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## I Have Seen History Shaped Through Prayer

For me the power of prayer to shape history is no mere abstract theological formula. I have seen it demonstrated in my own experience on many occasions. In this chapter I will relate four such occasions. To make them effective as illustrations, I have chosen situations in which different nations and different political factors were involved.

### The War in North Africa

From 1941 to 1943 I served as a hospital attendant with the British forces in North Africa. I was part of a small medical unit that worked with two British armored divisions—the First Armored Division and the Seventh Armored Division. It was this latter division that became celebrated as the “desert rats,” with the emblem of the white jerboa.

At that time the morale of the British forces in the desert was very low. The basic problem was that the men did not have confidence in their officers. I myself am the son of an

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army officer, and many of the friends with whom I grew up were from the same background. I thus had some valid standards of judgment. As a group, the officers in the desert at that time were selfish, irresponsible and undisciplined. Their main concern was not the well-being of the men, or the effective prosecution of the war, but their own physical comfort.

I recall one officer who became sick with malaria and was evacuated to a base hospital in Cairo. For his transportation to Cairo he required one four-berth ambulance to himself, and a one-and-a-half ton truck to carry his equipment and personal belongings. At that time we were continually being reminded that trucks and gasoline were in very short supply, and that every effort must be made to economize in the use of both. From Cairo this officer was then evacuated to Britain (a procedure that certainly was not necessitated by a mere bout of malaria). Some months later we heard him on a radio broadcast relayed from Britain. He was giving a very vivid account of the hardships of campaigning in the desert!

At that period our greatest hardship was the shortage of water. Supplies were very strictly rationed. Our military water bottles were filled every other day. This was all the water that we were allowed for every purpose—washing, shaving, drinking, cooking, etc. Yet the officers in their mess each evening regularly consumed more water with their whisky than was allotted to the other ranks for all purposes combined.

The result of all this was the longest retreat in the history of the British army—about seven hundred miles in all—from a place in Tripoli called El Agheila to El Alamein, about fifty miles west of Cairo. Here the British forces dug in for one final stand. If El Alamein should fall, the way would be open for the Axis powers to gain control of Egypt, to cut the

Suez Canal, and to move over into Palestine. The Jewish community there would then be subjected to the same treatment that was already being meted out to the Jews in every area of Europe that had come under Nazi control.

About eighteen months previously, in a military barrack room in Britain, I had received a very dramatic and powerful revelation of Christ. I thus knew in my own experience the reality of God's power. In the desert I had no church or minister to offer me fellowship or counsel. I was obliged to depend upon the two great basic provisions of God for every Christian: the Bible and the Holy Spirit. I early came to see that, by New Testament standards, fasting was a normal part of Christian discipline. During the whole period that I was in the desert, I regularly set aside Wednesday of each week as a special day for fasting and prayer.

During the long and demoralizing retreat to the gates of Cairo, God laid on my heart a burden of prayer, both for the British forces in the desert and for the whole situation in the Middle East. Yet I could not see how God could bless leadership that was so unworthy and inefficient. I searched in my heart for some form of prayer that I could pray with genuine faith and that would cover the needs of the situation. After a while it seemed that the Holy Spirit gave me this prayer: "Lord, give us leaders such that it will be for your glory to give us victory through them."

I continued praying this prayer regularly every day. In due course the British government decided to relieve the commander of their forces in the desert and to replace him by another man. The man whom they chose was a general named W. H. E. "Strafer" Gott. He was flown in to Cairo to take over command, but his plane was shot down, and he was killed. Thus at this critical juncture the British forces in this

major theater of the war were left without a commander. Winston Churchill, at that time Prime Minister of Britain, proceeded to act largely on his own initiative. He appointed a more-or-less unknown officer, named B. L. Montgomery, who was hastily flown out from Britain.

Montgomery was the son of an evangelical Anglican bishop. He was a man who very definitely fulfilled God's two requirements in a leader of men. He was *just* and *God-fearing*. He was also a man of tremendous discipline. Within two months he had instilled a totally new sense of discipline into his officers, and had thus restored the confidence of the men in their leaders.

Then the main battle of El Alamein was fought. It was the first major allied victory in the entire war up to that point. The threat to Egypt, to the Suez Canal, and to Palestine was finally thrown back, and the whole course of the war changed in favor of the Allies. It is no exaggeration to say that the battle of El Alamein was the turning point of the war in North Africa.

Two or three days after the battle I found myself in the desert a few miles behind the advancing Allied forces. On the tailboard of a military truck beside me a small portable radio was relaying a news commentator's description of the scene at Montgomery's headquarters as he had witnessed it on the eve of the battle. He recalled how Montgomery publicly called his officers and men to prayer, saying, "Let us ask the Lord, mighty in battle, to give us the victory." As these words came through that portable radio, God spoke very clearly to my spirit and said, "That is the answer to your prayer."

How well this incident confirms the truth about promotion that is stated in Psalm 75.6-7. The British government chose

Gott for their commander, but God set him aside and raised up Montgomery, the man of His own choosing. God did this to bring glory to His own name, and to answer a prayer which, by the Holy Spirit, He himself had first inspired me to pray. By this intervention God also preserved the Jews in Palestine from coming under the control of the Axis powers.

I believe that the prayer which God gave me at that time could well be applied to other situations, both military and political: "Lord, give us leaders such that it will be for your glory to give us victory through them."

### **The Birth of the State of Israel**

In 1947 the future of Palestine was brought before the General Assembly of the United Nations. At that time the British still governed the country under a mandate that had been assigned to them by the League of Nations shortly after the end of World War I. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted to partition the country into two separate states, allotting a small area to an independent Jewish state, and the rest of the country to the Arabs (with the city of Jerusalem under international control). The date set for the termination of the British mandate and the inception of the new political order in Palestine was May 14, 1948.

Almost immediately after the United Nations decision in favor of partition, the Arabs of Palestine, aided and abetted by infiltrators from the surrounding Arab nations, embarked on an undeclared war against the Jewish communities in their midst. Several main areas of the country were virtually taken over by armed groups of Arabs, with little or no semblance of normal civil government. By the early part of 1948 the

Jewish community inside Jerusalem already presented the appearance of a beleaguered city. They were almost totally cut off from supplies of food and other commodities, and were in a condition bordering on starvation.

On the date set for the inauguration of the new Jewish state, all the surrounding Arab nations simultaneously declared war on it. Something like 650,000 Jews, with the barest minimum of arms and equipment, and without any officially constituted military forces, found themselves confronted on every frontier by a hostile Arab world, fifty million strong, who boasted well-trained armies and abundant military supplies. The leaders of the Arab nations publicly declared their intention to annihilate the new-born Jewish state and to sweep the Jews into the sea.

At this period my wife Lydia and I were living with our eight adopted daughters in the center of Jewish Jerusalem. We occupied a large house on the southeast corner of a main intersection between King George Avenue and a street leading eastward to the Jaffa Gate of the old city. Lydia had been living in or near Jerusalem for the previous twenty years. She had been an eyewitness to a long series of earlier conflicts in that area between the Arabs and the Jews. She recalled that invariably the Jews had been poorly armed and ill prepared to resist attack. Now in this critical hour it seemed that the odds against the Jews were immeasurably greater than on previous occasions, and the results of defeat too terrible to contemplate.

Together Lydia and I searched the Scriptures for words of encouragement or direction from God. Each day we became more and more convinced that we were living in the period of Israel's restoration, to which their prophets and leaders had looked forward over the long centuries of agony and

exile. This was the time spoken of in Psalm 102.12-13: "But thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever . . . Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time is come."

We realized that we were seeing before our eyes the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel:

Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west:

I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far and my daughters from the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 43.5-6

These and other passages of Scripture convinced us that the restoration of the Jews to their land was the sovereign purpose of God being brought to fulfillment. If it was God's purpose to restore Israel, then it could not be His will for them to be driven out or destroyed. This gave us faith to pray for Israel's deliverance, based not on nationalistic prejudices, but on the scriptural revelation of God's will.

When Lydia and I were thus brought together by the Holy Spirit concerning God's will, our prayers fulfilled the condition stated in Matthew 18.19: "Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." One day, as we were praying together I heard Lydia utter this short prayer: "Lord, paralyze the Arabs!"

When full-scale fighting broke out in Jerusalem, our house was less than a quarter of a mile from the front line, which ran more or less along the west wall of the old city. In the

first six weeks of fighting we counted approximately one hundred and fifty windowpanes that had been broken by bullets. For most of this period our whole family lived in a large laundry room in the basement.

Because of the strategic location of our house, our backyard was taken over by the *Haganah*—the volunteer Jewish defense force that later developed into the official Israeli army. An observation post under the command of a young man named Phinehas was located in the yard. In this way we became quite well acquainted with a number of the young Jewish people—both men and women—who manned the post.

Early in June 1948 the United Nations succeeded in imposing a four-weeks' cease-fire, and there was a temporary lull in the fighting. One day during the cease-fire some of our young Jewish friends were sitting in our living room, talking freely about their experiences in the initial period of fighting.

"There's something we can't understand," one young man said. "We go into an area where the Arabs are, and they outnumber us ten to one, and are much better armed than we are. Yet at times they seem powerless to do anything against us. It's just as if they are paralyzed!"

Right there in our own living room this young Jewish soldier repeated the very phrase that Lydia had uttered in prayer a few weeks previously! I have never since ceased to marvel at God's faithfulness. Not merely did God literally answer Lydia's prayer to "paralyze the Arabs." He even provided us with firsthand, objective testimony from a Jewish soldier in our own living room that this was what He had done! God's purpose to grant Israel continuing occupation of their land was, in this miraculous way, achieved with the

loss of fewer lives than would otherwise have been the case.

It was the invading Arab armies, with all their superiority in arms and numbers, that were defeated and driven back. In the next twenty years this initial victory of Israel was consolidated by equally dramatic victories in two succeeding wars. Today the state of Israel has been firmly established and has achieved amazing progress in almost every area of its national life.

For Lydia and me all this has much greater significance than the mere record of unusual military or political achievements. Each time we receive some fresh item of news concerning Israel's continuing development and progress, we say to ourselves with deep inner satisfaction: "Our prayers played a part in that."

#### **The End of Stalin's Era**

From 1949 to 1956 I was pastor of a congregation in London, England. I still retained a special interest in God's dealings with the Jewish people, which had first been kindled by my experiences in Jerusalem at the time of the birth of the state of Israel. Early in 1953 I received information from reliable sources that Josef Stalin, who at that time ruled the Soviet Union as an unchallenged dictator, was planning a systematic purge directed against the Russian Jews.

As I meditated on this situation, the Lord reminded me of Paul's exhortation to the gentile Christians concerning the Jews:

For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief:

Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy.

Romans 11.30-31

Somehow I felt that God was laying at my door the responsibility for the Jews in Russia. I shared my feelings with the leaders of a few small prayer groups in various parts of Britain, who also had a special concern for the Jews. Eventually we decided to set aside one day for special prayer and fasting on behalf of the Jews in Russia. I do not recall the exact date chosen but I believe it was a Thursday. All the members of our groups voluntarily committed themselves to abstain from food that day, and to devote special time to prayer for God's intervention on behalf of the Jews in Russia. Our own congregation came together that evening in a prayer meeting devoted primarily to that topic.

There was no particularly dramatic spiritual manifestation in the meeting, no special sense of being "blessed" or emotionally stirred. But within two weeks from that day the course of history inside Russia was changed by one decisive event: the death of Stalin. He was seventy-three years old. No advance warning of his sickness or impending death was given to the Russian people. Up to the last moment, sixteen of Russia's most skilled doctors fought to save his life, but in vain. The cause of death was said to be a brain hemorrhage.

Let it be clearly stated that no member of any of our groups prayed for the death of Stalin. We simply committed the situation inside Russia to God, and trusted His wisdom for the answer that was needed. Nevertheless, I am convinced that God's answer came in the form of Stalin's death.

In Acts chapter 12 a somewhat similar answer to the prayers of the early church is recorded. King Herod had the

apostle James (brother of John) executed. Then he proceeded to arrest Peter and hold him for execution immediately after the Passover. At this point the church in Jerusalem betook themselves to earnest, persistent prayer on Peter's behalf. As a result, God intervened supernaturally through an angelic visitation, and Peter was delivered out of the prison. In this way, the prayers of the church for Peter were answered, but it still remained for God to deal with King Herod.

In the closing verses of the chapter Luke gives a vivid picture of Herod, arrayed in his royal apparel, making a speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon. At the end of his oration the people applauded, shouting, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man" (Acts 12.22). Puffed up with conceit at his own achievement, Herod accepted the applause. However, the record concludes, "Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not give God the glory. And in fearful internal agony he died" (12.23 PHILLIPS). The outworking of the power of prayer in human history can at times be swift and terrible.

It remains to point out briefly the consequences of Stalin's death. The planned purge of Russian Jews was not carried out. Instead, a period of change in internal Russian policy was initiated, so significant and far-reaching that it later came to be known as the era of "destalinization." In due course, Stalin's own successor, and former associate, Khrushchev, publicly denounced Stalin as a cruel and unjust persecutor of the Russian people. Later, Stalin's own daughter, brought up under the teaching of atheistic communism, fled from her native land and sought refuge in the country which her father had most persistently abused. She further professed her faith in a crucified Jew, whose followers her father had cruelly persecuted.

### Kenya's Birth Pangs

From 1957 to 1961 Lydia and I served as educational missionaries in Kenya, East Africa. I was the principal of a Teacher Training College in Western Kenya.

During this period Kenya was still painfully struggling to recover from the bloody agonies of the Mau Mau movement, which had created bitter mistrust and hatred, both between Africans and Europeans and also between various of the African tribes. At the same time the country was being hastily prepared for the end of British rule and for national independence. This was eventually achieved in 1963.

In 1960 the Belgian Congo, to the west of Kenya, gained its independence. Without adequate preparation, the various different African groups inside the Congo were unable to meet the demands of self-government, and were plunged into a bloody and protracted series of internal wars. Many of the European residents of the Congo fled eastwards into Kenya, bringing with them gruesome pictures of the strife and chaos they had left behind them.

Against this background, the forecasts of the political experts for the future of Kenya were dark indeed. It was generally predicted that Kenya would follow the unhappy course of the Congo, but with problems made even more serious by the internal antagonisms that were the legacy of Mau Mau.

In August 1960 I was one of a number of missionaries ministering at a week-long convention for African young people held in western Kenya. There were about two hundred young Africans in attendance, most of whom were either teachers or students. A considerable number of these were either students or former students from the Teacher Training College of which I was the principal.

The convention ended on a Sunday. In the final service that evening we witnessed a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, quoted by Peter in Acts:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Acts 2.17

A missionary colleague from Canada brought the closing address, which was translated into Swahili by a young man named Wilson Mamboleo, who had recently graduated from our Teacher Training College. The first two hours of the service followed a normal pattern, but after the close of the missionary's address the Holy Spirit moved with sovereign power and lifted the meeting onto a supernatural plane. For the next two hours almost the whole group of more than two hundred people continued in spontaneous worship and prayer, without any visible human leadership.

At a certain point the conviction came to me that, as a group, we had touched God, and that His power was at our disposal. God spoke to my spirit, and said, "Do not let them make the same mistake that Pentecostals have so often made in the past, by squandering My power in spiritual self-indulgence. Tell them to pray for the future of Kenya."

I began to make my way to the platform, intending to deliver to the whole group the message which I felt God had given me. On the way I passed Lydia, who was sitting beside the aisle. She put out her hand and stopped me.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

"Tell them to pray for Kenya," she said.

"That's just what I'm going up to the platform for," I replied. I realized that God had spoken to my wife at the same time that He had spoken to me, and I accepted this as confirmation of His direction.

Reaching the platform, I called the whole group to silence, and presented God's challenge to them. "You are the future leaders of your people," I told them, "both in the field of education and also in the field of religion. The Bible places upon you, as Christians, the responsibility to pray for your country and its government. Your country is now facing the most critical period in its history. Let us unite together in praying for the future of Kenya."

Wilson Mamboleo was with me on the platform, translating my words into Swahili. When the time came to pray, he knelt down beside me. As I led in prayer, almost every person present joined me in praying out loud. The combined volume of voices rising in prayer reminded me of the passage in Revelation 19.6: "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings . . ." The sound of prayer swelled to a crescendo, then suddenly ceased. It was as if some invisible conductor had brought down his baton.

After a few moments of silence, Wilson stood up and spoke to the congregation. "I want to tell you what the Lord showed me while we were praying," he said. I realized that God had given him a vision as he knelt beside me in prayer.

Wilson then related the vision he had seen, first in English and then in Swahili. "I saw a red horse coming toward Kenya from the east," he said. "It was very fierce, and there was a very black man riding on it. Behind it were several other horses, also red and fierce. While we were praying, I saw all the horses turn around, and move away toward the north."

Wilson paused for a moment, and then continued, "I asked God to tell me the meaning of what I had seen, and this is what He told me: 'Only the supernatural power of the prayer of my people can turn away the troubles that are coming upon Kenya!'"

For many days after that I continued to meditate on what Wilson had told us. I realized that Wilson's vision was in some ways similar to one recorded in Zechariah 1.7-11. I asked Wilson whether he was familiar with this passage of Zechariah, and he replied that he was not. I gradually came to the conclusion that by this vision God had granted us an assurance that He had heard our prayers for Kenya, and that He would intervene in some definite way on behalf of the country. Subsequent events in Kenya's history have confirmed that this was so.

During the period of British rule, Kenya was one of three states that made up British East Africa. The other two states were Uganda to the west, and Tanganyika to the south. (Tanganyika was later renamed Tanzania.) Kenya eventually achieved her independence on December 12, 1963. The other two states had already achieved independence somewhat earlier. Immediately after independence a national government was duly elected in Kenya, with Jomo Kenyatta as the nation's first president.

In January 1964 there was an exact outworking in Kenya's history of the vision which Wilson had seen. A bloody revolution broke out in Zanzibar, off Kenya's east coast. This was led by an African from Uganda who had been trained in revolutionary tactics under Castro in Cuba. The revolution succeeded in overthrowing the Sultan of Zanzibar.

In the same month, a revolutionary movement gripped the national army of Tanzania, and its influence spread also to

the army of Kenya. The aim was to overthrow the elected government of Kenya, and to replace it by a military dictatorship under communist control.

At this critical juncture Kenya's new president, Jomo Kenyatta, acted with wisdom and firmness. Enlisting the help of the British army, he suppressed the revolutionary movement in the army of Kenya and restored law and order throughout the country. In this way the authority of Kenya's duly elected government was preserved, and the communist attempt at a military take-over was completely foiled.

In Wilson's vision the red horses that turned away from Kenya moved towards the north. Northward along the African coast from Kenya lies Somalia. The kind of communist military coup that failed in Kenya was successful in Somalia. Someone later described Somalia as "a communist military camp."

The other countries bordering on Kenya have likewise experienced serious political problems. To the south, in Tanzania, strong communist influence has brought about various limitations of political freedom. To the west, in Uganda, there has been a history of unstable governments and internal tribal clashes, with a very determined effort by the Moslems to gain control of the country and to make Islam the official religion of the nation. Yet in the midst of all this, Kenya has to a remarkable extent succeeded in combining order and progress with a high degree of political and religious liberty.

The attitude of Kenya's government toward Christianity has been consistently friendly and cooperative. Although President Kenyatta does not himself profess to be a Christian, he has officially invited the various Christian bodies in Kenya to teach the message of Christianity in every government school in the country. In many ways Kenya has become a



strategically located center from which trained national Christians are able to move out with the gospel message to all the surrounding countries.

Sometimes God uses unexpected means of getting information to us. In October 1966 I was in the office of a travel agency in Copenhagen, making arrangements for a flight to London. While I was waiting for my ticket to be prepared, I picked up an English edition of the *London Times*. There was a special sixteen-page supplement, dealing exclusively with Kenya. In essence, the theme of this supplement was that Kenya had proved to be one of the most stable and successful of nearly fifty new nations that had emerged on the continent of Africa since the end of World War II. As I turned each page of the supplement, I seemed to hear the inaudible voice of God within my spirit, saying, "This is what I can do when Christians pray with faith for the government of their nation."

When I decided to include this record of God's dealings with Kenya in the present volume, I wrote to Wilson Mamboleo in Nairobi. I outlined my recollection of the vision which God had given him in 1960, and asked him to indicate any ways in which I could make my account more accurate. I also asked him if he had any comments to make on the present situation in Kenya. The following are some extracts from his reply, dated 30 June 1972:

Thank you for your letter. It is the Spirit of the living God who has guided you to ask me to write these things . . . .

It is so wonderful how the Lord has worked. I and another brother who loves to pray have been uplifting

you before the Lord in prayer and while we were doing so, I received your letter . . . .

Concerning my vision of 1960, I feel you have grasped it well, so there wouldn't be any need for an addition . . . .

At this time Kenya is leading a peaceful life. Economic development is steadily growing. Foreign investment is in a healthy structure. Business among the African people is booming in every town in the country. The success which is being achieved in Kenya is because of the stability of the present government led by His Excellency the President, "Mzee" Jomo Kenyatta.

I can say that God chose this man to lead our nation at such a time as this, and I, as well as many other faithful Christians in the country, do pray for him, that God might grant him wisdom.

Many people in the country do not have an answer who would be a successor to President Kenyatta, when his days on earth are over. In the eyes of men, there is no man of his caliber who will have such a commanding leadership, accepted by all his countrymen, as Kenyatta. However, I do believe, and this is what I tell those I meet, that "God will provide" a man—but only as a result of persistent prayer of the saints . . . .

We thank God that Kenya enjoys more freedom to worship God in the way a person is led, than the other neighboring states. In Tanzania, religion—and especially Christianity—is being suppressed. Open-air evangelistic meetings are not allowed unless one has a valid permit from the authorities . . . . In Uganda, the military gov-

ernment led by General Amin, a Moslem, is urging all religious bodies to become ecumenical. Recently General Amin himself made a mixture of worship—Moslem prayers were conducted in a Christian church, when the General himself attended the prayers . . . .

The military government of Somalia is a socialist type of government. Somalia has close ties with the communist countries of the East—the Soviet Union and Red China. Large amounts of financial and material aids are given to Somalia, just as Tanzania receives its aid from China (including military training and supplies of Chinese MIG fighters) . . . .

Over the past twelve years the history of Kenya and the surrounding nations has demonstrated the exact outworking of the vision which God gave to Wilson in 1960. The intervention of God on behalf of Kenya came through a group of Christians who united together to pray, in accordance with Scripture, for the government and the destiny of their nation.

As you ponder on this record of God's faithfulness, call to mind the words with which Wilson's vision closed: *"Only the supernatural power of the prayer of my people can turn away the troubles that are coming upon Kenya."*

Is there not good reason to believe that these words apply just as much to your country, and to mine?

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## 6

### Fasting Intensifies Prayer

In the preceding chapter various incidental references were made to the practice of fasting. It is now time to examine more systematically the teaching of Scripture on this subject. It will help to begin with a simple definition. We understand "fasting" to be the practice of deliberately abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. If abstinence from water (or other fluids) is also included, this is normally indicated by the context.

#### Christ's Teaching and Example

The best starting point for a study of the Christian discipline of fasting is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6.1–18 Christ gives instructions to His disciples on three related duties: giving alms, praying, and fasting. In each case He places His main emphasis upon the motive, and warns against religious ostentation for the sake of impressing men. With this qualification, He assumes that all His disciples