

KEEPING TRACK OF THE STORY

Using Prayer Cards

THE IDEA OF USING PRAYER CARDS instead of a prayer list came to me one day when I was sitting on our living-room sofa, trying to pray. Life over the past few months had become almost unbearable. I was frozen on the inside.

While sitting like this, spiritually numb, a thought suddenly came to me: *Put the Word to work*. I got some three-by-five cards, and on each one wrote the name of a family member, along with a Scripture that I could use to shape my prayers for that person. I began developing a stack of prayer cards that allowed me to pray through my life—for loved ones and friends, for non-Christians I'm building relationships with, for my church and its leaders, for missionaries, for my work and my co-workers, for character change in my own life, and for my dreams.

Here are the overall guidelines I use when creating a prayer card.

1. The card functions like a prayer snapshot of a person's life, so I use short phrases to describe what I want.

2. When praying, I usually don't linger over a card for more than a few seconds. I just pick out one or two key areas and pray for them.
3. I put the Word to work by writing a Scripture verse on the card that expresses my desire for that particular person or situation.
4. The card doesn't change much. Maybe once a year I will add another line. These are just the ongoing areas in a person's life that I am praying for.
5. I usually don't write down answers. They are obvious to me since I see the card almost every day.
6. I will sometimes date a prayer request by putting the month/year, as in 8/07.

A prayer card has several advantages over a list. A list is often a series of scattered prayer requests, while a prayer card focuses on one person or area of your life. It allows you to look at the person or situation from multiple perspectives. Over time, it helps you reflect on what God does in response to your prayers. You begin to see patterns, and slowly a story unfolds that you find yourself drawn into. A list tends to be more mechanical. We can get overwhelmed with the number of things to pray for. Because items on a list are so disconnected, it is hard to maintain the discipline to pray. When I pray, I have only one card in front of me at a time, which helps me concentrate on that person or need.

Prayer Cards for Family Members

You've already seen my card for Emily. Here's my son Andrew's card.

Notice that each phrase represents some area of my son's life I'm praying for. The order is not important. I'm praying through his friendships, his character, his relationships, his heart, and his mind—nothing is too mundane. When Andrew was in eighth

Andrew

6/02: Be a kingdom influencer

With Emily—"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Romans 15:7

How do I disciple him?

Math + Reading + Science + S.S. + Bible!

Honesty "put away all deceit"—enjoy reading

basketball, track, ping-pong

friends—good friends that love Jesus

Psalm 51:6 "You desire truth in the inward parts."

Know and walk with Jesus 1/03 Ephesians 4:2 "Be completely humble"

grade, working on finding a sports niche, I wrote down a couple of sports—basketball and track—to help me pray. He ended up loving track.

I put the Word to work by writing down Scripture. Jill and I saw God repeatedly answer my prayer that Andrew "desire truth in [his] inward parts" (Psalm 51:6, NKJV). As I was watching this prayer request unfold in his life, one thing led to another, and my son and I ended up going to counseling together. That created a lasting friendship between us. God dragged me into my own prayer request.

Over time, almost every phrase on that card became a mini-story with twists and turns on the way to an answer. I showed Jill the card several years after I'd first created it, and her only response was "Wow."

Kim's card follows the same general pattern as Andrew's, has the same haphazard look to it. Hidden in Kim's prayer card is a way of praying that I learned from J. O. Fraser, a China Inland Mission missionary to the Lisu in southwestern China about one hundred years ago. Faced with the impossible task of converting the resistant

Kimberly

Galatians 5:22-23 "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . self-control."

Ephesians 6:1 "Children, obey your parents in the Lord."

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." 1 Peter 5:10

"Be patient." Ephesians 4:2

"Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." 3 John 2

-computer mouse -Liberator better -clean up -wonderful aide
-software -get breakfast -public manners -horse

Job: announcer, library, data entry—a calling, a way to help

Lisu, he learned two kinds of prayers: big and small.¹ If you think back to the Hope–Reality chart (see chapter 21), the big prayers focus on the hope line and the little prayers focus on the reality line. We need both kinds of prayers.

My big prayers for Kim are reflected in the passages from 1 Peter, Ephesians, and 3 John. Kim's life has been hard, so I'm praying for blessing. I often pray, "The God of all grace, . . . after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you" (1 Peter 5:10, NIV).

At the bottom of Kim's card, I have listed nitty-gritty, daily-life prayers for the small issues in her life. Finding a computer mouse bedeviled us for a couple of years. Finally, we found a large trackball that Kim is able to manipulate easily. "Liberator better" is a prayer for her speech computer. I wrote that request the summer she went off to speech-computer camp. I wrote down "horse" because Kim has always wanted a horse. Lately that has shifted to wanting a cow. Now that her brother Andrew is marrying the daughter of a Lancaster dairy farmer, we might be able to work something out.

The big prayers were the huge, impossible prayers, such as the ones that Kimberly would be "strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10,

NIV). I remember when I first wrote that, it felt strange, like I was opening a door that I didn't know existed. We'd been so preoccupied with survival that it was hard to imagine Kim prospering. Big prayers help you dream impossible dreams. They help you to think big.

Now eleven years after writing those big prayer requests, I'm slowly seeing God answer them. Take a simple thing like "steadfast." When I wrote this card, Kim was anything but steadfast, especially physically, but as a dog walker she has to step over hoses, bend down in cages, and manage a dog on a trail. She has literally become more steadfast.

A Prayer Card for People in Suffering

The church prays well for people who suffer if the person has a clear diagnosis with an end in sight. But if the diagnosis isn't clear or if it is endless, the church tends to get overwhelmed. In other words, when it becomes real suffering, we don't pray!

"I'll keep you in my prayers" is the easiest way to back away politely. Roughly translated it means, "I have every intention of praying for you, but because I've not written it down, it is likely I will

David Gray Jr., both struggling, Rodney & Sarah Lee

Mom/Sue/Charlene

Bob & Annette Winter

John

Isaiah 61:1a, 2b, 3a

Cancer

Jenny

Roberta

The Spirit of the sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me . . . to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

Single women who want to get married
Carol
Jane

Struggling Marriages
Roberta & George Carter

never pray for it. But I say it because at this moment I do care, and it feels awkward to say nothing." It is the twenty-first-century version of "Be warmed and filled" (James 2:16).

A prayer card devoted to people in pain enables you to take suffering seriously because you are able to watch what God does over time. Surrounding this passage from Isaiah, I have written the names of people who are struggling with a difficult situation or illness. By praying regularly for them, my heart tunes in to their struggles. I am bolder about asking others how things are going because those people are already on my heart. I don't feel like a phony.

A Prayer Card for Non-Christians

I've had several cards for non-Christians. My first card was for people in an evangelistic Bible study I used to lead. Before I'd written out this card, the study was going okay, but my message wasn't penetrating people's hearts. After six months, I decided to write up a prayer card and start praying for each person daily. Almost immediately, things began to happen in all of their lives. Jane's three children all began to

Bible Study

Brad, "I'm on my way to becoming a Christian!"

Jane, "Where should we go to church?"

1. Jane—submit and believe that Jesus is the only way.
Wisdom for me to know how and when to address it.
2. Brad & Jane—continue to believe—deepen their faith.
3. Go to a good church. Wisdom to know what to say.
4. Tom & Sandra—God's Word would guide them.

struggle. Her husband, Brad, quit the study, telling his wife it was for weaklings. Later he rejoined the study for several months, but then quit again, telling her the same thing. God obliged him and made him weak by permitting cancer in his life. Although still young in his faith, Brad now professes faith in Christ.

A Prayer Card for Friends

I would not have started praying regularly for other men in my life unless I had a prayer card for them. We usually don't pray for things that function like wallpaper in our lives. We only pray when the wallpaper starts peeling.

Men

Sam—Not be passive, want intimacy/closeness with XXX, not comfort and privacy.

"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." Galatians 1:10

Robert—heart, eyes

Ralph—forgiveness for XXX, XXX

James—XXX oneness of XXX + XXX, writing, health

Doug—filled w/ Jesus, very profitable with business

Building a Sample Deck

Here is an outline of a sample deck of prayer cards that will allow you to pray through your entire life. Some cards I pray through every day; others I rotate through, using one or two cards a day. How many cards you use for a particular area depends on the shape of your life. It is completely up to you.

- 4–10 family cards (one for each person)
- 1–3 people-in-suffering cards
- 1 friends card
- 1 non-Christian card
- 1 church's leadership card
- 1 small-group card
- 1 missionary, ministries card
- 1–3 world- or cultural-issues cards
- 3 work cards
- 1 co-workers card
- 3–5 repentance cards (things I need to repent of)
- 3–5 hope or big-dream cards

If you can't find time to write out these cards, then use your prayer time to write them out. One morning a week, instead of praying, write out a card for one of these areas. You can begin with just

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a partial card. That's how all my cards started. For example, just write out one Scripture and the names of a couple of people in suffering on a card and leave it at that.

The hard part of writing out prayer cards isn't the time. It is our unbelief. We seldom feel unbelief directly—it lurks behind the feelings that will surface if we start to write out prayer cards, feelings like "This is so corny" or "I feel straightjacketed" or "What good will it do?" The old red herring of legalism

may come to mind. You might fear that it will take away the spontaneity of childlike praying.

Get Dirty

Prayer is asking God to incarnate, to get dirty in your life. Yes, the eternal God scrubs floors. For sure we know he washes feet. So take Jesus at his word. Ask him. Tell him what you want. Get dirty. Write out your prayer requests; don't mindlessly drift through life on the American narcotic of busyness. If you try to seize the day, the day will eventually break you. Seize the corner of his garment and don't let go until he blesses you. He will reshape the day.