

Prayer chan

Three stories of how prayer changed things in an unexp

by Don Clymer

As I entered the hospital room and introduced myself, I could feel the tension in the air. The woman lying in the bed had lost a child in birth and had requested a visit from a hospital chaplain. I assumed the man standing by her bedside was her husband.

I expressed my sorrow at their loss and tried to be a loving, nonthreatening presence. I hoped to draw out the reason they requested a pastoral visit, but every attempt left me stonewalled. Hoping to salvage some of the visit, I asked if I could pray for them before I left. They agreed. I went over to the woman, laid my hand on her shoulder and prayed a simple prayer. I thought, The shorter the prayer the quicker I will be through this stress-filled ordeal.

As I was about to leave, she grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. "I have something I need to confess."

I prayed they would feel a special sense of God's presence during these difficult times. When I lifted my head, the man was sobbing, his shoulders shaking. He told me a litany of woes he and his wife had gone through the previous three months, culminating with the death of their newborn. The atmosphere in the room changed remarkably after the prayer. The relationship between me and the people changed. What started out as a forced, awkward encounter had become a God moment.

When I was a child a motto hung on our living room wall: "Prayer Changes Things." I think I believed it to be true, but I wasn't all that convinced, at least not until I started visiting people in our local hospital and nursing-care facilities.

The Bible is full of encouragement to pray. Romans 12:12, states: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." Prayer is one of the basic elements of the Christian life. Almost every Christian thinks they could pray more. Beyond encouragement to pray, the Bible also

promises that prayer will be answered. 1 John 5:14: "And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." By praying for each other—and understanding that God hears our prayers—we move on to discover that prayer changes things.

My visit with an elderly woman was a pleasant one. We chatted about her life, her accomplishments and her faith. She seemed an optimistic and well-adjusted woman who had learned to live her life gratefully. She consented to a prayer on her behalf. In the prayer I recounted some of the things she had accomplished in her life and thanked God for her faithfulness and commitment.

As I was about to leave, she grabbed my arm and pulled me closer. "I need to talk more to you," she said. "I have something I need to confess." She proceeded to tell me about some unresolved issues in her life that she said "made her more than a little resentful." Her change of attitude took me aback, and we spent a long time talking about things in a totally different way than we had. Prayer brought humility and contrition to an otherwise normal visit. The visit had become a God moment.

Lest you think that these changes only occur with the infirm and the elderly, let me recount an experience with a group of 20 college students in rural Guatemala. We were in the middle of a service project among the Quechi Mayan people. Our living conditions were basic; we slept on boards and had neither electricity nor running water. Bathrooms were makeshift plastic sides with a board over a hole in the ground. After several days of working in the dirt and hot sun, we arrived at the project to find that our directors hadn't arrived and we had to wait until they came with the supplies we needed to keep going. I sensed that the spirits of our group were low. I gathered them in a circle in the local church that served as our project headquarters to hear their complaints.

"We are tired and ready to go home," they said. "We are sick of trying to analyze our every experience." One of the practices our group had to do was journal on where they had experienced God in the previous two weeks, and where they had experienced distractions that took them away from a

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ected way, leading to God moments.

sense of God's presence. The distractions were obvious, so I asked them to list where they had experienced God during the past several days of our time in the boonies. The students came up with all sorts of ways they had experienced God: the gorgeous starlit sky where no artificial light was present, the smile of a host child, the smell of the fresh tortillas cooking on the grill, the faithfulness of the people who walked miles and miles in the dark over steep mountain trails to fill the church on a Wednesday night. We prayed and thanked God for showing us his presence in spite of the distractions.

The directors of the project arrived with our materials, and we headed out again to the dirt and sun. There was a noticeable spring in their step as they made their way down the long, narrow mountain path to the field where we were preparing soil for a nursery. As they started to work, several students began singing. Soon the whole group was singing lively African-American spirituals. "As I went down to the river to pray. ..." The dirt sieve swung back and forth in

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rhythm. The local Quechi Mayan people working alongside us caught the spirit, and several of the kids tried to mimic our singing. There were smiles all around.

In their evaluations at the end of the semester, most of the students rated the rural Guatemala experience among the Quechi Mayan people as the best of their semester. The prayer of examen completely turned around the atmosphere and tone of the experience. The grime and the sweat had become a God moment.

I could recount many other experiences of prayer remarkably changing the encounter and the atmosphere of a visit or a group dynamic. God expects us to pray and will answer if it is according to his will. Those answers to our prayers often bring unexpected changes—changes that become God moments—God moments that help build our faith.

Don Clymer teaches Spanish and humanities at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va. He also serves on the pastoral care team at Lindale Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, and volunteers as a chaplain to Spanish-speaking patients at Rockingham Memorial Hospital in Harrisonburg.

Loanne Harms

