

# Should We Pray For The World?

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*"O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name." —Daniel 9:19*

During the now infamous 9-11 terrorist attacks against America, how did *you feel* about your countrymen and America? Did you wish this country, modern day Israel, would wake up to its rebellion against God? Did you yearn for God to be merciful to your neighbors and restore His protective shield? Perhaps you spent a few sleepless nights agonizing for the many new widows and fatherless and motherless. Those attacks were indeed tragic.

Did you want to pray for them but did not because the Bible seems to say not to? This may very well be a misconception to some. Over the years, various people in God's church have used verses in Jeremiah and elsewhere to teach we are not to pray for the world or the people of this world. Several correct foundational beliefs have served to foster this conclusion.

Briefly, we are not of this world, and God's Kingdom—our Kingdom—is not of this world (John 18:36). In fact, we are to come out of the world (Revelation 18:4). We cannot and must not love this world, or else the love of the Father cannot be in us (I John 2:15-18). We are ambassadors for the Kingdom of God (II Corinthians 5:20). Our primary citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), not with any of the sinful nations of this world. Besides, God does not hear the prayers of sinners (Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 59:2). We are to remain unspotted, untainted, from the world (James 1:27). In addition, there seem to be clear scriptures that warn us to never pray for the world. These verses are just for starters!

It seems plain enough. But for those who use the scriptures to conclude we should never pray for our neighbors or for strangers in the world, please read on. That line of thinking is about to be challenged.

## **Proof Texts?**

The Bible passages most often quoted to support the notion of not praying for people in the world are these:

**Jeremiah 11:14:** Therefore *do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them* ; for I will not hear them in the time that they cry out to Me because of their trouble.

**Jeremiah 14:11-12:** Then the Lord said to me, "*Do not pray for this people, for their good.* When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence."

**Jeremiah 15:1:** Then the Lord said to me, "*Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be favorable toward this people.* Cast them out of My sight, and let them go forth."

Some feel John 17:9, a prayer of Jesus Himself, indicates it would be wrong to pray for people of the world: "I pray for them. *I do not pray for the world* but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours."

On the surface, these four passages seem clear: Do not pray for the world or the people in the world. However, this raises a questions: If God intended the instructions He gave to Jeremiah to be binding on His people for all time, should we not find the prophets after Jeremiah never praying for the people of the land? What we find instead, though, are many examples of God's people, including Jesus Christ, doing quite the opposite!

A few details in the passages from Jeremiah may be surprising. For instance, God tells Jeremiah the same thing three times—do not pray for them. If Jeremiah had quit praying for them after His first admonition, God would not need to repeat the command. Obviously, then, Jeremiah continued to pray for his countrymen!

The passage in Jeremiah 15:1 is interesting. To paraphrase, God is saying, "Jeremiah, I know Moses prayed for the nation when I was about to blot them out. I know Samuel promised to continue to pray for the nation. But this time it will be different. My will is set this time. No amount of praying for them will change My will this time. So don't bother!" (See Exodus 32; Numbers 16:41-50; I Samuel 12:19-23.) Jeremiah prays for the nation because of the examples of other prophets before him. Yet, God is gently telling Jeremiah that He hears his prayers for the nation, but this time the answer is a firm "no."

God hears our prayers, but when He changes what He says He will do, it is because *He* wills to change. We have no power to *make* God change His direction, but we should feel free to ask according to His will. Perhaps our fervent prayers will cause God to reconsider what He is about to do. God decides whether and when He will change, after He hears us. He can choose to change His own mind—and He *has* changed His mind—after fervent prayers on many occasions. Moses' prayers, the prayers of the Ninevites, and many other examples in the Bible testify that He will change. In this case, though, God is simply explaining to Jeremiah that this time, in this circumstance, He will not alter His course of action.

### **Commands for All Time?**

Some feel God's words to Jeremiah are commands for His people from that time forward never to pray for the people of the world. Is that the correct interpretation?

The prophet Daniel is taken captive early in Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Judah, and soon after arriving in Babylon, he is handpicked to advise the emperor. As the years pass, Daniel is well aware of Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jews would return to Jerusalem at the end of seventy years in exile (Jeremiah 29:10-14). Near the end of that seventy-year period, what do we find Daniel doing? He implores God so fervently on behalf of his nation that God sends Gabriel, one of the highest-ranking angels, to deliver a message directly from Him (Daniel 9:1-24).

What stands out in Daniel's prayer for his nation is his use of "we," not "they." He puts himself in the same boat with the sinning Jews. Daniel cries out, ". . . we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments" (verse 5). Notice his prayer's conclusion:

O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are a reproach to all who are around us. Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate. O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name. (verses 16-19)

Clearly, Daniel is praying for forgiveness for his sinful countrymen and for himself. He prays for good things to start happening to his unconverted neighbors. And God hears: "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision" (verses 22-23).

As we study the inspired Scripture, we find holy men moved with deep feeling for their people, their city, their country—all the while realizing that they simultaneously look for another city with eternal "foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

Ezekiel, another captive of the Babylonians, reminds us that God puts some kind of identifying mark on those who "sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done" around us (Ezekiel 9:4). Those who are moved by events spiraling out of control pray about the situation, entreating God to act, to come soon. Ezekiel records that God spares such concerned people.

By contrast, he records the horrific scene of thousands being slaughtered who do not grieve over the condition of the nation (verses 5-6). As the slaughter commences, Ezekiel prays and begs God to reconsider what He is doing: "Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?" (verse 8). God answers that, this time, He must punish and punish hard (verses 9-10). The point is that Ezekiel felt so deeply for his countrymen and nation that he implored God to extend mercy.

How did we do on September 11, 12, 13, and in the days since? Are we sighing and crying when we see "acts of God"—natural catastrophes like floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes—ripping through the countryside? God is moved when He sees us moved by the pain and suffering occurring around us, and not just that affecting our immediate circle of family and friends.

We know God will punish modern-day Israel increasingly in the years ahead. We will witness a great deal of sorrow and woe, but God is pleased when He sees us wholeheartedly interceding even for those who deserve the discipline.

### **Jesus' Example**

Most dramatic of all are the examples and admonitions of our Master and Teacher, Jesus Christ. For instance, as He walks up to Jerusalem, instead of thinking of His own impending suffering and death,

He thinks of His countrymen: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34).

How then can we explain John 17:9? Jesus gives the prayer in John 17 specifically for His disciples and for a specific reason. It was not the time to pray for any other than His disciples. However, this does not mean that Jesus never prayed for anyone but a disciple!

If we are supposed to pray only for converted brethren but not for our unconverted countrymen, how can we follow Jesus' many other examples and commands about this topic? For example, Matthew 5: 44-45, 48:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and *pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. . . . Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

What a statement! He says praying for people outside the church is part of what defines us as children of our Father in heaven! Those who hate us and spitefully use us are certainly not fellow church members or converted believers, yet our Savior commands us to pray for them! There is perhaps no clearer passage on this topic!

In fact, how many of those whom Jesus prayed for and healed were "in the church" or had God's Spirit? Probably none of them! How many were worldly sinners? Certainly most of them, maybe even all of them!

Later, while hanging on a stake, Jesus practices perfectly what He preaches, once more praying for people of the world: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). What clearer example could we have?

In fact, though Jesus did not participate at all in any of the world's evils, He lived His life among the people. As the son of a carpenter, He interacted with the public constantly. He never shied away from the people of the world. He enjoyed people, weddings, and parties enough to be accused—falsely, of course—of being "a glutton and a winebibber." He felt comfortable accepting an invitation to dinner at the house of a Pharisee—He was even bold enough to invite Himself to dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, an ill-reputed tax collector.

How do we fare among the world? Are we comfortable with our "unconverted" neighbors? Would we accept dinner invitations and attend social occasions? Jesus, our Elder Brother, did. Jesus was not like the Pharisees—the very name means "the separated ones"—who acted "holier than thou." Yes, we should separate ourselves from the *ways* of the world. Yes, we should live a holy life (I Peter 1:15-16). After all, we have the Holy Spirit. But we should not be like those "who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!'" (Isaiah 65:5). God says of them, "These are smoke in My nostrils."

**Pray "for All Men"**

Stephen, the first martyr after Christ, follows his Master's example. As rocks crush his skull, his last words beseech God not to charge his murderers with sin (Acts 7:59-60). He prays for those who are killing him!

Paul feels so deeply for his unconverted countrymen that he declares:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites. . . . (Romans 9:1-3)

Would we be willing to give up our salvation and reward for the salvation of all our fellow citizens? Paul made it a point to pray often for his people: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1). He obviously does not feel God's statements to Jeremiah extend to his time and situation.

He leaves no doubt about how he feels about praying for people in the world:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made *for all men*, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (I Timothy 2:1-5)

Not "all men" are in the church. Few "kings and all who are in authority" are converted, if any. Nevertheless, we are to be praying for and about them. Are we? When was the last time we prayed for the President? When did we last intercede and give thanks for our governor, mayor, congressmen, senators? Abraham prayed for Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20:7). The Persian emperor Cyrus asked for prayers from God's people (Ezra 6:3, 10).

Imagine meeting our neighbors in the resurrection. They are thrilled to see us in the Family of God. How will they feel if we divulge that we never ever uttered a word about them to our Father? Though they are now "people of the world," they are our future brothers and sisters once they are converted. They will come to a knowledge of the truth and will be saved in God's time. We should not be so short-sighted by failing to pray for them.

We know there is coming a time of captivity for modern-day Israel, just as Judah went as captives to Babylon. When that happened, God told them to pray for the city in which they were held captive! Notice Jeremiah 29:7: "And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace."

God shows no partiality. If we are growing in God's image, neither will we show partiality—not even in our prayers.

### **Harmonizing Beliefs**

How do we harmonize praying for people of the world with the concepts of coming out of the world?

It is true that we are not of this world, but we live in it. We cannot totally avoid having regular day-to-day interactions with uncalled people, or else we would have to leave the earth (I Corinthians 5:9-12; John 17:14-15). Besides, if we stopped interacting with sinners, where would our light shine? A light is most needed, and most effective, where there is darkness. We are the light of the world but do not participate in "the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:8-12).

We are *not* to love the world—the cosmos, the lifestyle—but we are to show love toward the people of the world. God does—to the point of having given His only begotten Son to die for the world so that all who believe in Him could be saved and not perish. This love for the people of the world includes praying for them in various ways.

It is right to pray for a city and its residents whose lives have been ripped apart by a catastrophe, manmade or natural. It is right to mourn, cry, and sigh, for the brokenhearted mom whose little girl has been kidnapped, for shattered families working through a messy divorce, and for the nation itself—that God be merciful to all of us.

God says to leave the world's values and priorities. We seek higher values, the world to come and its priorities. We are not trying to save the world now, but we are allowed to have feelings for our fellow human beings. We do not find pleasure in the things the world's people do, but we do care for them.

However, we should never forget John 15:18-19. The world hates us because we are not part of their way of life. We are not of the world. We are different—from a different world, as it were, but we still hurt when others hurt. We need to be a people who sigh and cry about the suffering and evils we see, begging God, "Your Kingdom come."

The next time you feel a need to pray for your neighbors, for someone in distress, for the President and other leaders, or for the nation itself, please do so. God says we should.