

Praying for the Lost

Charles Spurgeon related well the priority all Christians must give to praying for the lost:

The soul-winner must be a master of the art of prayer. You cannot bring souls to God if you go not to God yourself. You must get your battle-ax, and your weapons of war, from the armoury of sacred communication with Christ. If you are much alone with Jesus, you will catch His Spirit; you will be fired with the flame that burned in His breast, and consumed His life. You will weep with the tears that fell upon Jerusalem when He saw it perishing; and if you cannot speak so eloquently as He did, yet shall there be about what you say somewhat of the same power which in Him thrilled the hearts and awoke the consciences of men. My dear hearers, especially you members of the church, I am always so anxious lest any of you should begin to lie upon your oars, and take things easy in the matters of God's kingdom. There are some of you—I bless you, and I bless God at the remembrance of you—who are in season, and out of season, in earnest for winning souls, and you are the truly wise; but I fear there are others whose hands are slack, who are satisfied to let me preach, but do not themselves preach; who take these seats, and occupy these pews, and hope the cause goes well, but that is all they do (*The Soul Winner* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 reprint], 246–47. Italics in original).

What Christian does not pray for the salvation of friends and loved ones who do not know the Lord? Yet we must have a broader outlook than that. Scripture supports the perspective that we should all pray for the lost in general.

The Bible gives several examples of prayer for those outside salvation. In [Numbers 14:19](#) Moses prayed, “**Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Thy loving-kindness, just as Thou also hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.**” He cried out to God for the forgiveness of the sinning Israelites.

Samuel the prophet also prayed for Israel's salvation. In [1 Samuel 7:3–5](#) we read,

Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to the Lord with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the Lord and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.” So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the Lord alone. Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.”

Later in [1 Samuel](#), after rebuking them for their sin in demanding a king, he said, “**Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way**” ([1 Samuel 12:23](#)).

The New Testament relates the testimony of Stephen. While being stoned to death, he prayed what amounted to a prayer for his executioners' salvation: **“And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ And having said this, he fell asleep”** ([Acts 7:59–60](#)).

Paul had a deep desire for the salvation of his fellow Israelites. He expressed that desire in [Romans 9:1–4](#): **“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites.”** That deep concern could not help but find expression in his prayer life: **“Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation”** ([Romans 10:1](#)).

The Bible, then, clearly expresses the appropriateness and propriety of praying for the lost. In addition to the examples noted above, evangelistic praying is the express teaching of [1 Timothy 2:1–8](#). These verses are polemical in nature; they confront a problem in the Ephesian church. Since Paul here commands prayer for the lost, we may conclude that such praying had slipped from the priority it should have been at Ephesus.

Since the scope of the Gospel call is universal, Paul shows the need to pray for all men. The goal of the church, like Israel before it, is to reach the world with the saving truth of God. Israel failed to be the faithful nation by which God could reach the world, and the responsibility has been passed to the church. Paul writes out of concern that the exclusivity that caused Israel to fail in her mission should not cripple the church. History shows that the church has, in fact, become content with itself and often neglectful of sinners.

The central function of the church on earth is to reach the lost. Paul knew that the Ephesians would never do that as long as they maintained their selfish exclusivism. To carry out their mission in the world they must be made to understand the breadth of the Gospel call. And the first feature in understanding that is to come to grips with evangelistic praying.