

Praying for Missionaries



by Eddie Arthur

'This helpful piece is designed to help us pray for people like him (and me) whose primary responsibilities lie in cross-cultural mission – and we need prayer! But it also has wider application to every Christian believer, because we are all called to serve Him, in this in-between state.....so let's use this and every other tool we can find to help us to pray expectantly.'

Gordon Showell-Rogers

Associate International Director, World Evangelical Alliance

'The whole piece is refreshing, lucid and honest – I think it can do only good.'

Rev Dr Paul Adams

Senior Pastor, Banstead Baptist Church, Surrey

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My wife and I have been missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators for almost 30 years. During this time we have lived through some wonderful moments and some pretty awful ones too. However, there is one thing that has kept us going and that is the way in which God has answered the faithful prayers of our friends and supporting churches. I have no doubt that we would have crashed and burned somewhere along the line if people had not been praying for us.

However, I have to admit that despite knowing how important prayer is, I still find it difficult to pray and I'm sure I'm not the only one. This little booklet started out as a series of blog posts, and is intended to help people, like myself, who sometimes struggle knowing how best to pray for missionaries. We are all very different, and some people will find my suggestions helpful, while others won't like them at all. The main thing is that each of us seeks to find ways that will help and inspire us to pray.

When Jesus' disciples struggled to know how best to pray, he taught them a short prayer which has become very familiar to all of his followers. I reckon that I can't do better than the Master, so this guide simply picks up on the themes of the Lord's Prayer and suggests ways in which they could be used to pray for your missionary friends.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

It is appropriate that any prayer for missionaries should start with thinking about God. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus gave the 'Great Commission' to his disciples, the first thing they did was worship. Mission must always start from a heart that overflows with love and gratitude to God; otherwise we have nothing to offer a needy world.

Missionaries also face a particular temptation: in order to raise interest and support for their work, they have to talk about themselves an awful lot. Unless they are very careful, they can draw attention away from God and on to themselves. Many missionaries have extraordinary stories to tell about travelling to exotic places, eating strange foods and seeing wonderful things happen, but if we just talk about these things, we are missing the point. The centre of mission work is the God whom the missionaries serve, not the missionaries themselves.

So if you want to pray for missionaries, here are two starting suggestions:

- *Start with worship yourself. Don't forget to acknowledge who you are praying to and your dependence on your heavenly Father.*
- *Pray that "your" missionary will have a life which is typified by gratitude and worship for God. Even if you don't have time to work through all of the other things in your prayer list, don't miss out this one.*

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Missionaries talk a lot about doing stuff: attending meetings, preaching, travelling and what have you. But, in the final analysis, it isn't the stuff we do that is important; it is the impact that it has that matters. Ultimately, the work of a missionary is to announce the kingdom of God in word and deed. The meetings, preaching and travelling are means to an end, not the end in itself. If the stuff we are doing isn't contributing to the coming of God's kingdom, then something is going wrong somewhere.

If you are someone who regularly prays for a missionary, why not ask them in what way the activities they are doing are contributing to God's kingdom? It doesn't do anyone any harm to stop and think through the deeper impact of their work. Of course, sometimes, the connection between the day-to-day activities and the kingdom can be a little distant. It is far easier for a Bible translator to point out the kingdom impact of his or her work than it is for someone running a finance department. But, the translator knows full well that they couldn't do their work without the backup provided by finance and other administrative staff. We can't be too simplistic about this.

It seems to me that there should be two aspects in praying for the kingdom impact of missionaries' work.

The first is that the way in which the work is done demonstrates God's rule on earth. The way in which we work should be God-honouring and should contribute to the growth and development of the people around us. The remark by an African church leader *that he wanted to see the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of Bible translators before he read the words 'Holy Spirit' on the page* is an excellent illustration of this principle. Missionaries need to be faithful disciples in the everyday details of life.

The second aspect is that the results of our work need to have a Kingdom impact. It's not enough to preach a fantastic sermon or to translate an

epistle; we need to see people drawn into deeper communion with Christ through the sermon or epistle.

- *So when you pray for a missionary, pray that both the way in which they do their work and the impact of their work will contribute to God's kingdom coming and his will being done on earth – just as it is in heaven.*

Give us today our daily bread

If there is one thing that 20 years of leadership in a mission organisation has taught me; we never have enough time, people or money to do what we think we should be doing. Individual missionaries may well have the resources they need for whatever it is they are doing, but across the board, agencies struggle. This means that mission leadership is a constant round of both praying for God's provision and working out how you can do what you need to do when God doesn't provide in the way you would like him to. We constantly need to refocus, cut programmes and find ways to allow two people to do three peoples' work – all the time praying for God to provide.

There are those who rather simplistically say that "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply". I don't want to get distracted by this phrase, but let me just say that you can't guarantee that doing the right thing for the right motives means that the financial resources will be there, nor does the lack of finance mean that something is being done wrongly. It isn't that simple.

God does provide for our needs, though not always for our desires. Sometimes missionaries and agencies over-reach themselves and need to rein in their ambitions. Sometimes he has very important lessons to teach us as we see how much he can do when we don't have the resources we think we need. We can sometimes learn far more in times of shortage than in times of plenty.

So what is the daily bread that you should pray for missionaries to receive?

- **Stuff:** *this will depend on the person and the situation, but missionary letters generally list a few things that the writer needs.*
- **Money:** *Brits don't like to talk about this, but missionaries do need financial support; please pray that they will receive it (even better, give something, as well as praying).*

- **People:** *it was the Lord Jesus who said that the harvest was plentiful and the labourers were few. Things haven't changed much, so pray for people to join in the work.*
- **Wisdom:** *to know how to continue working for the Kingdom when resources are short.*

And forgive us our debts

Or forgive us our sins/trespasses. It may surprise you, but missionaries do sin and do need to seek God's forgiveness. Although some people put missionaries on a pedestal, they have the same struggles as everyone else. Pride, jealousy, anger, lust; you name it, missionaries are prone to it in the same way that other people are.

In fact, missionaries and other Christian workers often struggle more with some things than the general population. Sometimes Christian workers can rely on the fact that they are doing 'Christian stuff' all of the time and can neglect their own devotional lives, with the attendant problems that this can bring. It is dead easy for Bible teachers and preachers to become proud of what they are doing and to live for the performance rather than for seeing others built up in Christ. It is also true that Christian workers are often very vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one.

As we also have forgiven our debtors

This bit is always uncomfortable. Christian work is based on character. It is important that missionaries, preachers and others have the technical skills they need to do the job, but it is far more important that they have a Godly character. Someone who is unforgiving, who bears grudges, is always going to struggle to be effective in Kingdom ministry. It isn't always easy to forgive people, but we have to do it. Many a Christian minister has had their heart broken by the very people they are trying to serve, but bitterness and being unforgiving is just not an option.

In passing, it is also important that Christian leaders learn to seek forgiveness from other people when that is appropriate. It isn't easy, but it has to be done.

So with that in mind, here are three things that you might like to pray for a missionary (or anyone else, come to think of it):

- *Pray that they will keep short accounts with God and will regularly turn to him for forgiveness and strength to grow.*
- *That they will have forgiving hearts and won't hold grudges against others.*
- *That they would seek forgiveness from others when they have stepped out of line.*

And lead us not into temptation

Of course, missionaries are all so holy and wonderful that they don't suffer from temptation. Pull the other one!

Missionaries are subject to temptation in just the same way that other people are. We all have our weaknesses and issues in our past which leave us liable to drift away from God in our own particular ways, and missionaries are no exception. If you face a particular temptation, then it is likely that a missionary that you know struggles with the same issue.

However, missionaries and other Christian workers do have a slice of issues that are a bit more specific to their roles.

As I mentioned earlier, the biggest problem is confusing service for God and a relationship with God. It is desperately easy for Christian workers to allow their work and study to replace regular devotional time with God. After all, if you are spending all day studying the Bible in great depth so that you can translate it or teach it, why would you need to read it devotionally? What difference is another fifteen minutes of Bible study going to make?

It is also true that the loneliness, isolation and stress which can be part of missionary life can reduce people's ability to resist temptation. Those normal everyday temptations to pride, anger, lust or what-have-you can become much sharper when you are a long way from home and going through culture shock.

- *So, pray that they would not allow their work to take the place of their Lord and that they would be strong to resist temptation in all its forms.*

Deliver us from the evil one

In my experience, Christians tend to divide into two broad camps. There are some who see demons lurking behind every bush and who attribute anything even vaguely unpleasant to their activity; and there are those who, while acknowledging that Satan and demons exist, are unwilling to admit that they actually do anything. I, of course, am perfectly balanced down the middle!

Whatever your view on this issue, it is very hard to deny that Christian workers, especially those who are taking the Gospel into new areas, will face attacks from the evil one. These attacks come in many forms. I remember lying in bed in Kouya-land listening to a mask dancing ceremony going on around midnight and being able to palpably feel the evil in the air. You might find it hard to believe and you may wish to rationalise it in some way, but you weren't there. It's hard to describe what it feels like to experience such a solid sense of evil surrounding you – quite frankly, I was scared rigid!

But the evil one doesn't always manifest himself in that sort of obvious display. Missionaries and Christian workers face assaults by corrupt governments, persecution at the hands of religious zealots and other less obvious forms of attack. I don't doubt for one moment that Satan and his minions are involved in this sort of thing.

There is nothing that he would like to disrupt more the progress of the Gospel around the world and the best way to do that is to render ministers of the Gospel ineffective. Mission work can go ahead (for a while at least) without daily bread, but the attacks of the evil one can render it useless very quickly.

- *So, please pray that your missionary friends would be delivered from the evil one, however he chooses to attack them.*

About the Author

Eddie Arthur is the Executive Director of Wycliffe Bible Translators in the UK. Previously he has worked as part of the translation team for the Kouya New Testament in Ivory Coast and as the National Director for a Wycliffe partner organisation in Ivory Coast and Mali.

You can read more of Eddie's thoughts on Bible translation and life, on his website kouya.net, or follow him on Twitter @kouya.

About Wycliffe Bible Translators

Worldwide there are over 340 million people in over 2,000 languages who do not have access to the story of God's love for his people – the story of the Bible – in the language that they understand the best, their 'heart' language.

Wycliffe Bible Translators believe that the Bible is the best way for people to come to know and understand who God is. Our vision is that by working with churches, organisations and individuals from around the world, all people will have access to God's word in a language they truly understand.

Find out more about those without God's word and how Wycliffe are playing their part in changing that at wycliffe.org.uk.