and forget about it. But history tells us that prolonged, constant, fervent prayer is what precedes all the mighty outpourings from God in healing, revival and community transformation.

Why is that? Well we don't know all the reasons, only God does. However, one of the reasons is clear. Nobody can pray constantly and fervently and sincerely over a long period of time without faith. You just can't do it. You will give up sooner or later because without faith you will see no real purpose in sustained prayer. It will feel like a dead ritual, not a spiritually significant activity.

Only those with a deep sense of trust and faith in God will be able to pray and continue praying, regardless of the outcome and it's that faith and trust which is what God is holding out for. Revivals and community transformations are built on that faith and trust. Prayer is simply the activity of those people who trust God and have the faith to believe that God will not only answer their prayer, in His time and His way, but He will also transform them in the process of praying. Let me say that again: **Prayer is the activity of those people who trust God and have the faith to believe that God will not only answer their prayer, in His time and in His way, but He will also transform them in the process of praying.**

You see friends, God has never seen prayer as just the means by which we communicate with Him or ask Him for stuff. God sees prayer as much, much more than that. God desires to transform us into the image of His Son, which is our ultimate and true identity as believers, and He does that as we pray more than via any other means. So what is God doing in the face of all our challenges in the world today?

God is doing exactly what He was doing thirty three years ago in that Church in Canberra I visited; He is doing exactly what He was doing in New York in 1857 and then all across America the following year; He is doing exactly what He was doing under that haystack in Massachusetts in 1806; He is doing exactly what He was doing just before He left the earth in bodily form over 2,000 years ago – God is calling His people to prayer. In an age when we would rather fill our days with more ‘productive’ activities, God is still calling us to be still and know that He is God (Ps.46:10); to draw near to Him so that He might draw near to us (James 4:8); to wait on our Lord so that we might rise up as with the wings of an eagle (Is. 40:31).

God is calling us to push the ‘pause’ button on our busy lives and to pray - constantly, fervently and in faith. Our minds tell us that we need to ‘do’ so much more in this troubled world, but the Spirit of God will tell us that we need to direct more of that energy into humbling ourselves before God in prayer. Only there, in that place of submission, that place of dependence, that place of trust, will we once again know that God is the only One with the ability to deal with any and all of the world’s woes and the army He is raising up to bring His enemy into submission is an army which marches on its knees - an army of invisible prayer warriors.

We are in a spiritual battle, we always have been. We are at war with the enemy of God, we always have been. Our battle is not against the Islamic State and ruthless terrorists ... our battle is against the principalities and powers, the spiritual forces of darkness which gives birth to all manner of evil around our world, and that battle is not fought with weapons made by man.

The soldiers in God’s army have the cross of Christ as their ultimate weapon and they march on their knees in prayer. The amazing thing about God’s army is there is no age limit. In fact, like I saw in a photo album many years ago in that Canberra church, some of the greatest and most effective soldiers in the army of God, are those in the twilight of their life on earth – those senior saints who have the time, the maturity and the spiritual burden to spend hours and hours in prayer.

Let me assure you that I would not have survived the last four decades in ministry without prayer warriors like that. I could take you to several photos in my album of life and point out the specific people whom I know for a fact were praying fervently and especially for me, for my family and for the ministry in which I was involved at the time.

You see friends our mission, our vision, our strategic direction, our ministry programs ... in fact everything we ‘do’ and ‘decide’ as a church are all a fruitless waste of time without prayer. They are just things we do – maybe with right motives and sincere intentions - but they will lack power, they will achieve very little and they will not last, if they are not preceded by, saturated in, and constantly upheld by sustained, fervent, daily prayer across the Church.

When that vision of the purpose, the place and the priority of prayer is re-captured by the Church in our day, then maybe, just maybe, we will also get to see one of those ‘spontaneous’, ‘sovereign’ moves of the Holy Spirit explode across the landscape of our life and community as the Lord captures the hearts of thousands of His people. Let those who have ears to hear, really listen to what God is saying to the Church today. Amen.