

The Earth: Handle with Prayer

BY JAN JOHNSON

As the plane descended that Saturday evening, I watched forest fires raging over my special place on the planet: Southern California. Fire after fire lined the eastern corridor to Los Angeles. Once home, I could see the sky lit up and the hills above us on fire.

The next morning as the winds picked up, firefighters knocked on our door and told us to pack up to be ready to leave. But the fire receded and they didn't come back, so we went wandering toward the hills to gaze at the fire.

That's when I did something odd. I shut my eyes and held up my hand toward the direction I wanted the wind to blow so that the fire would bypass our neighborhood and move back into the hills.

My daughter's friend quizzed me, "What are you doing?"

With hesitant uncertainty, I offered, "Uh . . . I'm praying for the wind to shift."

At the time, I thought it was odd that I did that. But now I'd probably pray with determination and imitate the Master: "Peace, be still" (Mark 4:39, *King James Version*). What has changed is that my fledgling ideas about praying for our planet, its forces, its creatures, and our part in that have grown.

God could work wonders without anyone's help, but God likes having a team of partners, rather than merely puppets. Jesus told the disciples they were no longer mere servants, but friends who *knew the master's business* (John 15:15). We are part of this team, and part of our "master's business" is caring for the earth: "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man" (Psalm 115:16). As team members, we "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26).

To some, "rule over" has meant to be exploitive, but that really isn't imitating Christ, who did not find power and authority something to be exploited. Instead, the mind of Christ (which we have) involved self-giving, even self-emptying love (Philippians 2:3, 6). God tenderly cares for



creation (Psalm 104:2-32), and as partners chosen to care for and tenderly manage or "be responsible for" creation (Genesis 1:26, *The Message*), we aren't chosen for our own benefit, but for what God wants to accomplish through us.

This responsibility as God's agents—the human job description—goes against contemporary tendencies to either disregard creation or to manipulate it, praying: "God, please don't let it rain (even if there's a drought) because I want to take my boat out on the lake today." (The latter may not always be an unwise prayer unless it's the only kind of creation prayer we ever offer—manipulative). Can I let go of my manipulative ways, on the one hand, but also of my unthinking, indifferent ways ("I'm too busy to recycle") to join God in tenderly caring for creation?

Hearing the Groaning of the Earth

As God's agents on earth (Genesis 1:26), we are like estate managers, so it behooves us to learn how to be more responsible and vigilant in caring for the

earth. While there are many ways to take responsibility, one simple, overlooked way is in praying for the earth.

Such prayer requires that we understand the natural world as God's idea and God's workmanship, full of beauty and wonder. Yet this natural world is also full of ugliness and violence, but "that wasn't the original intention, and the living God has now acted to heal the world of wickedness and corruption which have so radically infected it."¹ This action involves the coming of the Christ, and through Christ, God was pleased to "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." The gospel of Christ (life, death, and resurrection) has now been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:20, 23). Paul believed that the "whole cosmos is good, God-given, and despite the rebellion of the powers within it, it has been reconciled to its maker . . . new creation has been born, and must now be implemented."² How can we be a part of that?

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Schooled in these ideas as another round of fires came near our home, I asked God how I might pray. I've been counseled by those wiser in prayer to be humble when venturing out in a new kind of prayer. So I followed this advice to start small by praying for the smallest of the nine fires, one that happened to be about 10 miles from me. That first little fire went out in a day . . . but then, it was a small fire. Besides I'm not sure my prayers made a difference in the fire, but I loved participating in the gentle management of creation.

Then I received an e-mail from a friend living in a distant community surrounded on three sides by fire. Would I pray? So I focused on that community, and again, it was spared (but a lot of people were praying for that one). I kept all this to myself, following the discipline of secrecy, especially about prayer (Matthew 6:6; 8:4). Many people were praying, and I was so happy to be a small, simple conduit.

With new awareness in my eyes and ears, I seemed to see and hear the groaning of creation as we also were going through

a severe drought in Southern California (Romans 8:19-23). This was causing coyotes and deer and rattlesnakes to appear on our streets and front lawns desperately looking for water. So I prayed for unexpected rain to help these creatures.

After a few days of praying this way, I found myself slightly annoyed by slow traffic on the freeway because . . . there was unexpected rain. Before this, I might have wished the rain would stop, but now I slowed down and thanked God for the prayed-for unexpected rain that inconvenienced me but helped the earth and its creatures.

Paying Attention

Viewing ourselves as God's agents changes how we respond to climate news elsewhere. While we might pray for international political struggles, could I pray also for climate disasters?

Some people prefer not to pray, because if things don't seem to come out perfectly, it will look like God has failed. So we don't pray in order to protect God's reputation (as if God *needs* me to do this). But when

homes and even lives are destroyed, I am still God's agent. God is there because I'm there. God is a helper in these situations and invites my human mind and body to partner by helping too by donating time and money.

Such prayer requires expectancy. When facing a natural disaster, we tend to be afraid or to worry or even to become numb. But these thoughts contradict the prayers we just uttered aloud. Do I believe God's love and power in the universe can for this moment be focused to bring about goodness and rescue in the midst of this natural disaster? Am I willing to ask? Yes, because once you've participated in being God's agent a few times, you love being a part of what God is doing and would never sit on the sidelines again.

¹Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone The Prison Letters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 152.

²N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection and the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 239.

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HOW THE BIBLE GUIDED ME AT A CROSSROADS

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searching Scripture, praying and fasting, and seeking wise counsel, my heart was still unsettled about the right choice.

Principle 6: Examine the open doors. In Revelation 3:8, Jesus says to the messenger of the church in Philadelphia, "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." In Acts 16 the Holy Spirit kept closing doors on Paul until he opened a door in Macedonia.

Look at the options. What do your circumstances say? In our situation, the door was open to go and the door was open to stay.

Principle 7: Seek supernatural direction from God. Allow God to direct your steps. I think in most situations you will have a sense of God's leading long before you reach this point, but Teresa

and I did everything mentioned above and still had no clear sense of direction from God. Going or staying were both equally valid choices. That's when a proverb guided our final choice.

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). In Acts 1, when the disciples were choosing a replacement for Judas, the decision came down to two equally good choices and there was still no clarity.

What happened? They prayed, "Lord, . . . show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry" (Acts 1:24, 25). The disciples finished praying and then cast lots. What is casting lots? It's the ancient equivalent of flipping a coin! The apostles made their final decision by asking God to direct

the outcome of rolling the dice or flipping a coin or drawing names.

So that's what Teresa and I did. I would never do this at the beginning of a choice process, but after we had done everything else we knew to do, we cast lots! We prayed and fasted, yet again asking God to direct our choice by controlling the flip of a coin. The coin came up nine times in a row to move to Florida, and I quit flipping!

Most choices in life won't ever come to a prayer-covered coin flip. And God is not so small he can bless only one choice. But when we seriously followed biblical principles, God clearly lighted our path.

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