

The War Prayer

Told by Aaron Shepard

Characters:

Citizens 1–6, Minister, Stranger

CITIZEN 1: It was a time of great and uplifting excitement. The country was up in arms, and the war was on.

CITIZEN 6: In our small town, every breast burned with the holy fire of patriotism. Drums beat, bands played, toy pistols popped, firecrackers hissed and spluttered. On every street, a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun.

CITIZEN 2: Daily the young volunteers marched down the avenue, smart and fine in their new uniforms. Proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheered with voices choked with emotion.

CITIZEN 5: Nightly we packed the public meetings, where patriotic speeches stirred our hearts to the deepest deep. At every other word, we burst in with cyclones of applause, even as tears ran down our cheeks.

CITIZEN 3: A half dozen rash dissenters dared to disapprove of the war and cast doubt on its righteousness. But they right away got such a stern and angry warning that they quickly shrank from sight and offended no more.

CITIZEN 4: It was indeed a glad and gracious time.

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CITIZEN 1: Sunday morning came and our church was filled. It was the day before the battalions would leave for the front.

CITIZEN 6: The volunteers were there, their young faces alight with visions of glorious victory. Beside them were

their proud and happy dear ones, as well as envious neighbors with no sons or brothers of their own to send forth to the field of honor.

CITIZEN 2: The minister read a war chapter from the Old Testament.

CITIZEN 5: Then an organ blast shook the building, and together we rose with glowing eyes and beating hearts to pour out that tremendous invocation,

ALL (except STRANGER):

God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest
Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword!

CITIZEN 3: Then came the minister's prayer.

CITIZEN 4: Never in our church had we heard the like of it for passionate pleading and moving language.

MINISTER: Ever-merciful and benign Father of us all, watch over our noble young soldiers. Bless and shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril. Bear them in Thy mighty hand, make them invincible in the bloody onslaught. Grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory. . . .

CITIZEN 1: An aged stranger entered from the back and moved up the aisle with slow and noiseless step. His long body was clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, and his white hair fell in a frothy waterfall to his shoulders. His rough face was unnaturally pale, almost ghostly.

CITIZEN 6: With all our eyes on him, he ascended to the minister's side and stood there, waiting. The minister's own eyes were shut in prayer, and he went on unaware of the stranger.

MINISTER: Grant us victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag. Amen.

CITIZEN 2: The stranger touched the startled minister on the arm and motioned him to step aside. The minister did so, and the stranger took his place.

CITIZEN 5: For some moments he surveyed his spellbound audience, then spoke in a solemn voice.

STRANGER: I come from the Throne of Heaven, bearing a message from Almighty God.

CITIZEN 3: The words smote us with a shock.

CITIZEN 4: If the stranger noticed, he gave no heed.

STRANGER: You have heard your minister pray, "Grant us victory, O Lord our God." The Lord too has heard this prayer, and He will grant it—if such is your desire. But first I am commanded to explain to you its full meaning. For it is not one prayer, but two—one spoken, the other not. Listen now to the silent prayer:

"O Lord our God, help us tear the enemy soldiers to bloody shreds. Help us cover their smiling fields with their patriot dead. Help us drown the thunder of guns with the shrieks of their wounded.

"God our Father, help us lay waste the enemy's homes with a hurricane of fire. Help us send out their women and children and elderly to wander homeless in rags and hunger and thirst.

"For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, fill the hearts of the enemy with helpless fear and grief. Break their spirits, blast their hopes, and blight their lives. All this we ask in the spirit of Love, of Him Who is the source of Love. Amen."

(*pauses*) You have prayed it. If you still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits.

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CITIZEN 1: Afterward, we agreed the man must have been a lunatic. What he said made no sense at all.