

In the Crosshairs

Prayer in the Time of War

By Kie Bowman

You have probably never heard anyone describe war as heaven. In fact, it is the exact opposite.

Unfortunately, war is a fact of life in the 21st century. The Geneva Academy recognizes more than 110 armed conflicts in the world today.¹ We almost expect the horrors of war in our world, since in the last 3,400 years there have been only 268 years when war was not active somewhere in the world.²

From a political perspective, there is little you can do to stop terrorism or drone attacks against our Navy or illegal missile tests by the world's most dangerous actors. But in the spiritual realm there is a lot you can do. You make an impact beyond measure when you pray.

The History of War in Scripture

Joshua was a general (Josh. 11:1–23). David “killed his tens of thousands” (1 Sam. 18:7). Jesus prophetically described the grisly scene of invading armies coming against Jerusalem (Matt. 24:7–22). The Book of Revelation predicts the final battle will be fought in Israel in the Valley of Armageddon (Rev. 16:14–16).

The Bible takes war seriously. In a sense, human “war” started as armed conflict when Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4:8), and it will end when Jesus defeats an international army after the 1,000-year reign (Rev. 20:7–10).

In these days of international terrorism, armed conflict, and

the world holding its collective breath with fear and uncertainty, what principles can we learn from the prayer ministries of the biblical heroes who walked a familiar path? How can we pray in the crosshairs of war?

Pray for Peace

The early Church had no political influence. Soon after Pentecost, the church leaders were arrested and imprisoned (Acts 4:1–20). In fact, the Book of Acts is a history of apostolic imprisonments (Acts 5:17–42, 12:5, 16:16–40, 18:12–17, 19:24–41, 21:27ff). Leonard Ravenhill once said, “The early Church had so little influence with men they couldn’t stay out of jail, but they had so much influence with God no jail could hold them.”

While the early Church had almost none of the advantages the American Church takes for granted, they had something we desperately need. They knew how to pray. In fact, “Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him” (Acts 12:5).

In the worst conditions, the Church was, first and foremost, a praying Church. Their lack of social standing meant they were always at risk of running afoul of some Roman leader or decree. Paul understood that keeping the infant Church out of the “line of fire” politically and socially was a way of protecting the viability of the ministry. This outlook could be the motivation behind Paul’s advice: “I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim. 2:1–2).

While they were not in a war zone when Paul wrote to Timothy, the apostle had spent enough time in jail and had been the victim of unprovoked violence often enough to know how dangerous preaching the gospel could be in the Roman Empire.

So, he urged the Church to pray so they could live in peace and continue their ministry.

No matter how bad the situation becomes, no matter how many drones fly overhead, or how many tyrants wage senseless wars, believers are called to pray for peace.

Pray with Conviction

The overwhelming majority of Americans believe morals are in a free fall in our country. Almost 80 percent of us think it is bad and getting worse.³

In the face of our moral decay, Scripture describes the results of standing boldly for God, even when a culture is corrupt. Unfortunately, in a morally decadent culture, godliness becomes marginalized—and the evil majority persecutes the faithful. Peter warned us when he said, “They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you” (1 Peter 4:4).

When we see the sexual intemperance, the cruelty and violence, the political corruption, the drug abuse and crime in our cities, and failures among the clergy, we are forced to ponder the question: “Is Western culture too far gone already?”

For instance, in December 2022, Isabel Vaughn-Spruce was arrested in Birmingham, England, for praying silently in public across the street from an abortion clinic. The charges were eventually dropped a few months later. Apologies followed, but the message sent by the original arrest is blatant.⁴ The British pro-life advocate, arrested for silent prayer, was a victim of the culture wars.

Imagine the pressure you might experience if your prayers are ever outlawed during a full-scale military action. It is happening in parts of the world already. What would you do if it happened to you?

More than 2,600 years ago, Daniel rose to political power in a godless nation. But we cannot forget he was there as a prisoner of war (Dan. 1:1–6). God's hand was on Daniel as he overcame the challenges of serving under five kings and the Babylonian and Persian wars that upended national security. In one of those battles, a new Persian king, Darius the Mede, overthrew Belshazzar the Chaldean (Daniel 5:29–31). In other words, a new country, new culture, new customs, and a completely different kingdom seized power.

Following his ascension to the throne, Darius passed a law that no one could pray to any god except to King Darius himself. To do so would be an act of treason, punishable by death (Dan. 6:6–9). In other words, prayer was viewed as a war crime.

What happened next was one of the most defiant, courageous, and inspiring acts in the Bible. Daniel waged a counteroffensive against the hot war aimed at his prayer life.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before (Dan. 6:10).

What do we learn from Daniel's response to the war against prayer? For one thing, his testimony reminds us that prayer can give us a steel backbone, eager to stand for God in the face of overwhelming circumstances and impossible odds.

The man or woman who dares to believe that prayer is an act of defiance against the raging wars around them is a person of deep conviction. And remember, conviction is not a belief you hold; conviction is a belief that holds you.

Prayer as a Sacrifice

Pastor and author Craig Groeschel has often said, “We sacrifice what we love for what we love more.” As a culture, we do not know much about sacrifice.

In seasons of intense conflict, however, we start to learn the hard way. We know instinctively that if we love something or someone enough, we ignore the price tag. We voluntarily sacrifice what we love for what we love more. We find this principle illustrated in the Book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah’s opening chapter introduces the conflict—will the privileged courtier find a reason to sacrifice for the suffering people of God? Nehemiah is a comfortable civil servant confronted with the terrible news of the devastated condition of his “hometown.” There are Jewish refugees and escapees living in the shadows of poverty and terror, and Nehemiah had ignored his responsibility for too long. So, he prayed (Neh. 1:1–11).

Nehemiah actually had a dream job. He worked in the palace with daily access to the royal family. He ate well, wanted for little, and could have lived the rest of his life surrounded by comforts barely imaginable to the general population. But when he repented, fasted, and wept in prayer for days, God did something new in his heart.

Nehemiah was led to leave his service in the Persian Empire and travel to war-torn Jerusalem—hundreds of miles west across the desert—to lead his people to rebuild the wall as a security system around the battle-plundered city. God led him to sacrifice the known for the unknown—the security of the palace for the unpredictability of a city in ruins, ravaged by war.

Nehemiah walked away from guarantees and stepped into a life of faith. He found his resolve in the secret place with God,

where a man of the palace and privilege became a man of prayer. A nation devastated by the evils of war decades earlier got a second chance through the sacrifice of one man who prayed.

John Bunyan once said, “Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan.” We may not see the results Nehemiah saw because we never enter the sacrifice phase of prayer. We pray only when it is convenient and then only briefly.

Nehemiah, on the other hand, prayed in pain for days. His sacrifice in prayer led to the renewal of the Jewish people.

Even though he had to keep his sword handy while he constructed the wall (Neh. 4:17), Nehemiah lived not in the midst of war but in its aftermath. The city without a wall did not know it needed a man to lead it—one who had been to the depths of personal sacrifice in prayer.

A New Kind of Leader

Broken cultures rarely realize that their greatest need is spiritual rather than material. The aftermath of war calls for a new kind of leader—one stripped of self-interest and who has plunged to uncharted depths in prayer.

Jesus warned of “wars and rumors of wars” (Matt. 24:6). But Alex and Stephen Kendrick were right about God’s plan for the world when they said, “When prayer becomes your immediate reflex instead of your last resort, the whole battlefield begins to tilt in your direction.”⁵

¹“Middle East and North Africa: More than 45 Armed Conflicts,”
GENEVA ACADEMY,
<https://www.geneva-academy.ch/gallies/today-s-armed->

conflicts/.

² Chris Hedges, "What Every Person Should Know About War," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html/>.

³ Megan Brenan and Nicole Willcoxon, "Record-High 50% of Americans Rate U.S. Moral Values as 'Poor,'" GALLUP, June 6, 2022, <https://www.news.gallop.com/poll/393659/record-high-americans-rate-moral-values-poor.aspx/>.

⁴ Caroline Downey, "Charges Dropped against British Woman for Praying Outside Abortion Clinic," *National Review*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/charges-dropped-against-british-woman-arrested-for-praying-outside-abortion-clinic/>.

⁵ Stephen and Alex Kendrick, *The Battle Plan for Prayer*, B&H Publishing Group, 2015.

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