

# 11

## Elsie's Prayer

*"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you; I always pray with joy." (Philippians 1:3-4)*

I have this mental photograph of Elsie in my mind. This 70-year-old woman, all five feet of her, is kneeling on the stone floor in front of the altar one hour before worship. At first glance, one might think she is praying. Closer examination will reveal that she is straightening the tassels of the altar paraments, one tassel at a time. Years later, that picture still speaks to me. It tells me of a person who wanted to make sure that no detail, great or small, detracted from the worship and glory that was to be offered to God in the worship soon to begin. That one scene typifies her life of servanthood. I had a nickname for her at the time. I called her Bunny Rabbit. She moved around and never seemed to flag with energy, much like the Energizer Bunny seen on the commercials, whose battery never seems to run dry.

I have another mental photograph of Elsie in my mind. Years later, I visited her in her home. It had been years since we had seen one another, as I had moved away. Entering her house, I was greeted with an unfamiliar scene. She was lying in bed. Her body was so weakened through her illness that she could barely move. At age 92, her body was worn down. Now confined to a bed, she might as well have been in chains. This was the spirit of what she shared with me in our conversation: She felt like a prisoner, unable to do anything worthwhile. Up until this point, her world had revolved around her service to her church and the Lord she loved so deeply. Now, her world revolved around her bed from which she could not move. I

shared with her Paul's words:

*"I thank my God every time I remember you in all my prayers for all of you, I remember you in my prayers with joy" (Philippians 1:3-4).*

I reminded her of how Paul had written these words while confined himself, even chained in prison. Our visit ended. The Lord called Elsie home a few months later. I was told by friends, however, that while she spent those final months weakening in body, her spirit kept going and going and going as she interceded with prayers for many loved ones and the ministries of her church. Even though she could no longer serve her church each Sunday by straightening out the tassels and countless other tasks, Elsie remained a vital part of the priesthood of believers.

In the Old Testament, the priesthood had two basic functions. The first was to represent God before people. The second was to represent people before God by bringing forth the prayers of God's people. Each of us belongs to the priesthood of God. God's Word declares, *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God. . ."* (1 Peter 2:9). C.F.W. Walther, the first President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, said that each Christian is by means of their Baptism a priest:

*"It is, of course, beyond dispute that a pastor before all others has the duty to lead souls to Christ. It is furthermore true that parents have a special responsibility to lead their children to Christ and to raise*

them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Father and mother are appointed by God as the pastors of the home. . . Each of us has a brother or sister, or acquaintances, relatives, friends. When we are with them, let us take to heart that we through holy baptism have been made spiritual priests, and that we there also made a covenant with God to enter into His service. Let us avail ourselves of each opportunity to speak something good, to recount what God has done for us, to win back the erring, to reprove those who sin, to comfort and encourage those who are sad and disheartened” (a condensed translation by James Ware of a sermon preached by Dr. Walter in 1842, as printed in *The Lutheran Witness*, October, 1987).

Within that priesthood, our ministry is to include the ministry of intercession. Intercession is when we pray on behalf of another person. We carry their joys and their burdens before the throne. A ministry of this nature often outlives those who offer such prayers. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus said,

*“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).*

The ministry of intercession is one way of loving our neighbor while on our knees or while in chains.

Intercession, however, does not happen when we pray only out of the burden or pain of our own situation. The ministry of intercession moves us away from being consumed with what is breaking our heart and asking ourselves what breaks the heart of God. Having wisdom in this is possible only through the Word where we learn to understand the heart of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said,

“If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart” (Cook, p. 146).

The ministry of intercession involves us in rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). Will Rogers was known for his laughter, but he also knew how to weep. One day he was entertaining at the Milton H. Berry Institute in Los Angeles, a hospital that specialized in rehabilitating polio victims and people with broken backs and other extreme physical handicaps. Of course, Rogers had everybody laughing, even patients in really bad condition; but then he suddenly left the platform and went to the rest room. Milton Berry followed him to give him a towel, and when he opened the door, he saw Will Rogers leaning against the wall, sobbing like a child. He closed the door, and in a few minutes, Rogers appeared back on the platform, as jovial as before.

If you want to learn what a person is really like, ask three questions: What makes him laugh? What makes him angry? What makes him weep? These three questions will reflect much about the character of a person. The church today is in need of more people who know the difference between anger and anguish. The difference between anger and anguish is a broken heart. It is easy in this world in which we live to get angry over its sin and corruption. It is not so easy to look at sin, our own included, and to weep and pray over it. Consider Moses. When he descended down Mt. Sinai with the tablets in hand and saw the sin of his people, he broke the tablets in anger. Then he returned back to the top of the mountain where his anger turned to anguish as he interceded for the people of Israel.

The ministry of intercession is one that is filled with joy and anguish as God’s people,

His priests, intercede for one another. We may not be able to travel to foreign mission fields. We may not be fluid and eloquent with words to speak. But we can pray. Page through the story of the early church in the book of Acts. It is apparent just how much those who were on the front line coveted the prayers of God's people, that the Word of God would be preached boldly and without restraint:

*After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).*

It is no different in our day. One of our most effective and powerful mission responses is to pray. Pray for missionaries and their safety. Learn about specific missionaries and engage with them in a prayer ministry. Pray that the Word of God will be preached without restraint.

A ministry such as this is not only at the heart and center of our calling in the Holy Priesthood, but it joins us with Christ in a most intimate way, for this is at the heart of His ministry at present before the throne.

*"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).*

Further, we read,

*"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:34-35).*

Waiting for the Lord to call her home, Elsie continually offered up prayers for anyone and anything that came to mind. Not only did her prayers benefit an untold number of people, but she, too, was blessed. In those prayers, the loneliness of her confinement was replaced with an intimate fellowship with Jesus, the Friend who had borne all her sins and grief.

That is what prayer can be—an intimate fellowship with Jesus, even in our lowest moments. That is what one daughter discovered about prayer through her dad.

The man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been told of his visit.

"I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?"

"I'm the new pastor at the church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

A little puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head. I gave up any attempt at prayer," the old man confessed, "until one day about four years ago when my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest: Sit down on a chair; place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because He is the One who promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now.'"

"So, I tried it, and I've liked it so much that I do it for a couple of hours every day. I just sit here and talk with Him about whatever concerns me regarding my family or news I hear on TV. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the man to continue on the journey and in this unique ministry of intercession with Jesus. He prayed with him and returned back to church. Two nights later

the daughter called to tell the pastor that her dad had died that afternoon.

“Did he seem to die in peace?” the pastor asked.

“Yes, when I left the house around two o’clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange—in fact, beyond strange—kind of weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed.”

Even when chains imprison or bind us, whatever those chains are, there is freedom and intimacy with Jesus as we enter into a ministry of intercession with Him.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you sit at the right hand of the Father. Yours is the position of glory and power. You dwell there as True Man and True God, interceding for me, praying on my behalf. Kindle in my heart the same passion and love that is in you that I might join you in this ministry of intercession on behalf of others. For when I intercede for others, I then reflect your very heart and love to others.  
**Amen.**

**Challenge:** LCMS World Missions publishes a Pray For Us Calendar each month. Visit their website at [www.lcmsworldmissions.org](http://www.lcmsworldmissions.org) and print out this month’s prayer calendar. If you do not have internet access, ask your church office for a copy. Commit to praying for these missionaries for the remainder of our 50 Days Ablaze.

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 42

**From the Book of Concord:** “Therefore from youth on we should form the habit of praying daily for our needs, whenever we are aware of anything that affects us or other people around us, such as preachers, magistrates, neighbors, and servants; and, as I have said, we should always remind God of his commandment and promise, knowing that he does not want them despised. This I say because I would like to see people learn again to pray properly and not act so crudely and coldly that they daily become more inept in praying. This is just what the devil wants and works for with all his might, for he is well aware what damage and harm he suffers when prayer is used properly” (The Large Catechism, The Lord’s Prayer, p. 444.28-29).