

LESSON 6

A PRAYER BURDEN

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: What is a prayer burden?

Growing: What does God want me to do when I feel burdened?

In the last lesson, we touched briefly on Nehemiah's response when he heard the walls of Jerusalem were broken and the gates of the city were burned. Nehemiah wrote, "I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days. . . . And I said: 'I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night' " (Nehemiah 1:4–6).

Nehemiah was experiencing a prayer burden. A prayer burden can be defined as a strong motivation to pray for others and carry the needs of others before God in prayer until God responds. The Bible has a great deal to say about such burdens. We are to bear one another's burdens (see Galatians 6:2). We are to go the second mile in helping another person (see Matthew 5:41). We are subject to God's punishment if we place burdens on others (see Amos 5:11 and Matthew 18:6-7).

Much of our ability to bear natural burdens is derived from developing our ability to carry spiritual burdens in prayer. A burden of prayer is marked usually by a sense of spiritual weight—a heaviness of heart, a spirit of mourning, or a feeling of restlessness that arises because we can't shift ourselves away from a problem that has come to our attention.

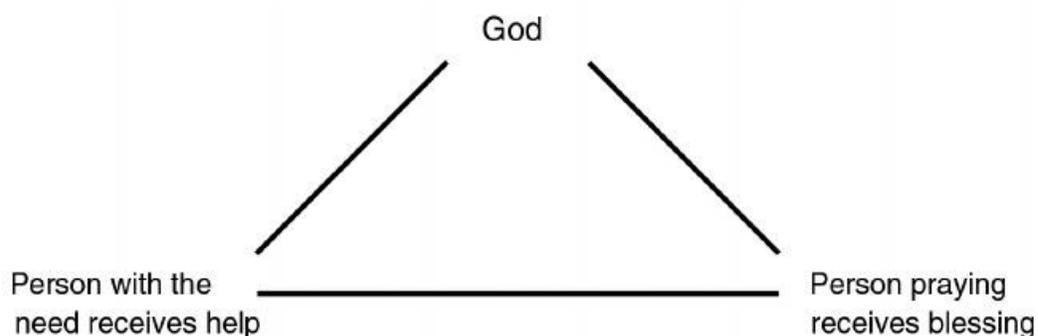
THE SOURCE OF BURDENS

Burdens tend to arise from one of three sources. *First, a burden may be the result of a self-inflicted error, sin, or guilt.* This type of burden could be called a "burden of conviction." The Holy Spirit allows us to feel the full weight of our sin and guilt. The antidote for this type of burden is to confess our sin to God, receive His forgiveness, and move forward in our lives.

Second, a burden may come from the negative behavior of another person. We may find ourselves depressed under a load of guilt another person has laid on us or angry over another person's negative behavior. Our best response to this type of burden is to ask God to deal with the other person, to forgive us for anything we may have done (known or unknown), and to help us withstand the persecution. Jesus gave clear instructions about how to deal with those who persecute us. We are to have an attitude of love toward them, pray for them, speak well of them, and do good to them (see Matthew 5:44).

Third, a prayer burden may come from God. In these cases, God wants to get our attention about a matter so we will pray about it. The burden may be triggered by something somebody else says or does. In the Bible, we see how God used messengers from Jerusalem to tell Nehemiah about the brokenness of the Israelite people and the city. The burden to pray, however, came directly from God. The Lord was calling Nehemiah to focus on the problems at hand and to pray so that He could act.

God does not act in many situations because we do not pray. God gave us free will—which includes our ability to choose sin over righteousness—and will not override it. If you are burdened to pray for another person, God desires to act on that person's behalf. He places the burden to pray on your heart so that He has an opening in the spirit realm through which to move. As you pray, you are allowed to get in on the blessing that God has for you and for that person through an answered prayer. All prayer is thus threefold:



This triangular aspect of prayer is the way God builds up His people to be a people, and not just isolated individuals who are in relationship with Him. God wants us to be in relationship with Him and in relationship with other people. The hallmark quality of this triangle is love. So, if God is burdening your heart, He is calling you to get involved in other people's problems and heartaches. This is part of God's teaching you how better to love others. In turn, God will place a burden on other people's hearts to pray for you.

1. "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" (Matthew 5:44–45). Why does Jesus say the Lord "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good" in this context? What does this teach about prayer?

2. When have you prayed for someone who treated you badly? What resulted from those prayers—both in you and the other person?

THE WEIGHT OF THE BURDEN

The weight of a prayer burden is determined by two things. *First, the burden is determined by the magnitude of the need.* A prayer burden may hit you with tremendous force, or it may be of lesser intensity but with a nagging persistence over several days and weeks. Second, the weight of a burden is determined by how quickly God desires to deal with the situation. Some problems are resolved immediately, others take time.

In either case, your response to a prayer burden must be immediate. You need to turn away from your daily routine and pray! Nehemiah's response was to sit down and weep as soon as he experienced his prayer burden. If God burdens your heart to pray about a matter, you may need to excuse yourself from the presence of others, change your schedule, or cancel an appointment. Don't let anything keep you away from prayer!

Let me warn you that the devil will launch every temptation to get you to stop praying and go on about your business. You will suddenly be reminded of a thousand "important" things that you need to do. The phone may ring repeatedly. You may feel guilt pangs because you are not doing

your daily chores. If you have a burden to pray, however, the most important thing you can do before God is to obey Him and to pray.

Note that worry is different than feeling a burden. You know that you are experiencing worry when the focus of your concern is on your need or on how a particular problem affects you. Worry is always self-centered. A prayer burden is focused on God and what He wants to accomplish in the life of another person (or in the lives of a group of people).

If you don't know whether you are feeling worry or a prayer burden, ask God to reveal the nature of what you are experiencing. If your attention is directed to a particular person, God is calling you to pray for that person. However, if your attention is solely on yourself and how a problem might affect your life, you can know that is worry.

3. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1 Peter 5:8–9). In practical terms, how does a Christian resist the devil?

4. Why does Peter add that "the same sufferings" are being experienced by Christians around the world? What does this suggest about the spiritual battle?

THE DURATION OF A PRAYER BURDEN

The length of time that you experience a prayer burden is partly up to you. If you respond immediately to the burden to pray, God can begin to work through you more quickly. However, if you disobey God's prayer burden, it is likely to linger on until you obey.

Sometimes a prayer burden will rest on your heart for hours . . . and sometimes for months. Nehemiah's prayer burden lasted "many days." A prayer burden will last as long as it takes for you to hear clearly what God wants you to pray about. For this reason, when you experience a prayer burden, you must listen keenly for God to tell you what to pray for. A burden lifts when all of the preparation is completed so that God can act.

If the burden is related to a situation in your personal life, the process may take some time as God prepares you and changes you. If the burden is related to a situation in another person's life, then the burden is likely to last until you pray for precisely what God desires to do and until He has removed all obstacles from the path. This process may involve important interim changes in the life of another person or in the course of a circumstance. In Nehemiah's case, the burden lasted until he had prayed precisely for the things that God wanted to do and God had changed the heart of the Persian king.

Always keep in mind that God has good plans. Prayer is a good work performed on the behalf of others. It yields good results because God works all things for good to those who love Him (see Romans 8:28). A prayer burden is an invitation to be involved in a good process—one that yields a good harvest in your life and the lives of those for whom you are praying.

5. "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Galatians 6:9). When have you found yourself growing weary while doing good? How did you find strength to continue?

6. In what ways might you be tempted to lose heart while praying? Where do you find strength to continue?

WHEN TO SHARE A PRAYER BURDEN

If God gives you a burden to pray for a specific person, you are to pray and not gossip about the person. You must not share the nature of the burden until you are free of any criticism related to the person for whom you are praying and until God gives you a green light to go to that person. Nobody else should be involved. The matter is between you, God, and the third party.

Some burdens, however, are collective in nature. For example, each of us should feel a strong burden to pray for the spiritual state of our nation as well as for individuals or groups of fellow believers who are facing trouble or a major challenge. In the book of Acts, we read how King Herod put the disciple James to death and then arrested Peter, intending to do the same to him. In response, "constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church" (12:5). The believers knew that their role in this matter was to seek God in prayer.

7. “Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison. Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, ‘Arise quickly!’ And his chains fell off his hands” (Acts 12:6–7). How did God answer the believers’ prayers for Peter’s release?

8. What are some burdens that you have for your fellow believers in Christ? What steps are you taking to act on those burdens?

THE RESULTS OF A PRAYER BURDEN

A prayer burden is one of God’s methods of cleansing us. As we yield to His call to pray, we will become stripped of self-centeredness. As we pray, we will receive a blessing and have our faith renewed and strengthened. We will grow in our awareness of God’s methods and plans.

Ultimately, we will become a force for bringing about the victory of God over evil. We will become agents for good change and increased righteousness.

9. “If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matthew 5:40–41). What are some practical examples from your life of what these verses are teaching?

10. If you give up both your cloak and tunic, how will you keep warm and clothed? What does God’s Word say about this?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, thank You for calling us to a deeper level of communication with You through prayer.

Thank You for impressing us with the need to focus all our attention—sometimes even through fasting—solely and completely on You. Don’t spare us the burden. When You want to change a nation, place a heaviness on our hearts to seek You in prayer. Brighten the lights, stir the flame, and fan it into a fire that will compel us to not rest until Your will is done. We want to be a people who are willing to bear whatever burden You give and stay with it until we have secured the victory in Christ.

NOTES AND PRAYER REQUESTS Use this space to write any key points, questions, or prayer requests from this week's study.