

Prayer as Process – Lanes and Lines

1. We live in a connected world where every tragedy is beamed into our homes or on our phones. We offer thoughts and prayers and, more often than you might think, material support and money but the scale of some of these tragedies is just overwhelming.
2. Some of the poorest nations seem to get hit the most often: Pakistan, Indonesia, Peru come to mind. Mudslides, earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, floods. There is the human tragedy in the first blow, of course, but there is also the lingering human tragedy of the mess left behind.
3. When you see whole villages broken and scattered, under many feet of mud and debris, you could be forgiven for wondering what could ever be done to repair the damage. They are poor and they do not own machinery, but they clear the mud, they clear the debris, they rebuild their homes as best they can and they do it one handful at a time.
4. I've lived long enough to witness this time and time again. Rescuers rush into the rubble as those around them pick up some rocks, sticks, or fill a bucket by hand. I have a great admiration for these people. They didn't leave (they can't!) and they didn't give up (failure is always an option). They started the process even though it seemed impossible to ever get back to a state of normalcy or even sub-normal livability.
5. Prayer is a process. As mentioned last week, we want to speed it up. We pray for the big thing without acknowledging that many, many steps lie between where we are and where we want to be. The universe is analog while we tend to think in digital terms (fuzzy logic, going digital killed some phone connections)
6. The world needs people who pray, but there is more to prayer than just praying. Jesus said, "Watch and pray." (Mathew 26:40,41) There is an expected participation in the work of God on earth (remember Philip and the chariot, Moses sent to Egypt, Paul making tents).

7. And it all starts with your eyes and heart. There needs to be an active relationship between your eyes and your heart. We are commanded to look, to see, and we are also commanded to love and care. There is a good phrase for this in scripture: “lifted their eyes.”
8. [ONE] Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the ram that would replace Isaac as sacrifice (Gen. 22:13). Isaac would later lift his eyes and see Rebekah (Gen. 24:63-64). Jacob would lift up his eyes and see Esau (Gen. 33:1). Joseph would see Benjamin (Gen. 43:29). All of these would end up moving the will of God forward in mighty ways...
9. But we can also lift up our eyes in a way that leads to evil. Both Lot (in choosing land) and Potiphar’s wife lifted up their eyes and that led to tragedy. We have to be looking and we have to have a clean heart. David didn’t ask for a clean heart so that he would feel better as he sat quietly beside a fire. (Psalm 51:10-13) He needed a clean heart so that he could lift us his eyes to teach others the way of God AND to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (most likely a figurative expression at this point in history, though wall building was an ongoing process).
10. When I was a boy, one of the phrases that I heard in prayers a lot was “open unto us doors of opportunity so that we might...” and there were a few ways of ending that sentence. The more I practiced lifting up my eyes (truly seeing, noticing, and noting what was around me), I changed that line in my prayers to “Lift up my eyes to see the doors already standing open, the many paths you have laid open before me to do good.”
11. There is a famous scene in the first Jason Bourne movie where Matt Damon is in a café with a young woman. He tells her that he knows the license plates of all six vehicles in the parking lot, the weight of the man at the counter, and that the waitress is left handed. That seems supernatural...but it was just lifting his eyes; it was just seeing.
12. In Louisiana, I talked to a church about reaching out to the people around them with love. There was the standard kickback about having already tried that or why it couldn’t be done. So, I told them the names of all the housekeepers at my hotel and a little bit

about several of them. They asked how I knew that and I told them, “I asked.”

13. The place I get my hair cut has a sports theme and is lined with TVs showing various iterations of ESPN. I am somewhat saddened by the thought of spending one’s life arguing about sports but that is really an ungracious thought on my part. Yes, it seems as if they are eye deep in ephemera that won’t mean a thing in ten minutes, but they have found this way to earn money and feed their family and, for all I know, support wonderful charities. Still...I wonder about our tendency to get wrapped up in arguments that do not help those around us.
14. (“The Authorship of the Book of Deuteronomy”) I have no brief against the writer and I absolutely believe that research of that kind is necessary and helpful. But I saw the book on the desk of a preacher in an exceptionally impoverished area of Eastern KY. He told me that the local preachers were arguing about it and it had become a very big deal. Surrounded by poverty, shattered marriages, alcoholism and drugs, this is what captivated them.
15. When I asked them what was being done for the poor and addicted and depressed around them, I was given a little here and there but, mainly, I was given reasons why it wouldn’t work (blaming the people or asserting that they were not willing to work with other religious groups). It reminded me of seeing villages devastated in Pakistan (on TV. I’ve never been there). My first thought is: no way can that be better. That village is finished...
16. And then the people stoop and grab a handful of earth, moving it outside the area and coming back for another. They want to rescue their neighbors and restore their village...and they are willing to go through the process to get it done.
17. When we pray, let’s ask God to give us sight. Then, let’s lift up our eyes. Then, let’s go back to God to ask Him to help us with this one thing, right here, right now. We bring our prayers back, we rescue them from vagaries, pie in the sky, generalized prayers (“help everybody in the world”) to the local, the immediate.

18. [TWO] And as we pray, God works. And as He works, we lift up our eyes and see. And as we see, we pray. (Awaken)