

Adventures in Prayer Week 2: – Burden-bearing

Exodus 28 includes detailed descriptions of the various items of clothing which the temple priests were required to wear as they ministered before God on behalf of the people. Verses 6-30 give a detailed description of something called the 'ephod', a sort of tabard which the priest would have worn over his robes. It had two shoulder-pieces and a breast-piece. The names of the tribes of Israel were engraved on Onyx stones on the shoulder-pieces and again on a whole array of precious stones on the breast-piece. The scripture tells us that the priest was to 'bear the names of the sons of Israel' on his shoulders and on his heart. This is a profound image of the ministry of intercessory prayer.

Heart Prayers

There are certain prayer concerns which we carry on our hearts – people or situations about which we care deeply. These things are relatively easy to pray for: the desire to pray comes readily and we probably feel engaged and motivated as we express our longings. Heart prayers might include:

- Prayers for our loved-ones
- Prayers for churches we have been a part of over the years
- Prayers for projects/organisations/causes in which we have a personal involvement or investment
- Prayers for issues about which we feel strongly



Shoulder Prayers

There are other prayer concerns which we believe to be important and which we want to carry in prayer but which feel like hard work. We have a sense of responsibility about praying for them, but the praying itself doesn't come quite so easily. It's as though we carry the burden on our shoulders rather than our hearts.

Shoulder prayers might include:

- Prayers for those in authority
- Prayers for situations far-removed from our own lives – crises in other parts of the world, etc
- Prayers for issues we find boring or too complex to engage with
- Prayers for a situation which has gone on a long time with no change

Tips for praying heart prayers:

- When we carry things on our hearts, our emotions are often close to the surface. Allow yourself to feel as you pray – to weep, to groan, to cry out to God in whatever way feels most natural.
- Heart prayers are by nature things about which we care deeply, and praying for them can easily tip over into obsessive worry or debilitating fear. Remember that God bears the burden with you (Psalm 68:19). Make sure your praying is about sharing that burden, not allowing that burden to get too heavy.

Tips for praying shoulder prayers

- There are situations we want to pray for about which we don't have any particularly strong feelings, and that can make motivation and engagement harder. Getting informed can help to motivate us – reading about the situation and gaining some understanding of what the needs are, or reading/listening to stories of those whose lives are impacted by the situation.
- Some situations feel like shoulder prayers because they feel so huge. The needs are so many and so great that we don't know where to start. In that situation, don't try to pray for everything. Choose one specific aspect and form a prayer for that. Each time you come to pray for the situation, choose just a small corner to focus on.

Questions for reflection:

- Which person/situation does your heart return to most often in prayer at the moment?
- Have you ever been aware of the Holy Spirit helping you to pray when you weren't able to? What happened, and what was it like?

- When we pray together, prayer can often feel rather cerebral. What might we do to encourage/permission/make space for a bit more 'heart prayer' in our praying together?
- Is there a situation you've sensed God drawing your attention to but which you've found it hard to pray for?
- Have you ever developed prayer rhythms, such as using daily offices, prayer calendars, lists of intercession topics etc? How have these things helped you in your praying?
- Have you ever been led in prayer by someone who has helped you connect with a particular issue/situation in a new way? What was it about their prayer that helped you?

Prayer Activities

Shoulder prayers

1. Choose a current news story to pray about. First, take time to do some research; read a few articles and write down what you learn. Then, use your notes to inform your prayer. Pray for each person involved by name; think about how they might be feeling; pray for the circumstances which need to change or the issues which need to be resolved. Bring that situation before God, taking time to pray detailed, specific prayers.
2. Is there a particular ministry you know God is asking you to commit to praying for? If so, sign up for their newsletter, and make sure you stop to read and digest it when it arrives. You may even want to print it out and leave it somewhere you'll see it, so that you remember to pray.
3. Lists can be useful in working our way through shoulder prayers. If there are lots of people you want to pray for regularly (extended family, people at church, work colleagues, neighbours etc), you could make a list of all of them and choose 4 or 5 to pray for each day. If you like a more random approach, put all their names on separate slips of paper into a box or a bowl and draw a few out each day.

Heart prayers

1. When it's hard to find words to express the prayers that come from deepest within you, it can help to borrow someone else's. Find a book of prayers, or search the internet, and look for a prayer, passage or poem which seems to echo the cry of your own heart. Keep it to hand so you can read it often.
2. 'Heart prayers' can be particularly painful because they're the ones that grieve us most when we don't see answers. Ask God to give you a promise from Scripture which you can call to mind whenever you feel discouraged or weighed down. It doesn't need to be a promise about the outcome of your praying, just a promise about the goodness of the one you pray to.
3. Do you know someone who is carrying a particular heart prayer at the moment? Why not send them a message or Bible verse to encourage them in their praying?