

PASTORS

# Vol. 01 -- Pray for Your People

*How to lead your congregation in prayer -- from Sunday intercession to crisis prayer to establishing a culture of prayer in the local church*

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*Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.*



# The Theology of Pastoral Intercession

There is a moment every pastor knows but rarely admits: the moment you stand before your congregation, having prepared your sermon, organized the bulletins, rehearsed the order of service -- and realize the most important thing you could have done this week was something you barely touched. Prayer. Not the pastoral prayer that appears at 11:14 in the order of service. Not the spontaneous blessing over a meal. But the kind of prayer that ancient pastors called the cure of souls -- the sustained, deliberate, costly intercession of a shepherd who carries his flock before the living God.

Moses stood between God and a rebellious Israel, arms raised until they trembled, while Joshua fought in the valley below (Exodus 17). Samuel declared it would be sin -- actual sin -- for him to cease praying for Israel (1 Samuel 12:23). The Apostle Paul opened every letter with his prayers for the churches, and his prayers were not vague, sentimental wishes. They were theologically dense intercessions: that the Ephesians would receive the spirit of wisdom and revelation, that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, that the Philippians would abound more and more in love with knowledge and discernment (Eph 1:17, Col 1:9, Phil 1:9). These are not pastoral pleasantries -- they are blueprints for the kind of formation only God can produce.

*"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him."*

-- Ephesians 1:15-17

The theological foundation of pastoral intercession rests on several pillars. First, the priestly role. In the Old Testament, the priest was the one who stood between God and the people -- who carried the names of the twelve tribes on his breastplate into the Holy of Holies. The New Testament dissolves the clerical monopoly on priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), but it does not dissolve the priestly function of those who shepherd God's people. The pastor who intercedes is not claiming sacerdotal authority over God's access to his people. He is fulfilling a representative function -- naming the people, carrying their needs, and presenting them before the Father with the confidence of one who approaches through the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Second, the prophetic logic of intercession. Prayer is not a technique for manipulating divine outcomes. It is participation in the divine purpose. When the prophet Ezekiel saw the dry bones of Israel (Ezekiel 37), it was the word of the Lord spoken by the prophet -- the prophetic breath -- that became the vehicle of resurrection. When Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and again that it would, he was not overriding God's sovereignty; he was functioning within it (James 5:17). Pastoral intercessory prayer is the spiritual analog to preaching -- it is the declaration of divine purposes, the alignment of the human will with the divine will, the enactment of the kingdom through yielded human agency.

Third, the incarnational pattern. The Gospels are extraordinary in their attention to Jesus's prayer life. He rose before dawn (Mark 1:35). He withdrew to lonely places (Luke 5:16). He prayed through the night before selecting the twelve (Luke 6:12). He interceded for Peter specifically (Luke 22:32). And in John 17, we are given an unparalleled window into the intercessory heart of the Son: he prays for the disciples' protection, for their sanctification, for their unity, for their joy, and for all who will believe through their word. The Good Shepherd named each sheep and carried them before the Father. This is the model.

## The Three Levels of Pastoral Prayer

Not all pastoral prayer is intercessory, and not all intercession looks the same. The pastor who would develop a rich, sustainable prayer life for his congregation must understand the three distinct levels at which pastoral prayer operates.

### **Level 1: Corporate Worship Prayer**

The prayers that occur within gathered worship -- the call to worship, the pastoral prayer, the prayers of the people -- shape the congregation's collective theological imagination. When the pastor prays publicly with theological depth, biblical literacy, and authentic emotion, he is training the congregation how to think about God, how to approach him, and what categories of concern deserve to be brought before him. Weak, formulaic, or thoughtless public prayer produces a congregation that thinks of prayer as incidental to spiritual life. Substantive, pastoral, Scripturally-rich public prayer catechizes the congregation into a life of prayer.

The pastoral prayer in Sunday worship deserves much more preparation than most pastors give it. It should not be entirely extemporaneous, because spontaneity without preparation often produces the same handful of phrases in rotation. Neither should it be read entirely from a script, which removes the sense of genuine approach to a personal God. The best pastoral public prayers are prepared in structure and content but delivered with pastoral immediacy -- the pastor knows what he wants to pray for and why, but prays it rather than recites it.

#### **PRACTICE**

Each week, spend 15-20 minutes preparing the congregational prayer. Write out the specific categories you will cover: praise, confession, thanksgiving, petition for the congregation, intercession for the world, prayer for those suffering. Let the week's sermon text shape the language of the prayer. A congregation that hears the same themes in the prayers as in the preaching will experience a powerful integration of worship.

### **Level 2: Private Intercessory Prayer for the Flock**

This is the hidden engine of pastoral ministry. Nobody sees it. The congregation rarely knows it is happening. It produces no visible ministry outcomes. And it is, in the long view, the most important thing a pastor does. The pastor who systematically, specifically, and consistently prays for the people in his congregation by name is doing the deepest pastoral work available to him.

The Old Testament model of the priest carrying the names of the twelve tribes into the Holy of Holies is not merely ceremonial history -- it is a template. The high priest did not go before God with abstract categories ("bless my people"). He went with names. Names inscribed in stone on his breastplate. The specificity of his intercession was built into the architecture of the priestly garments. The pastor who would follow this model must know his people well enough to pray for them specifically: this marriage that is struggling, that young man who is drifting, this widow who is afraid, that elder who is carrying more than anyone knows.

Eugene Peterson wrote of the "patient, subterranean work" of pastoral prayer -- the work nobody notices, that produces results on a timeline too long to be traced to any single act of ministry. Pastors who skip this work in favor of more visible ministry will eventually notice a shallowness in their pastoral relationships and a spiritual staleness in their congregations that no new program or sermon series can fix. The dryness goes all the way down to the root of the prayer life.

### **Level 3: Crisis and Pastoral Care Prayer**

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When someone calls at 2am because their marriage is collapsing, when the hospital chaplain contacts you because a member is in the ICU, when a family arrives at your office in the aftermath of a suicide -- in these moments, the pastor's ability to pray aloud with authority, tenderness, and genuine faith is a pastoral skill of the first order. It is also one of the least trained skills in most pastoral education.

Prayer in crisis moments is not performance. People in acute distress are extraordinarily sensitive to inauthenticity. A pastor who prays at a hospital bedside with formulaic phrases disconnected from the specific situation will bring comfort to almost no one. A pastor who prays with genuine knowledge of the person's situation, with honest acknowledgment of the pain, with confident appeal to the character of a God who is present and sovereign even in chaos -- that pastor will do immeasurable pastoral good in those moments.



# Building a Sustainable Intercessory Prayer Practice

The crisis of pastoral prayer is not primarily a motivational crisis -- most pastors want to pray more than they do. It is a structural and rhythmic crisis. Prayer has been displaced not by irreverence but by busyness, and the busyness is itself often ministry-related. The email from a congregant in need. The sermon that needs three more hours. The staff meeting that ran long. The accumulated administrative debris of running a modern church organization. All of this is real, and none of it is inherently wrong. But without intentional structures that protect prayer time, the urgent will always crowd out the important.

## The Weekly Prayer Architecture

Think of your prayer life as an architecture -- a set of structures that channel spiritual activity and give it form. Just as a building requires both foundation and frame, a sustained prayer life requires both a devotional foundation (personal communion with God) and a pastoral frame (structured intercession for the flock). Without the devotional foundation, intercession becomes rote. Without the pastoral frame, devotion becomes self-focused.

## The Daily Offices: Morning and Evening

The practice of fixed-hour prayer -- praying at set times each day -- is one of the oldest and most durable structures in the history of the church. Rooted in the Jewish tradition of the three daily hours of prayer (Daniel 6:10; Psalm 55:17), formalized in the monastic Rule of Benedict, adapted into Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions through various prayer books, and recently recovered by many evangelical pastors, the daily office offers a solution to the prayer-by-impulse problem that afflicts most pastoral prayer lives.

The morning office anchors the day before the accumulation of demands begins. It typically includes Scripture reading (following a lectionary or a systematic plan), a psalm, structured prayer covering praise, confession, intercession, and petition, and a period of silence. The evening office closes the day with examination of conscience, thanksgiving for the day's provisions, and intercession that carries the day's pastoral encounters into the night. Even 20-25 minutes for each office, consistently practiced, will produce a depth of spiritual formation that five years of irregular earnest prayer attempts cannot match.

The key to the daily office is that it does not depend on feeling. You do not pray the morning office when you feel spiritually warm and receptive. You pray it because it is Tuesday morning and Tuesday morning is when you pray. This is not legalism -- it is the kind of structure that protects prayer from the vagaries of pastoral emotion. Eugene Peterson put it plainly: pastors who pray only when they feel like it will pray very little and accomplish less.

## The Weekly Congregational Prayer System

Beyond the daily offices, the pastor needs a systematic method for covering the entire congregation in prayer on a rolling basis. In a small congregation of 50, this is achievable in a daily 15-minute block. In a congregation of 200-500, it requires intentional organization. In a larger congregation, the pastor must build a prayer team and delegate portions of the intercessory task without abandoning personal participation.

One effective method is to divide the congregation alphabetically or by household unit, and pray through one section each day of the week. With a congregation of 200 households, praying 40 households per day on a weekday schedule covers the entire congregation each week. This is not the only method, and the specific system matters less than the commitment to actual, regular, named intercession for every person in the congregation.

Some pastors prefer to use the pictorial church directory as their prayer guide -- praying face by face. Others keep a prayer journal in which they note specific requests, life situations, and spiritual concerns as they learn of them through pastoral conversations. Others use a digital tool (Prayer Mate, PrayerChain, or a simple spreadsheet) that reminds them of congregants and tracks what they have been praying for over time. The tool matters far less than the practice.

### **The Monthly Pastoral Prayer Meeting**

A praying pastor should also build a culture of prayer in the congregation. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to establish a regular corporate intercessory prayer meeting -- not a prayer-and-worship service, not a Bible study with prayer at the end, but an actual meeting whose entire purpose is intercession. This meeting should be small enough to be genuinely intimate (8-20 people) and consistent enough to become a rhythmic feature of congregational life.

The pastor who leads this prayer meeting is not presiding over a religious ceremony. He is modeling what pastoral prayer looks like in community. He prays specifically for the congregation. He teaches people how to intercede. He creates space for others to pray aloud. Over time, this meeting becomes the spiritual boiler room of the congregation -- the place from which spiritual heat is generated and distributed throughout the community.

## **What to Pray for Your People**

Pastoral prayer is directional -- it has specific content shaped by specific people and specific circumstances. The pastor who prays vaguely ("Lord, bless my congregation") is doing something, but not something that maximizes the pastoral power of intercession. The following categories represent the key areas of congregational prayer that every pastor should be covering regularly.

### **Spiritual Vitality and Growth**

Paul's prayer in Colossians 1:9-12 is the gold standard for this category: that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy. This prayer asks for nothing circumstantial -- it asks entirely for spiritual formation. It is a prayer for people to become who God designed them to be.

The pastor who regularly prays this prayer for his congregation by name is praying in alignment with the deepest purpose of pastoral ministry. Not just that people's circumstances would improve (though we pray for that too), but that people themselves would be transformed -- that the image of Christ would be formed in them, that they would grow into spiritual maturity, that the Word of God would be at home in them with all its richness (Colossians 3:16).

### **Marriages and Families**

The family is the smallest unit of the church and the most vulnerable to spiritual attack. The enemy knows that a broken marriage affects not just two people but children, extended family, small group community, and the broader congregation. The pastor who prays preventively and persistently for the marriages in his congregation is engaged in genuine spiritual warfare -- not the theatrical kind, but the patient, sustained kind that builds defensive walls before the siege begins.

This means praying not only for couples you know are struggling, but for all the marriages in your congregation. Pray for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Pray for wives to be cherished and to flourish. Pray for parents raising children in the enormous pressures of contemporary culture. Pray for prodigal children, for parents carrying the weight of that grief. Pray for families navigating divorce, remarriage, blended family complexity, and the slow healing of generational wounds.

### **The Spiritually Vulnerable**

Every congregation has people who are one crisis away from walking away from faith. The young adult raised in the church who is quietly losing confidence in the resurrection. The long-time member who is in the early stages of an addiction no one knows about yet. The high-functioning professional whose marriage is held together by appearance rather than love. The woman carrying shame she has never brought to God because she does not believe God could handle it. These people will rarely raise their hands for prayer. They will rarely seek you out in the foyer. But they are in your congregation, and they need your intercession desperately.

Paul's pastoral heart for the vulnerable is visible throughout his letters. He writes of carrying "anxiety for all the churches" and the daily pressure of concern for the weak (2 Corinthians 11:28-29). This is not a healthy psychological state to aim for -- it is a description of the cost of genuine pastoral love. The pastor who genuinely loves his people will feel some version of this weight, and prayer is one of the primary ways to transform that weight into something productive rather than crushing.

### **Leadership and Ministry Teams**

Those who carry spiritual responsibility in the congregation are both the most vital and the most vulnerable members of the flock. The enemy targets leaders not because of personal animosity but because of strategic leverage -- a fallen elder affects dozens of people; a pastor in moral failure can devastate hundreds. The pastor who prays specifically and regularly for the spiritual health, marriage, integrity, and resilience of every leader in his congregation is doing more for the long-term health of the church than any leadership training program can accomplish alone.

Pray for leaders by name and by role. Pray for their marriages. Pray for their children. Pray for their financial integrity. Pray against the specific temptations associated with their personalities and their areas of responsibility. Pray that they would not burn out or be sidelined by the enemy before they have completed the work God has given them. And tell them you are praying for them. The knowledge that the pastor prays for you specifically is one of the most powerful forms of pastoral care available.



# Creating a Culture of Prayer in Your Congregation

A praying pastor is the necessary starting point, but not the ending point. The goal of pastoral prayer leadership is to create a congregation that prays -- that treats prayer as the primary business of the church, not a religious preamble to the real business. This does not happen automatically or quickly. It is the work of years, accomplished through modeling, teaching, structures, and the patient cultivation of a spiritual culture.

## Modeling: The Most Powerful Teaching Method

The congregation will become what the pastor models, not what the pastor teaches. A pastor can preach a dozen sermons on the priority of prayer while scheduling it as the last item in every meeting. The congregation will notice the discrepancy and follow the practice, not the preaching. The pastor who models prayer -- who is visibly, consistently, and unhurriedly prayerful -- will produce a congregation that values prayer far more effectively than any prayer seminar can.

This means that the pastoral prayer in worship deserves your full preparation and your full pastoral heart. It means that when a congregant shares a burden with you -- in the foyer, in the parking lot, in a pastoral meeting -- you stop and pray with them then and there, not just "I'll keep that in my prayers." It means that staff meetings begin with real prayer, not a perfunctory blessing. It means that your leadership team sees you as someone who genuinely believes prayer accomplishes something, because they have seen it accomplish things.

## Teaching: Giving the Congregation Language and Framework

Many congregants want to pray more than they do. They have been told prayer is important. They have experienced it sporadically. What they often lack is a framework -- a way of thinking about prayer that is biblically grounded, practically useful, and broad enough to encompass their real experience (including the experience of prayer that feels like it is not working). The pastor has a unique opportunity to provide this teaching through preaching, through small group curriculum, and through the informal pastoral conversations that happen throughout ministry life.

Key areas to address in congregational prayer teaching: the biblical theology of prayer (what is prayer, why does it work, how does it relate to divine sovereignty?); the different types of prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication -- but also lament, which is badly underrepresented in most evangelical prayer cultures); the practical disciplines of prayer (the daily office, journaling, Scripture-prayer, praying the psalms); and the communal dimensions of prayer (praying together, praying for one another, the prayer meeting as a means of grace).

## Preaching on Prayer

A systematic series on prayer -- not a topical self-help series but a genuinely expository journey through the great prayers of Scripture -- can permanently elevate the prayer culture of a congregation. The Psalms are the church's prayer book. The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6) is the church's primary prayer curriculum. Paul's intercessory prayers (Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, Philippians 1) are blueprints for congregational intercession. Nehemiah's crisis prayer (Nehemiah 1), Elijah's audacious intercession (1 Kings 18), the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus (John 17), the prayer gathering in Acts 4 -- each of these texts offers a full theological and practical treatment of prayer that most congregations have never encountered in depth.

## The Prayer Ministry Ecosystem

A healthy prayer culture in a congregation is not built on one prayer meeting or one intercessory team. It is an ecosystem -- multiple overlapping structures and practices that together produce an atmosphere of consistent, diverse, and deep prayer throughout the community. The components of this ecosystem might include: a weekly congregational prayer meeting, a 24-7 prayer chain or online prayer request system, prayer partners (congregants paired with each other for mutual intercession), prayer stations in the worship space before and after services, a prayer team that covers the worship service in intercession in a separate room, pastoral care prayer visits (where church leaders visit homes specifically to pray), and seasonal prayer events (prayer retreats, all-night prayer gatherings, Advent and Lent prayer disciplines).

Not every congregation can or should implement all of these simultaneously. The wise pastor builds the ecosystem gradually, starting with the most foundational structures (the congregational prayer meeting, the prayer chain) and adding complexity as the culture develops. The goal is not impressive programming but genuine, deep, widespread prayer that permeates every dimension of congregational life.

## When Prayer Feels Like It Is Not Working

No honest treatment of pastoral intercession can avoid this subject. There are seasons -- sometimes extended seasons -- when prayer feels like speaking into a void. The person you have been interceding for does not come to faith. The marriage you have prayed over for years still ends in divorce. The congregation you have carried before God for a decade still struggles with the same patterns of conflict and stagnation. What do you do with that?

The Psalms of lament are the Scripture's most honest engagement with this question. "How long, O LORD?" is the repeated cry of Psalm 13, Psalm 88, Psalm 89, and dozens of others. The psalmists do not resolve the tension between unanswered prayer and divine faithfulness with a theological explanation. They live in the tension, cry out from within it, and slowly -- not always in the same psalm -- arrive at a reaffirmation of trust that is more costly and therefore more durable than any trust that has not been tested.

The pastoral implication is twofold. First, you need permission to lament. The pastor who has been praying for years without visible fruit is not failing -- he is participating in a tradition as old as the prophets and as recent as the great intercessors of every generation. Second, you need to distinguish between prayer not working and prayer not working on your timeline. The history of the church is full of prayers that appeared to go unanswered for years, decades, even generations -- and then bore extraordinary fruit. George Muller's 50-year intercession for a friend who came to faith on the day of Muller's funeral is not exceptional. It is illustrative of how intercession often works.

*"And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."*

-- 1 John 5:14-15

## Reflection Questions for Pastoral Self-Examination

1. How would you honestly describe your current intercessory prayer life? How many hours per week do you spend in prayer for specific people in your congregation? What does your honest answer reveal about your actual priorities?
2. Do you have a systematic method for covering your entire congregation in prayer? If not, what has prevented you from developing one? What one structural change would make the greatest difference?

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3. Who in your congregation is most in need of intensive intercession right now? Have you been praying for them specifically? What would it cost you to increase your intercession for them?
4. How is your public prayer in worship forming (or failing to form) the prayer culture of your congregation? What is one change you could make in your preparation and delivery of the pastoral prayer?
5. What is your experience of unanswered prayer? How have you processed it theologically? Have you been able to bring this honestly before God in lament, or have you suppressed it out of a sense that honest complaint is inappropriate for a pastor?
6. What structures do you have in place for building a prayer culture in your congregation? What is the next structure you need to add? Who would you bring alongside you to help build it?

## **Application: A 30-Day Pastoral Prayer Challenge**

The following 30-day challenge is designed to establish or re-establish a sustainable pastoral prayer practice. It is not a program -- it is a scaffold. Use it for 30 days, evaluate what is working, adapt what is not, and build from there.

1. Days 1-7: Morning Office. For 25 minutes each morning before any phone, email, or pastoral task, pray through a psalm, read a short Scripture passage, and pray specifically for five congregation members by name.
2. Days 8-14: Add the congregational sweep. Use your church directory or membership list. Divide the congregation into five groups. Pray through one group each weekday, covering the entire congregation by Friday.
3. Days 15-21: Add crisis and pastoral intercession. After each pastoral encounter (conversation, counseling session, hospital visit), take 5 minutes to pray specifically for the person before your next appointment.
4. Days 22-28: Add the evening review. At the end of each day, spend 10 minutes reviewing the day in God's presence. Give thanks for specific provisions. Bring specific people to God. Rest in his presence.
5. Day 30: Journal your observations. What changed in your pastoral relationships during this month? What surprised you? What do you want to carry forward permanently?

*The pastor who prays is the most powerful person in any community. Not because of personal authority, not because of giftedness, not because of institutional position -- but because he is connected to the God who moves mountains, raises the dead, and transforms the human heart from the inside out. The ministry begins on your knees and finds its most lasting fruit there.*

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