

Going Vertical Changes Horizontal

God's Presence Is the Strategy with Missions

By Dave Butts



It doesn't sound exactly like the Great Commission of the New Testament (Matt. 28:16–20), but God put Israel on mission. He told them, “Go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Ex. 33:1). The land promised to Israel was already inhabited—and it was going to take an immense amount of effort to dislodge the current inhabitants and establish Israel's Promised Land. Moses had the wisdom to realize that could not happen unless God Himself went with them on their mission.

In one of the more amazing conversations in Scripture, Moses and God talked about how important it was that the people of Israel have the Lord's Presence with them if they were to accomplish their purpose. As you read this passage, carefully consider how Moses' insight regarding the Lord's Presence might impact the effectiveness of your own mission today.

Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will

send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (Ex. 33:12–17).

This man of great leadership skills, Moses, understood that the Lord's Presence was the key to the success of their mission. To put it in another way, he realized that focusing on the vertical accomplished what God was calling them to do horizontally. Moses' strategy for success was to look to God and plead for His Presence. As long as God was with them, they could not fail in the long run.

Overwhelmed by the Impossible

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the horizontal—the size of the task before us. Israel's mission was huge! Maybe yours is too. When we focus on the horizontal—the people and the mission in front of us—we can wear out from the immensity of the task. In today's world, literally billions do not know Jesus as their Lord. Even using the word billions can cause us to want to curl up and watch TV instead of giving ourselves to a calling that seems impossible.

When we think of world missions, we almost always focus on the horizontal. We show videos and pictures of people in great need, physically and spiritually. The statistics we present of those without Christ move us to compassion. The possibilities

of reaching the world for Christ galvanize us to action. There is nothing inherently wrong with looking horizontally at the great needs around us. But focusing on the horizontal will not sustain and empower us to finish the task.

Like Moses and the people of Israel, what we really need is the Presence of God. Our focus must be vertical in order to be successful horizontally. The author of Hebrews commands us to “fix your thoughts on Jesus” (Heb. 3:1). That’s a vertical focus! It’s not a command to pay attention to what you are doing for Jesus, but to actually look to Him. Isn’t it very possible that our attention is in the wrong place?

Have you wondered how modern-day Christian leaders might have led Israel on their mission to take the land? After forming their team of key leaders, they would certainly have opened with prayer. Then they would have embarked on writing their mission/vision statement, followed by developing their one-, three-, and five-year strategies. Budget and staffing issues would also take quite a bit of the discussion time.

In the same way, for the leaders of Israel to organize a nation for conquest and then settle into new lands would take a great deal of training and strategic thinking. Even then, they probably thought it could begin happening in a matter of months. Only God knew it was going to take 40 years to get them ready for the task!

Please don’t misunderstand. All of those elements of planning and preparation are good—and often necessary. You can find many of those issues in the rest of the Book of Exodus. But Moses correctly started with the essential and then moved to the peripheral. The one thing that distinguished Israel and the leadership of Moses was the Presence of God. Moses models this strategy: Go vertical before the Lord prior to any horizontal move you might make!

We Can't Do It Alone

Jesus also taught us much about this, using the illustration of the vine and the branches. Jesus is the vine and His followers are the branches. We often think that our job as branches is to produce fruit (horizontal thinking). But that's not the case. The vine produces everything needed to bring about fruit on the branch. The branch just needs to stay attached (vertical thinking). Jesus made it very clear, "No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine" (John 15:4). To emphasize His point, Jesus then said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (v. 5).

Though Moses had not heard these words of Jesus, in a very real sense, his response to God fit within this teaching. It is as though Moses said, "Lord, I want to stay attached to you, our vine. We can't do what You want us to do on our own. We are branches incapable of producing fruit. The only thing that distinguishes us as branches is that we are attached to You."

The Presence of God going with Israel in Moses' day, and the branch staying attached to the vine in our day, are both about the same thing. We can't effectively do the work of God without God Himself! Our vertical focus on God will produce the horizontal fruit He desires.

Our Strategy: Prayer

I've served more than 20 years on the board of a great mission organization, Pioneer Bible Translators. It has always been a good, godly ministry that honors the Lord and serves Him with integrity in Bible translation, literacy work, and church planting. Seven years ago we brought on a new president who brought a new strategy to the ministry. It was very simple:

Prayer is our strategy. A vertical focus.

The results have been amazing. The number of missionaries has doubled. Our stateside structure has been greatly strengthened. The number of portions of Scripture translated has skyrocketed. Finances have grown steadily, matching the growth.

Without a doubt, before this emphasis we had prayed and served and had experienced good growth. But with a new, radical, vertical prayer focus, we have seen an explosion in our horizontal effectiveness.

What is the land God is calling you to take? What mission does He have you on? Determine not to go anywhere without Him. Go vertical before you go horizontal!

“If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (Ex.33:15–16).

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Prayer and God’s Supremacy in Missions

Quotes from John Piper

Life is war. . . . Prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie for the mission of the church as it advances against the powers of darkness and unbelief. It is not surprising that prayer malfunctions when we try to make it a domestic intercom to call upstairs for more comforts in the den. God has given

us prayer as a wartime walkie-talkie so that we can call headquarters for everything we need as the kingdom of Christ advances in the world. . . . The one who gives the power gets the glory. Thus, prayer safeguards the supremacy of God in missions while linking us with endless grace for every need.

You can say the mission is to “bear fruit,” or you can say the mission is to “set captives free.” The point stays the same: Prayer is designed to extend the kingdom into fruitless enemy territory.

When Paul tells us to pray for peace precisely because God desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, he is not picturing prayer as a kind of harmless domestic intercom for increasing our civilian conveniences. He is picturing it as a strategic appeal to headquarters to ask that the enemy not be allowed to draw any firepower away to decoy conflicts of flesh and blood.

We simply must seek for ourselves and for our people a wartime mentality. Otherwise the biblical teaching about the urgency of prayer and the vigilance of prayer and the watching in prayer and the perseverance of prayer and the danger of abandoning prayer will make no sense and find no resonance in our hearts. Until we feel the desperation of a bombing raid or the thrill of a new strategic offensive for the gospel, we will not pray in the spirit of Jesus.

Prayer puts God in the place of the all-sufficient Benefactor and puts us in the place of the needy beneficiaries. So when the mission of the church moves forward by prayer, the supremacy of God is manifest and the needs of the Christian troops are met.

The unity of these two goals—the glory of God and the joy of his people [John 14:13 and 16:24]—is preserved in the act of prayer.

Prayer is the turning away from ourselves to God in the

confidence that he will provide the help we need. Prayer humbles us as needy and exalts God as all-sufficient.

I believe the proclamation of the gospel in Word and deed is the work of missions. Prayer is the power that wields the weapon of the Word, and the Word is the weapon by which the nations will be brought to faith and obedience. . . . The New Testament pattern is: "Take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying. . . ." (Eph. 6:17-18).

Perhaps we should speak of prayer as God's instrument to release the power of the gospel, for it is clear that the Word of God is the immediate regenerating instrument of the Spirit. . . (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18).

The return to prayer at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a remarkable work of God. It is full of hope for the awakening of the church and the finishing of the Great Commission. Looking back on the way God aroused and honored seasons of prayer in the past would enlarge our expectation that wonderful works of power are on the horizon.

The war will be won by God. He will win it through the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel will run and triumph through prevailing prayer—so that in everything God might be glorified through Jesus Christ.

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