

ONE LEARNING TO PRAY

PRAYERFUL PREPARATION

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you
with power through his Spirit in your inner being.
—*Ephesians 3:16 NIV*

Lunch at last. I hurried to Rosie's room for a break and some nourishment. I didn't just need to get away from my classroom; I needed some prayer time with my friend. Rosie and I chatted briefly about the highlights or struggles of the day thus far, then bowed our heads together to pray. In those few moments together, we claimed God's provision for our students' vast needs and wisdom and strength for ours. A few bites and a quick gulp later, we were back at it, doing what God called us to do as teachers—refreshed and reminded that we are not alone and that His power working in us will complete the tasks He called us to do. That prayer time together got us through some difficult days and challenging situations. Even though we have taken separate paths since those first years of teaching, we still support each other through prayer, phone calls, and notes of encouragement. Friendships forged by spiritual connections never fade away.

It is the same with my first bosses and colleagues from twenty-five years ago. I will always be grateful God paired me with godly people whose support, enthusiasm, compassion, and wise counsel kept my first teaching experiences from being total disasters.

For those whose light, love, and laughter now accompany me down the halls and into the classrooms—Carolynn, Pam, Sheila, Sherry, Hannah, Cynthia, Teresa, Marilyn, Myra, and too many others to name—all of whom mean it when they say they will

pray—I am so indebted. God has graced me with colleagues and coworkers who know how to find a spark and ignite it into a flame that burns brightly for His kingdom.

After all, not one of us is meant to journey alone. Christian teachers in public schools need each other. Hopefully, this book will be like a friend who shines a light for you into the places you have been called to teach.

Not Just Survivors

Yet, even with encouragement, many of us barely survive our teaching days, always eyeing our school calendars for the next day of freedom. As Christian educators, however, we are meant to *thrive*, not just survive. We must find and offer freedom even within the confines of our classrooms. Although there will be days when we can manage only to put one foot in front of the other, most days we can stand firm and steady, walk briskly and with purpose, and teach enthusiastically with passion.

A Ziggy comic my cousin Susan sent me my first year of teaching comes to mind. In it, Ziggy is consulting his “to-do” list. The list is very short, yet encompasses the entire day:

1. Get up.
2. Survive.
3. Go to bed.

Pretty simple, but also profound. Some days, surviving seems like a victory. Thriving may be an optimistic dream. But because we serve the one “that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Ephesians 3:20 KJV), *nothing is impossible*.

For Christian educators, the public school can resemble a minefield or a mission field. Though the territory is fraught with potential problems and challenges, it is also filled with countless opportunities to live out our faith and draw others to Christ through our actions and reactions toward people and circumstances. But first we must be equipped, beginning with prayer.

According to James Rhee, an inner-city teacher on staff with Teachers’ Christian Fellowship in Canada, support is the single big-

gest need of Christian teachers. Simply put, prayer functions as an essential and effective tool for meeting that need. Rhee purposefully forges fellowship and prayer partnerships between teachers in his city. He emphasizes the importance of prayer with these questions: “Are teachers feeling supported? Do they sense they are being prayed for? Individually, do teachers have the sense that God is with them in their classroom? This comes only through prayer.”¹ In addition, prayer is also one of the greatest ways a Christian teacher impacts his or her students and colleagues for Christ.

Prayerful preparation should be the hallmark of any major undertaking for a Christian. This is especially true for Christian teachers in public schools. The calling we have to prepare, nurture, encourage, and inspire is noble, but daunting. Planning and executing meaningful lessons that address every learning style and level while aligning with state standards and incorporating technology provides a challenge all its own. Added to that, we must manage our classrooms with firmness and fairness, finding the balance between understanding students’ individual needs and circumstances while holding them responsible for achieving at their highest aptitude and operating with a positive attitude.

While these are actually the obligations of any competent, caring teacher, Christian teachers recognize opportunities far more purposeful within those obligations. In her book review of Julia and Gloria Stronk’s *Christian Teachers in Public Schools: A Guide for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents*, Sharon Harris sums up the Stronks’ assertions. In spite of legal limitations, teachers have the following opportunities: to express their faith through caring interaction with students; to teach effectively, thus enabling students to develop their unique God-given gifts; to model and commend in their students values such as honesty, respect, and compassion; and to teach *about* religion within the curriculum.² Prayer is another way teachers influence their students for Christ, often without the student even knowing it.

Although Christian teachers may not evangelize or advocate a particular religion, there’s nothing to prohibit a teacher from prefacing every lesson plan or class meeting with silent prayer. Actual-

ly, for those students who reveal particularly distressing behaviors or background situations, prayer is often a teacher's most powerful tool. Although in most cases the student will never be aware of prayers offered in his or her behalf, there may be occasions that a Christian teacher feels led to express his or her concern by offering to pray for a troubled student.

What a Difference Prayer Makes

When asked how a teacher had impacted his life in a positive way, Justin had this to say:

My most positive influence at school would have to be Coach C. I was going through a hard time and I was very sad and not talking much at wrestling practice because my mom found out she had a very deadly cancer. One day, Coach C came up to me and asked me what was wrong, so I told him. He told me the only thing I could do is to pray and ask God to have mercy on my mom and heal her back to her normal self. So that's what we did.

Every day I would go down to his office and Coach C would pray with me for almost thirty minutes. Every day he would tell me that no matter what happens, I always need to keep my trust in God. Then one day as I was going home, Coach C stopped me and told me that my parents had just called and said there was no more cancer. The doctors said it was like a miracle, but I knew it was just the hand of God. Coach has shown me that you can be a help in a time of need by just the small things that you do. I'm so glad Coach C helped me in my time of need.

The following e-mail confirms what a difference prayer made to another teenager.

To: Dalene Parker

Dear Mrs. Parker,

We have not met yet, but I wanted to tell you what an impact you have had on my son, Elliott. At the beginning of this year, Elliott started off badly. He was really down one morning when he came into the lab. You said something as simple as "I'll

pray for you,” and it touched him so deeply that even now (last night) when we were praying together, he thought of you and got choked up. He said how funny it was that someone could say something nice and it makes such a difference in a person’s life. I told him that was the Holy Spirit flowing from you to him. I also told him that he is able to have the same impact on his friends and people around him. He is trying to change some of his negative ways (sarcasm, joking at others’ expense, typical teenage guy behavior). Please remember him in your prayers.

Thank you for being attentive to the students. What you did one morning without a second thought has remained with Elliott and made a lasting impression. You know, when Mama says, “I’ll be praying for you today,” it doesn’t seem to mean quite as much as it does coming from someone else. I thank you for what you did for him. May God heap back on you all kinds of blessings!

Sandi D.

P.S. Elliott wants to tell you this himself, but he gets choked up about it. He doesn’t know I’m sending this, but I know he would want me to.

God’s Timing and Answered Prayers

Little did I know that God would later allow me to forge a friendship with this grateful mom that went far beyond the classroom. Three years after this e-mail, I needed a woman to accompany me on a ten-hour drive to the Florida Christian Writers Conference. I had not planned to go that year, but Tyler K., a gifted student-writer at the school where I teach, wanted to attend and needed someone to act as his guide. After much prayer, I asked the Lord to make it unmistakably clear that He intended me to go. The first indicator came when my superintendent granted professional leave. That had never happened before, mainly because of the Christian nature of the conference. Thankfully, however, our superintendent saw the validity of a writing teacher honing her craft and helping a student. I still had to pay part of my way

(supplemented by the generosity of a small scholarship from Billie Wilson, conference director, and prolific author Cec Murphy, bless them), but I was granted leave.

The second “fleece” depended on Tyler securing the necessary funding. Again, God used generous people who donated funds for his assistance. With his parents’ permission, Tyler borrowed from his college savings to make up the remainder.

The third fleece was the greatest hurdle of all. I knew I needed to have another female along in the car on such a long drive, just for propriety’s sake. I had no idea where to find such a companion. Of course, God did. A few weeks before the conference, Sandi Denkers placed the manuscript of her amazing Christian novel, *Plowing Memory’s Field*, in my box at school, so I could have a look and tell her what I thought. Prior to that, I had no clue Sandi was a writer, much less such an accomplished one. She had been working on her book for ten years, had finally completed it, and wanted advice about her next step.

Sandi knew of my keen interest in writing from her substituting in my classroom and her invaluable assistance on the school literary magazine when drafted as our “copy lady” for a time.

After reading with great delight the first few chapters of Sandi’s novel, I called her. “Sandi, I have a question to ask you that you may need to think about before you answer. I have been praying for a traveling companion to the Florida Christian Writers Conference, and I believe you are the one. I had no idea you were an author, but now that I’ve seen a sampling of your writing, you need to attend this conference to let editors and agents see your work.”

It took only a day or two for Sandi to analyze her budget and rearrange her plans before calling me back with an enthusiastic yes. What an amazing and delightful friend God provided in answer to this need. Not only was Sandi an excellent traveling companion and relief driver, she also had a tremendous sense of humor, sensitivity to others, and most importantly, a tolerance of my snoring (earplugs provided courtesy of the snorer).

Many confirmations followed God’s leading and His working in our lives through prayer and people.

At the conference, Tyler won the Writer of the Year award. The fact that he was one of a handful of teenagers there among the 200-plus adults made this honor even more amazing. With the award came a \$200 check from WinePress Publishing, exactly the amount Tyler needed to pay back his college savings. But God's hand was still working mightily. Tyler also received a contract from Lee Emory, an editor with Treble Heart Books, who was eager to publish Tyler's fictional account of an unborn child whose mother has to choose between him and the baby's father. Tyler's book, *As Rain Falls*, has since come out in print and has already begun the good work for which it was intended—saving the lives of the unborn.

All this—and more—because of prayer partners at home, school, and church praying for God's traveling mercies and His will to be done at the conference. Another unexpected blessing came when God confirmed His calling on me to write this book.

Prayer Walks

I am convinced that prayer is responsible for the sense of spiritual openness and receptiveness in the public school where I teach. Instead of our school being a minefield where we have to tread lightly, stay hidden, hunker down, and ready ourselves for explosive outbursts, it is more of a mission field where spiritual seeds can be sown and harvests reaped through the careful use of the power of prayer. Naturally, Christian teachers must exercise discretion and sensitivity appropriate to the situation and the student, but the Holy Spirit will guide and provide what should and shouldn't be said when personal prayerful preparation has paved the way.

At the beginning of each new school year, Teresa B. sends an e-mail like the one below to teachers prior to the first student day.

From: Teresa B.

Sent: Monday, August 08, 8:01 A.M.

Subject: Prayer Walk

For the past several years, I have done a "prayer walk" through the school where I currently teach. My purpose is to pray at every door where children and adults pass through as well as every classroom. Another vital part of my prayer walk

is the office and the offices of the administrators, as well as the cafeteria where the students gather during their “free” time. The first year in a school is always a difficult one, because I don’t know the students or the teachers. The following years become easier as I learn more about my new colleagues and students. I usually do this prayer walk around 6:30 one of the mornings before the children begin.

Here is how you can help me.

If you have a prayer request and would like me to pray for something specific when I reach your classroom, please either e-mail me the request or write it on a piece of paper and put it in my box—along with your room number, please. I promise all prayer requests will remain confidential.

Teresa’s offer to pray brought tears to my eyes and comfort to my heart as I asked her to remember me as a teacher new to the school and asked her also to pray for my two children who were new students who would be walking those halls and entering those classrooms for which she prayed.

In the following years, I have joined Teresa and other teachers on the prayer walk. This year was particularly meaningful as we met first in her room to pray for God’s comfort over the death of her father one month prior. Marilyn, a coworker from across the hall, joined us and provided a wonderful scripture for ongoing motivation: “Let us not become weary in doing good for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Teresa took her Bible and opened it to the passage the Lord guided her to once again. She said her Bible falls open to this same passage every year during her prayer walk:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
 Because the Lord has anointed Me,
 To preach good tidings to the poor;
 He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
 To proclaim liberty to the captives,
 And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,

And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,
To console those who mourn in Zion,
To give them beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning,
The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
That they may be called trees of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.
—*Isaiah 61:1-3 NKJV*

What a powerful feeling to know our personal prayer requests are remembered and our classrooms and hallways are covered with the peace of Christ.

Let's commit to starting not just every school year but every school day by asking for God's guidance, protection, wisdom, and direction. Knowing how early teachers start preparing for the day, this is a challenge in itself. Yet drawing encouragement and instruction from the greatest teacher of all is essential as we face needy children and new challenges for which human resources are simply not enough.

Father, thank you for your presence in my life and in our school today. Thank you for providing all the resources, energy, enthusiasm, patience, and wisdom I need for the students who enter my classroom. Help me to understand and meet their academic, emotional, and spiritual needs today through instruction, encouragement, and example. No matter what this day holds in terms of opportunities or obstacles, I know you hold me in the palm of your hand. You are able; I am available. You are wise. I am willing. Now, Lord, please teach through me today. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.

Note: See Chapter 12 for resources available through The Christian Educators Association International for teachers who desire to establish prayer groups at school. This organization not only supports teachers through prayer, but reminds them that prayer makes a difference in the classroom and in the heart and life of the Christian teacher.

SALT SHAKERS

In the Closet

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

—Matthew 6:6

In the past fifteen years, I have never been moved to clean out my closet. I never catch the spring cleaning bug. But this past weekend, I could not stay out of my closet. For a couple of hours I threw out, organized, and redistributed its contents.

Then I thought, *What am I doing? I have more pressing issues than this!* In the coming week I was facing deadlines, decisions that needed to be made, houseguests who would be arriving, and a long list of errands. There was so much that needed my attention, I didn't know which way to turn.

Maybe that's how I ended up in the closet. After cleaning it out, I rather liked it. It provided wonderful alone time with God, and I went back in it throughout the weekend. I think God planned it for me.

God, did you invite me into the closet? So many days I start off in a frantic state not sure of where or how to get started. This weekend, you helped to clear my mind and closet, and you reminded me that I need to start the day with just you—in prayer—in my closet. I need to ask for your direction and guidance in all areas of my life. Thank you for clearing the clutter and reminding me to start out my morning talking to you first. You can get the junk out of the way and make way for what really matters, serving you and others with a grateful heart.

Have a refreshing filled day.

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Veneal Williams has graciously given me permission to use a selection from Salt Shakers, her e-mail devotional, at the end of each chapter.