

Do Our Prayers for Missionaries Really Matter?

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A man once spent twenty minutes and twenty seconds of his life one day looking at two different emails. The first email was from a local store that shared all of its weekly deals. He studied it in detail, not only hoping to find a great offer, but also to see what was new in the world of technology. He took 20 minutes to do this, although he thought often throughout the rest of the day about what he discovered.



The second email this man received was from a missionary who preaches the gospel and starts churches in a difficult place on the other side of the earth. He didn't read much of this email, but he did scroll all the way down to the bottom. He deleted it twenty seconds after it was opened. He didn't think about the missionary one time the rest of the day, but he did ask God to bless "all of the missionaries out there" during family devotions that night.

I'm ashamed to say that the man in the story above was me. Thankfully, God has graciously shown me a better way. Sure, we're free to look through a local store's weekly ad and make wise purchases, but something is amiss in our lives and churches if we treat the reports of missionaries as flippantly as I did. We have a responsibility to partner with them not only financially, but prayerfully.

Powerful preaching and fruitful ministry on the mission field depend on the prayers of God's people. Paul understood this. Just before his departure on the first and second missionary journeys (and presumably the third), the believers in Antioch prayed for Paul and his team (Acts 13:3; 15:40). Furthermore, five times in his letters he asked directly for prayer. In First Thessalonians 5:25, he simply says, "Brothers, pray for us." He's more specific in his other appeals:

Romans 15:30-32 – "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company."

Ephesians 6:19-20 – "[Pray] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak."

Colossians 4:3-4 – "Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak."

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 – "Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith."

The great burden of the missionary is to take the gospel to unbelievers, to see them converted, and then to help them start churches. God saves sinners through the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Romans 10:17), but He does not intend to save apart from the prayers of believers. James Fraser, a missionary to the Lisu people in China, wrote to his prayer partners back home, "I believe it will only be known on the Last Day how much has been accomplished in missionary work by the prayers of earnest believers at home."¹

We should feel the urgency of this responsibility to pray for missionaries:

Pray right away when the email or prayer letter arrives. Read it thoughtfully. Study carefully any pictures that are attached. These are real people, in the most important battle happening on this earth. Heaven or hell is in the balance. You may pray again later, but don't wait until then—too much is at stake.

Pray regularly every day. You could write their names and specific requests on a prayer list you keep in your Bible, or on cards you look at throughout the day or when you exercise. One man I know prays for certain Welsh ministers every time he uses a certain coffee cup. You might use the same strategy for missionaries. I seek to pray for a different missionary before each meal.

James Fraser, when pleading with those who sent him to China to persevere in prayer for his ministry, expressed what any faithful missionary believes: "Solid, lasting missionary work is done *on our knees*."²

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¹ Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Behind the Ranges: Fraser of Lisuland Southwest of China* (London: China Inland Mission, 1956), 47.

² *Ibid.*