Ways to Pray for the Lost

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One of our former pastors who is now with the Lord used to encourage us to pray Scripturally rather than falling into "Christian cliches."

One evening he especially challenged us regarding praying for people who don't know the Lord. It's not cliche to pray "Please save so-and-so." Paul said of his countrymen, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

But, if you're like me, praying the same way repeatedly can seem rote after a while. Petitions based on Scripture not only refresh our prayers but also give us confidence that we're praying according to God's will.

The discussion that night sparked a brief search which turned up a few verses of praying for the lost. Since then, I've added others as well as some passages that aren't prayers in themselves but can be turned into prayer.

We don't necessarily need to mention all these things every time we pray for our non-Christians friends and loved ones, but considering one or two of these at a time can help us pray more fervently and effectively.

We can pray that:

They hear or read God's Word. Romans 10:17 tells us "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." There are so many ways now to encounter the gospel–in one's own Bible, on apps, via audio, and so many more options.

Someone tells them of Jesus. In a sense, books, blogs, social media posts, tracts, etc., involve someone telling the hearers or readers about Him. I've heard testimonies of people who believed on the Lord alone in their rooms after reading the Bible. But for many, a personal example is needed.

When Jesus had compassion on a crowd "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," He told the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore **pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers** into his harvest"

(Matthew 9:35-38). In Romans 10:14-15, Paul writes, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”

We can also pray that those who share the gospel would be given the right words to make it clear. Paul prayed for words, boldness (Ephesians 6:18-20), an open door (Colossians 4:3), and clarity (Colossians 4:4).

God will draw our lost loved ones to Himself. Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

The Holy Spirit will guide them into truth and remind them. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would guide us into all the truth (John 16:13), teach all things, and remind us of what Jesus said (John 14:26). Paul goes on to say, “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Their hearts will be “good ground.” In what we call the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, Jesus talks about various people’s hearts as ground that the seed of the Word is dropped into. The seed doesn’t take root and grow in some because it’s snatched away, in others because their heart is stony, in others because thorns choke it out. But the one with “good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it.”

Though we’re not specifically instructed to pray this way, I’ve prayed at times for hearts of lost loved ones to become good ground, for the stones to be removed, the bedrock underneath to be broken up, the thorns to be kept back, so that the seed of the Word can take root and bring forth fruit.

A line from a little-known stanza of the beloved hymn “Just as I Am” says, “Just as I am, Thy love unknown/ Has broken every barrier down.” I think God does that in some by bringing circumstances into their lives to soften them and by bringing them under the sound of the Word that they reject at first, but which gradually breaks down the stoniness. I think apologetics ministries are most helpful here in making way for the gospel.

They would be convicted of sin. Jesus said the Holy Spirit “will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment” (John 16:8). Though conviction feels

awful, without it, people don't know that there's anything they need to be saved from. In one sense, as we mature in the Lord, we realize more fully how awful sin is and how offensive it is to God. But we need this initial realization of what sin is in order to realize we need God's grace.

Their eyes would be opened and hearts turned from darkness to light. Paul said the mission God gave him was "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:18). Again, though this isn't written in the form of a prayer, we can certainly pray these things for those on our hearts.

That they would not be deceived. In Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus says that some people will fully expect to get into heaven, but will be told that He never knew them. One of my frequent prayers is that none of my loved ones would be deceived into thinking they are saved if they are not. I also pray they will not be deceived by those who twist Scripture to try to make it say something it doesn't (2 Peter 3:16).

I've also prayed that people would realize that whatever they are trusting in is not dependable and will not satisfy them in the long run, or that whatever is keeping them from salvation is not worth it.

They would understand God's love. God says He drew His people "with cords of kindness, with the bands of love" (Hosea 11:4). Paul prays for the Ephesians "to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:16-19). Once while I was reading this passage, the phrase "to know the love of Christ" jumped out at me. Paul goes on to say that this love surpasses knowledge–yet he prays we'll comprehend. He's praying for believers here: we can continually grow in our understanding of God's love. But I think we can ask for Him to open the hearts of our unsaved loved ones to God's love as well. God's law convicted me of my sin and my need of forgiveness, but His love drew me and convinced me it was safe to come to Him and He would receive me.

I was astonished to realize that a familiar passage followed this one in Ephesians. After Paul prayed that the Ephesians would comprehend God's love, he said, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21). We use these verses as encouragement for all kinds of things. But in context, praying for others to know God's love and be filled with the fullness of God, we can trust He's able to do more than we can ask or think.

What encouragement that our lost loved ones aren't "impossible cases." God is able to work through His word, His people, and His Holy Spirit to turn hearts to Himself.

"Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved." Romans 10:1