

Praying for Your Enemies

An Unexpected Story of Love

By Will Ford and Matt Lockett



Can prayer affect the current division in the nation, or are we doomed to eat the fruit of historical offenses? Slavery ended, and segregation is no more. However, old wounds remain unhealed, racism is alive and well, and class division and systemic inequality persist. From past experience, we (Matt and Will) can testify that God still has an alternate ending in mind.

In 2003, Will was reading and praying aloud from the “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during a prayer gathering at Dr. King’s historic church in Montgomery, AL. Toward the end of the speech, Will read the words, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”²

What an inspiring vision of a great reversal, changing former enemies into brothers!

While praying, Will—an African American and son of former slaves—remembered a curious artifact passed down in their family: a 200-year-old cast iron kettle used by his Christian slave ancestors. The pot was used for cooking and washing clothes, but it was also used in an unexpected way. In the secrecy of night, slaves would sneak into the barn and turn that huge kettle upside down. With its edge propped up on rocks, they would lay prostrate on the ground, tucking their lips under its edge, and pray. The kettle would muffle their voices as they prayed through the night, and their master couldn't hear them as they prayed for slavery to end and for the freedom of the next generation.

Mindful of that story, Will wondered whatever happened to those slave owners. For the first time, he began to pray for the family who once owned his family. Instead of expressing anger for their oppression in the past, he prayed for the next generation, as his ancestors had so long ago. The twist was that he found himself praying for the spiritual freedom and blessing of the generation descended from those slave owners.

Two years later we (Will and Matt) providentially met in a prayer gathering at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. It happened to be Martin Luther King Day, and we stood on the very spot where Dr. King had spoken the historic words, "I have a dream." A surprising friendship began, and together we started to lead prayer gatherings for unity and racial healing around the country.

A decade later, some unknown family history emerged. Matt learned that the final battle of the American Civil War—The Battle of Lockett's Farm—was fought in the front yard of his ancestors. What a strange coincidence, we thought. Will's family has a kettle that has been handed down along with the story of the slaves who prayed for freedom. And Matt's family owns the land where the Civil War ended. More dots connected, which led to a far more profound discovery.

Unforgettable Shock

That more profound discovery we made came as quite a shock. Imagine our amazement when we learned that it was actually Matt's family who had owned Will's family as slaves! The rich details of our story are carefully laid out in our new book *The Dream King*.

But consider what that revelation meant for us. Even though our families had been enemies in the past, prayer brought us together and made us brothers. Surely Dr. King's words were more than poetry. Perhaps they were prophecy.

Today, here we sit, looking at each other across the table of brotherhood, forgetting the other was ever our enemy. We believe this is the story God wants to tell throughout the nation.

Jesus' Great Challenge

Some say loving our enemies is the most difficult challenge Jesus issued: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:43-45).

Are we quick to label someone as an enemy? By definition, an enemy is "one who is antagonistic to another, especially one seeking to injure, overthrow, or confound an opponent."¹ With that measuring line, we all could make a sizable list of people or groups who seem to fit that description.

And so it begins. We make our lists, taking account of all the wrongs and abuses we have suffered. The lists grow, and the painful memories harden like names etched into drying concrete that will be readable for centuries.

To identify someone as an enemy seems to demand a response. If it does not lead to aggressive actions toward the foe, it often produces bitterness toward the adversary in our hearts. What can disrupt this process of pain and retaliation? Who has the necessary willpower to resist becoming exactly like our abuser after hate has run its course?

The answer is hidden in plain sight.

Prayer That Changes the Story

Apart from prayer, our painful experiences freeze people in a timeframe of offense. It's as though the end of the story comes immediately after the tragedy and ruin. However, prayer makes a better ending possible.

Jesus carefully linked the call to love our enemies with the activity of praying for them. Prayer is not the passive response of the weak and timid. It is arguably the believer's greatest form of direct action and activism.

Prayer for our enemies creates an opportunity for an alternate ending to an otherwise tragic storyline. Through prayer, we can wage a strategic attack against the darkness that has overwhelmed our abusers—and thus liberate them from their own oppression. Prayer carves out the space in which our enemies may change.

Needless to say, it changes us as well. Wounds receive their divine healing balm, and the heart softens in the process. The chasm of division can narrow, new bridges can be built, and a story can end with the embrace of a former enemy.

Jesus had the authority to call us to this unexpected and difficult command because He demonstrated it in its highest form. As He hung on the cross, bleeding from the wounds of His abusers, He knew humanity would not be His enemy forever. With His final gasping breaths, He uttered prayers that opened a

new way to restore our relationship with Him.

The words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," give us a guide for our own prayers for anyone attacking us. The laying down of His own life meant that humanity's enemy status would not be the end of the story. God calls us to live our lives by that extraordinary example.

Jesus was and is the ultimate Peacemaker. When we react in the opposite spirit of our enemies, we follow in the footsteps of the Righteous One. Instead of taking revenge, He prayed for His torturers' forgiveness. When retaliation was within His power, He instead showed mercy.

This radical change in the posture of our hearts is the key that unlocks redemptive storylines. Individuals will be set free when we pray for them with restoration in mind instead of judgment. Families will experience generational blessings when we pray to heal wounds that have festered year after year. Let's dare to believe that a nation will alter its course toward righteousness when we pray for light and truth to shine on those leading multitudes down a dark path. The Son of God led us into this redemptive work, saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Prayer Is the Key

It's no accident that we met in a prayer meeting. We believe we will all truly find each other in the prayer meetings, where God will give us His heart for each other and end the division that once defined us as enemies.

God intends to answer the prayer of His Son, Jesus, who prayed in John 17 that we would be one so that the world would believe. Glory comes when division ends and former enemies embrace. That kind of supernatural work gets the attention of

the world and leads to a saving belief in Him.

The hidden hand of God is hard at work, weaving our lives together in ways we could never have imagined. The one who looks like our enemy today could become our closest friend tomorrow, and God gets the glory when that happens.

Retaliation against enemies will cement the divisions that exist, but God has a divine remedy to turn the conflicts into a blessing. Pray for your enemies, and usher in God's alternate ending to an otherwise tragic storyline.

1 Merriam-Webster,
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enemy>.² Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream,"
<https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>
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MATT LOCKETT and WILL FORD are the founders of Dream Stream Company. Their new book *The Dream King* tells the true story of the way their lives are woven together by history and the hidden hand of God. It exposes systemic injustice and delivers new keys for understanding the nation's past, present, and future.

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