Praying with Paul

(Praying that will make a difference a billion years from now)

Praying with Paul

(Praying that will make a difference a billion years from now)

by Brian Johnston

1. A high view of God and his Word

To approach God in prayer is to revel in the sheer splendour of his Being; to make confession; and to be rightly grateful for his many blessings; as we express again our sense of dependence in turning to our heavenly Father for more help.

Prayer is the way God has chosen to bring his blessings to his children. Prayer also emphasizes the personal relationship we have with the Almighty. But more than that, in the act of praying we acknowledge that God is sovereign. That means we're to pray according to his will, and in line with his values. We're also to pray in conformity with his character, and consistent with his revealed purposes. In that way, we claim in prayer those things which are his promises to us. But how? How do we go about it?

Think about it for a moment. Where can we get to know God's will and what his values are? Where do we discover what his character is like as well as becoming aware of his purposes. The Bible, you say - and you would be correct. The practical implication of this is that - in prayer - the more we can relate our requests with what the Scriptures reveal to us the better. This is no quick and easy answer, of course, since it requires discernment, and so the bottom line is we must always rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance: not only praying in the Word, but praying in the Spirit.

It therefore makes perfect sense to study biblical examples of prayer, and we're going to concentrate on the Spirit-filled prayers of the apostle Paul which are recorded for our study and guidance in the New Testament.

It's very clear that a high view of God, and of his Word, influenced the apostle Paul's praying. Take his prayer for the Thessalonian believers recorded at the beginning of his first letter to them:

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel

did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)

And a little later, Paul returned again to that last theme, when he said:

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

So there it is: a high view of God and his Word, the Bible. This prayer of Paul's is one of thanksgiving for the progress these Christians have made in difficult conditions. Perhaps, also, it makes us stop and ask ourselves if our prayers - like this one - are outward-looking, filled with concern for the needs of others? Prayer is one way in which we can put others' needs before our own. And another thing, do we usually begin our prayers with thanksgiving - as Paul does here? There were, in fact, three reasons for thanksgiving in Paul's prayer which we read. Let's look more closely at this prayer that was dedicated to the needs of others, and which included three great reasons to give thanks to God.

The first reason for thanksgiving is the trinity of distinctively Christian graces Paul sees in those for whom he's praying. These are the graces he so often likes to refer to: they are, of course, faith, love and hope. Is this our prayer focus, I wonder?

Then, another reason for thanksgiving concerns the certainty that these believing friends have been chosen by God. What Paul says about these believers in his prayer to God reflects his own deeply held conviction that his life had been grasped hold of by strong hands from outside of space and time. His life had been grasped hold of by God and completely turned around. Probably, we can recall his personal experience on the Damascus highway. That was unusual; it's rarely as dramatic as that, but it's equally true that God has laid hold of each one of us who has come to know Jesus Christ as Saviour.

Thirdly here in First Thessalonians chapter one, Paul gives thanks for the power of God's Word, which the Spirit of God had miraculously used to bring about strong conviction in the hearts of these former pagans.

So there we have it: Christian graces, sovereign choices and the Spirit's use of God's Word. These are all great things for which to thank God as we pray! Let's go through them in turn.

First, the three graces of faith, love and hope. Each one of these had been productive in the lives of the converts in Thessalonica as Paul reviews them in prayer. Faith had shown itself in action; love had expressed itself in labour; and hope had been demonstrated by their steadfastness or fortitude. The

word 'patience' which is found in some translations doesn't really do justice to the idea here, which is more the thought of 'a steady determination to see things through'. Paul uses it later (2 Thes.3:5) in connection with the character the Lord Jesus displayed here on earth. I've been enjoying that application. The phrase 'the patience of Christ' is perhaps more familiar and it just rolls off the tongue without us thinking too much about it, but 'a steady determination to see things through' was what took our Saviour all the way from Bethlehem's manger to the cross at Calvary. Paul appreciated, in God's presence, while at prayer for them, the likeness these Thessalonians were showing to Christ. Despite challenging circumstances they were sticking at it. Their hope was being demonstrated by their fortitude.

Next we noted that Paul rejoiced in his assurance of God's choice of these recent converts at Thessalonia. This is a theme which Paul returns to in his second letter to them, when he says:

... we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17)

Paul delighted in them as those chosen and called. It's worth simply pausing to enjoy the scope of Paul's prayer. There's nothing petty here! As Paul turns to prayer he thinks big! He looks back into eternity and then again he looks forward into eternity. He rehearses how they have been chosen 'from the beginning' and now through the Gospel have been given 'eternal comfort'. How expansive a canvas do we paint in prayer? As Paul sets the scene in this way, he's making sure that his prayer will set things in their true proportions. Only when the events of this world are seen over against eternal realities will we be found praying like Paul. The expectation that we stand firm in our Christian witness - just as Paul longed for his friends here - coupled with the assurance that we can never lose our salvation, are based on the great bedrock Bible truth of divine election. That's a theme, not so much for debate, as it is for wonder and praise!

Then, thirdly, having thanked God for the Christian graces seen in the Thessalonians, and having also thanked the sovereign God for laying hold of them in accordance with his divine choice, Paul comes to his third reason for thanksgiving - which is their experience of the Word of God. He gave thanks

that it had come to them in power and in the Holy Spirit and in full conviction, and that they had received it for what it truly is: the Word of God. Now, again, at the end of his second Bible letter to them, the Word of God is once more his theme in prayer when he says:

Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

The apostle suggests the prayer topic of praying that there might be free course for the Word of God which he travelled around proclaiming. In his travels he further requested their prayer for him: that he would be kept from unreasonable men. But with Paul this is secondary. Of first importance is the spread of God's Word - that it will be swift and unhindered, and find a glorious reception among others as it had at Thessalonica. As always, Paul reminds us to keep things in true perspective: the progress of the Word comes before the protection of its messengers. But with balancing gentleness he then asks that their hearts might be directed into the love of God and into the fortitude of Christ. No mere sentimentalism, of course, for Paul has in mind that if we are taken up with exploring the love of God and if we're considering prayerfully the fortitude which Christ showed in going to the cross, then we too will be steadfast in our obedience - as he was.

2. What exactly have you got in mind?

If our prayer-life needs reviving then taking an inventory of Paul's prayers is a study well worth doing. When we reflect on our lifestyle, analogies like 'the fast lane' and 'pressure cooker' come to mind. We are pressurized by lots of demands, and with the hectic pace of modern life it seems at times as though we're living in the fast lane. Often, we may be tempted to economize on prayer: but that's always a false economy. The apostle Paul was busy, but never too busy to pray. He tells us he prayed constantly - meaning he prayed regularly; frequently remembering specific requests such as intercessions for others. All of this, it seems, could have been triggered by a distinctive approach which Paul had to prayer. Let's see if we can discover some features of the framework which seems to have been in Paul's mind as he gave himself to prayer. We'll attempt to discover it from the example of his prayer for the Church of God in Thessalonica, the one which is recorded for us at the beginning of his second Bible letter to them:

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.

Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our

testimony to you.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 NIV)

Did you notice how Paul said, 'with this in mind' (v.11) just before he made his specific requests? Behind these words lies a quite unusual construction ('eis ho') - one which implies that everything preceding that point was meant to lead up to it, and to what comes next. That's why I chose the New International Bible version - because it appropriately and neatly expresses the original idea as 'with this in mind'. That makes it so clear that Paul was not in vacant mood and had somehow simply drifted into prayer, resulting in him haphazardly mentioning anything which occurred to him about these people. Far from it! He's set the scene already by what's gone before, during which time he's been marshalling his thoughts. I've deliberately chosen this example from Paul's prayers because of this approach and attitude that it reveals. I want us to study the framework, or the particular mindset, which the apostle brought to prayer. You see, there's something much better than a blank mental sheet which we can bring to our prayer times - in addition to any formal written prayer lists which are not a bad idea. So what are we talking about? When Paul said, 'with this in mind', what was it he was referring back to? Let's review everything he's just rehearsed to them previously in the chapter. What he had already said was:

We ought always to thank God for you ... because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing [and] ... we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring ...

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you ... This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels ... on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.

So the things in Paul's mind as he turned to prayer for these Christian friends were the theme of the grace of God and the values of eternity. We'll return shortly to those two points: namely, the evidences of God's grace in their lives and the evaluation of their current circumstances in the light of eternity, for I'd like to explore them further with you.

But let's break off to ask: "How does this compare with our own frame of mind as we settle to prayer?" Is our mindset by comparison maybe a little tame and

domestic – dominated by safe travel, maintenance of adequate health, material well-being...? Or do we survey the lives of our family and friends - as well as others on our prayer lists - and thank God for any evidences of maturity we see and ask God for more of the same, all the time weighing up our requests to ensure they are influenced not so much by the 'here and now' but by an eternal perspective ?

A middle-aged man once reflected to me his hope that those who attended on him in his wasting, degenerative condition might not be as unmoved by the love of God in Christ as his own legs were now physically immobile, despite his best efforts to use them. I also recall an elderly house-bound lady in her nineties speaking with a radiant glow of how she extracted every ounce of witness opportunity from incoming telesales calls to her top floor flat!

These are only two examples of evidences of God's grace as it is manifested in the lives of others and for which we can give thanks. We can think of those whom we know who are perhaps bed-ridden, or otherwise house-bound, but with no major place for frustration in their lives. Is that not the grace of God? And many others have overcome setbacks that would have crushed the spirit of many of us; still others, despite infirmity, maintain the highest standards of ministry to the people of God. Would that not be the type of thing that would be grist for Paul's prayers? I think so.

We return to Paul's prayer in the first chapter of Second Thessalonians. For that was our starting point - our interest was in what seemed to present itself there as being - quite possibly at least - a typical mindset which Paul brought to his praying. I suggest it's of interest because we may feel there are times (perhaps many of them) when we are unsure of what to pray for. We have already said that, as Paul counts down to prayer (or at least to making specific requests within prayer) he first rehearses evidences of God's grace in the lives of those for whom he's praying. Remember, in the case of the Thessalonian believers, there was a faith, a reliance on the Lord, that was growing; and there was a practical love for one other that was increasing; and thirdly, there was also a victorious endurance under persecution. All three (faith, love and endurance) were demonstrations in these suffering Christians of the grace of God at work in their lives. Paul now gives thanks for this and prays for more of the same.

But then, secondly, we have seen that Paul assesses their service in the light of eternity's values. For he remembers, before God, their ongoing trial: how they were suffering persecution and opposition for their faith. His request is not for a quick end to it on their behalf. No, Paul takes a longer view of it. It's as if he says to them: "Congratulations for having been entrusted with this trial!" For them, God's will for the longer term was being expressed in their

biblical, Christ-like response to these trials and difficulties.

So we see that Paul had God's grace and eternity's values in mind as he settled to prayer. How does all this compare with our own frame of mind as we settle to prayer? We live in an increasingly secular world. All around people are full of their own self-importance and their own achievements, and the Bible is not taken seriously. If we're not on our guard, something of the world's values can rub off on us and seriously damage our prayer-life.

We'll conclude this chapter with a quick reminder of Paul's specific prayer in Second Thessalonians chapter 1 which came after the build-up we have been exploring:

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So Paul prays that God might fulfil every good purpose and each act prompted by faith. That assumes those plans and actions are the result of setting our mind on God's interests and not on mere human interests. We are to be motivated by the desire that the name of our Lord Jesus is to be glorified. I hope we can all say "Amen" to that.

3. Praying for others

The apostle Paul and his companions visited Thessalonica sometime around the year 50 AD. The city itself had been founded about four hundred years earlier by an officer in Alexander the Great's army and given the same name as Alexander's half-sister. Today, as Thessaloniki, it's the second most important city of Greece. It was evangelized during Paul's second missionary journey which had taken him into Europe for the first time - as Acts 17:1-3 tells us:

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. (NIV)

So Paul's visit was lasted only three weekends during which time he would have preached three sermons. It's even possible that there's a hint in those verses about the three topics on which Paul spoke over those three weekends: number one, that Messiah must suffer; number two, that Messiah was to be raised; and on the third week he may have delivered the message that the Messiah is Jesus - crucified, but risen from the dead!

How much more Paul would have wanted to tell them! But opposition forced him to move away (to Athens) sooner than he would have liked. The strength of meaning is actually not so much 'moved away' as 'torn away'. Now Paul is sending them a letter, for he wants them to know that he had left them with the greatest of reluctance. The wording he chose to use to express this is typical of that used by parents when deprived of their children. Certainly, there could be no doubt about his feelings as he continues ...

Therefore we wanted to come to you - even I, Paul, time and again - but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For you are our glory and joy. (1 Thessalonians 2:18-20)

Paul's longings after them had been intense. He'd tried again and again to get back to them, but all his plans had been frustrated. When Paul could bear the suspense no longer, not knowing how they were going on - he decided to send Timothy as his messenger to get some information. Paul, it seems, would rather face loneliness himself than to have no news of his friends at Thessalonica. This is how he puts it:

Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy ... that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this...

For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain. (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

When Timothy returns in due course bringing a good report of how the Thessalonian believers were standing fast, Paul is overjoyed. He describes it as 'good news' - the only time this term is used in the New Testament without referring to the Christian Gospel itself:

... now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you - therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. (3:6,7)

For this good news Paul is about to burst out into a thankful response to God. In fact he interrupts the writing of his letter to them, that he might pray and bring his dear friends before the Lord. I wonder how often we do that? How often do we start praying for someone we're thinking about or writing to?

So far, we have established the intensity of feeling Paul had for these friends who were still so very young in the Christian faith. But what does he pray for them? What arises out of this deep concern? Verse 9 gives the answer:

... what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God, night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. (3:9-13 NKJ)

Is that the kind of prayer we pray for our Christian friends: one where spiritual concerns take precedence over everything else? Paul's focus is more directed away towards the coming day of their appearing in the Lord's presence than the very real concerns of the here and now. Let's look at it again in a different Bible version:

Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us

to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thes.3:10-13 NIV)

This is definitely a prayer about people. Paul is passionate about people - and that passion shapes his intercession here into three main points (excluding his request to be able to visit them) well worth considering when we pray for others.

Paul was concerned about gaps in their faith, and so he prayed that these might be mended. I'm sure there were many other things, particularly physical matters concerning these friends, about which the apostle could have prayed. When he left them he must have known he was leaving behind a volatile situation. But even so, spiritual concerns were top of Paul's prayer agenda for these friends of his.

His second request on their behalf was that their love should 'increase and overflow'. The wording conjures up the image of rising river waters which swell up over their banks to water an entire river-plain. That's a picturesque way of saying they were to love their brothers and sisters, and not only them, but beyond that their love was to overflow outside of the church in evangelical concern for others.

Paul's third and final request was for their holiness. He prayed that God would strengthen their hearts so that they would be blameless and holy in God's sight. This is well worth noting if our own tendency is to focus on people's happiness when we pray for them - for example, by praying for the removal of obstacles and challenges from their lives. Paul had holiness, not happiness, in his sights. Later on, expanding on the same idea, Paul also asks:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it ... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-28)

The holiness Paul prayed for, as he interceded for his friends, was something that was attainable through the faithful God who calls us to this state of holiness. After all, that's why Paul was bringing the matter before God.

So, the challenge from this prayer of Paul's is: how much passion, or intensity of feeling, lies behind our intercession for others? Let's not neglect praying for others. And it's worth checking out if faith, love and holiness are our top concerns for them, even when it would be excusable to concentrate on other physical aspects of their circumstances!

4. Three reasons to pray

Do you ever struggle with prayer? Have you ever been distracted into thinking about something else – something mundane – just when you set aside time for prayer? Interruptions to our train of thought can really be a nuisance.

However, I want us to benefit from three of the apostle Paul's distractions! – that's if you permit me to call them that. For it would surely be better to say that the Holy Spirit was re-directing Paul's thoughts as he settled to prayer for his Christian friends in the Church of God at Ephesus. Three times Paul sums up these intervening Spirit-given thoughts and words by saying 'and for this reason I pray'. From which, I take it, that these promptings blended perfectly with his own prayer burden. After all, this is a man praying in the Spirit. So, three times Paul recaps by saying it was for 'this reason' that he was praying, before he finally succeeds in completing his specific prayer requests for his friends.

We end up benefiting by getting three great reasons to pray! They are all contained in three wonderful asides full of terrific teaching in the first three chapters of the Bible letter to the Ephesians. Let's sample it, for in a world that would bombard us with many reasons not to pray, this is just the antidote we need. In the first chapter he writes and shares with us the first reason to pray:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will …

… that's the will of God the Father! – who displays his sovereign good pleasure through those who believe in Christ. We go on to read more about Christ, for it's in Christ that …

… we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us … In Him also we have obtained an inheritance. (Ephesians 1:3-11 NAS)

What a tremendous summary of the work of Christ through the cross – redemption through his blood; forgiveness; the riches of his grace providing us with an inheritance! Now, what we have been thinking about: the will of God and the work of Christ have all been made known to us through the Holy

Spirit, and the apostle Paul is also moved to include the third Person of the Godhead in his tribute, when he says:

… after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (1:13,14)

So, what we find there overall is **the will of God the Father**; and **the work of God the Son**; and **the witness of God the Spirit,** all blending together in a glorious description of God's eternal purposes and spiritual blessings towards us.

It's immediately after writing this, that Paul adds for the first time:

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers. (1:15,16)

Clearly, this is Paul in the presence of God, in the attitude of prayer. 'For this reason,' he says, and I assume, as others do, that Paul's saying this in reflection, after reflecting upon all that we have just explored which has to do with God's sovereign, eternal purposes. In waiting upon God, his thoughts have been directed by God's Spirit to this exalted theme which dovetails with his prayer burden for the Ephesians. This is a man praying in the Holy Spirit, the divine encourager helping the apostle's human weakness and marshalling his thoughts as he intercedes for his Christian friends.

If we ever feel our prayer-life is becoming a little repetitive and flat and ordinary – 'bless Aunty Mary' and 'help John at church with his bad leg', then biblical prayers like this can raise our sights. Not that it's ever wrong to pray for minor practical concerns or to intercede for someone in a very general way, but it can be a telltale sign of spiritual laziness or burnout perhaps in which our praying has sunk to the level of a daily routine which we carry out without too much thought. The prayers of the apostle Paul are an education in the school of prayer, and from time to time we all need a little revision. But wait, Paul's still to give us reason number two, this time from chapter 2!

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ … and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus … Therefore remember that formerly you … were … strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of

Christ ... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ... (Ephesians 2:4 - 3:1 NAS)

… and so he goes on, once again on the brink of making his prayer request. As we review the second reason given for praying for these friends, we notice that once again all three persons of the Godhead are involved. For the themes which surface during this second reason are: the grace of God; and the blood of Christ; and finally the down-dwelling in the Spirit. From the dateless, timeless periods with which Paul began this prayerful meditation, he's traveled through history to the realization of God's sovereign and eternal purposes in Christ – something which takes us on a spiritual journey from the time when, as unbelievers, we were dead in our sins, to climax finally, at the end of chapter two, in the thrill of the privilege of being in God's spiritual house on earth where God himself lives by his Spirit! If only our scriptural meditation and review of our own experience was always something like that as we settled to prayer! What a difference it could make to our experience of prayer!

But still there's more: a third reason. Just when it seems likely that Paul's actually going to make his specific prayer request for them, he mentions another aside:

... that by revelation there was made known to me [he says] the mystery, as I wrote before in brief … the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel … To me, … this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord … For this reason I bow my knees before the Father … (3:3-14)

There are those words for the third time: 'for this reason'! This time it's the wisdom of God; the riches of Christ; and the revelation of the Spirit that feature: all issuing in grateful wonder for the Spirit's revelation.

Now, at last the waiting is over: and the apostle finally makes requests for a deeper experience of the power of the Spirit; and the love of Christ; and the fulness of God! Worth waiting to hear, wasn't it? Read the detail at your leisure from Ephesians 3 verses 16 to 19. Then add to that the greater sense of God – specifically of his calling and inheritance and power, all mentioned earlier (in chapter 1), and we discover that enlightenment and power are the twin themes of Paul's exalted praying for his friends at Ephesus.

5. Praying to get the best out of life

There's a saying which goes something like: 'the good is the enemy of the best'. What I think that's meant to convey is this: that settling for something satisfactory or 'OK' is one of the main reasons we often don't press on for even better results, for excellence.

This applies, too, in spiritual things. People talk about being in their 'comfort zone'. Who would not be reluctant to leave a comfortable, respectable situation? Many Christians avoid obvious failure. They seem to be doing all right. They conform to the norms of Christian respectability. They settle for what seems practical and realistic.

Perhaps that seems reasonable, until you read again Paul's letter to the Philippians - a letter that challenges us to leave behind all that's mundane and mediocre in our Christian experience.

The letter resonates with the gospel as the single passion of Paul's life. In his hands everything turns to the gospel – even when he's in prison. Prison-life opens doors to new captive audiences! The gospel is always bigger than his personal circumstances, and he manages to glory in his chains.

And if the gospel is the single passion of his life, then knowing Christ is the steady pursuit of his life. For Paul, Christianity is all about relationship – a relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God - a relationship that grows closer with the passing years of life's varied experiences. The language of the text of the letter invites us to picture Paul like an athlete who's always trying to improve on his personal best – here it's an athletic pursuit of Christlikeness. Ever onward and upward, he steadily pursues a more intimate knowledge of the heart and will of Christ. Rather than waste time complaining about his circumstances, Paul's focus was fixed on how he could advance his appreciation of Christ through these experiences.

And if the gospel is his single passion; and a deepening personal relationship with the Son of God is his steady pursuit; then the sole purpose of his life is to live in conformity with the cross of Christ – in other words, to follow a lifestyle in keeping with the God who in Christ sacrificed himself on the cross – such a lifestyle will always be centred on others, and not be about acquiring material possessions. Instead, it'll be a downwardly mobile lifestyle, characterized by the giving of one's own self for the advantage of others.

Paul was never a man to rest on his laurels. He kept on pressing forward. That's a good example for us to follow. Whatever stage of Christian maturity we have reached – or think we have – we must never think we have got as far as we are going to get. The aims and ambitions Paul had for his own life were ones he warmly commended to his friends at Philippi.

To be assured of that, let's take the time to listen again to how Paul begins his letter with the customary introduction and then quickly shares the substance of his praying for them.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:1-11 NIV)

In Paul's prayers there was no partiality, he played no favourites – he says 'in my prayers for all of you'. And he says 'I thank my God every time I remember you' and 'I always pray with joy'. Gratitude and joy were the regular features of his praying for them, which shows us something of Paul's spirituality. In fact 'joy' is a prominent theme in this letter which Paul writes to the friends he was always praying for. If we make happiness the goal of our life and go after it, it will be like a mirage always disappearing and disappointing us. But if we set our sights, like Paul, on pursuing a relationship with Christ and sharing with others the good news of the Christian message, then we'll be surprised by joy – sometimes in the strangest of places and at the least likely times!

Paul's prayer for them expressed genuine affection for them. In fact, Paul describes his longing for them to be with 'the affection of Christ'. That should cause us to stop and wonder. Here was a man, a follower of Christ, who really lived so close to his Lord that he could describe his own feelings as being the affection of Christ. His heart beat in harmony with that of his Lord! Paul could look back affectionately on 'the first day' of their

partnership with him in the gospel. We read about it in Acts chapter 16, for the sake of the work of the Lord, Paul had been put in prison there too – in Philippi, where a Church of God had been planted. From the prison in Philippi to the prison in Rome, where in all likelihood he is now, there had been a bond of fellowship between Paul and these friends. Sitting in prison now, Paul derives comfort and joy from that partnership through prayer.

And this is his specific prayer for them:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God. (Phil.1:9-11)

Life, at least in some parts of the world today, is full of choices. We choose between different options. Some options are good, only one is best. Like us today, two thousand years ago people faced choices. At the heart of this simple and short prayer for his friends was Paul's request that they might 'discern what is best'. In the choices which confronted them then, they had to prove or test the differing options and decide upon the one that was best. Paul prayed that they might be divinely guided in that lifestyle choice.

What's more we can be clear this choice was something which would set the moral tone of their lives. We can be sure of this because Paul prayed that their 'love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless'. Getting the best out of life, discovering what they should devote themselves to, demanded they first come to abound in love that was in accord with knowledge and insight. Some of us are rather prone to make choices based on a kind of mushy sentimentalism. That's not the sort of love Paul's talking about here. Going in for the best thing in life is to be based on an increasing love, a love that's consistent with knowledge and moral insight, and which would result in them being pure and blameless.

This selection of what's best is also just as clearly a decision with long-term consequences. For Paul brings in the values of eternity: an eternity which will already have dawned upon us when we stand before Christ and he assesses our service at his tribunal or judgement-seat. Paul's prayer anticipates that time and its concern is that they – and we - should live now in the light of that coming day.

So what was this best option which Paul prayed they might discern and choose for themselves? I'll tell you what I believe it was. Near the end of the letter Paul says:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. (Philippians 4:9 NIV)

That's quite some statement – by God's grace Paul lived what he preached. So it was right for them to imitate him, even as he imitated Christ. In the whole context of this letter, as Paul shares his own single passion, his steady pursuit, and what was the sole purpose of his life, do we not see the very thing modeled which is the best choice in life – the only worthy pursuit of a lifetime? Can we too not 'discern what is best', namely to:

… want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death … press[ing] on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (Philippians 3:10-12 NIV)

Is that not the best thing we could ever pray for?

6. Praying that will make a difference a billion years from now

I wonder what percentage of our praying involves asking God for good health or recovery from illness; for safety on the roads; a good job; success in exams; the needs of our children; success in our mortgage application or job promotion interview; and much more of the same?

All of these are perfectly valid prayer concerns, but as you read through the prayers of the apostle Paul, as they are recorded for us in the Bible, you can't help but notice that things like these are not the focus of Paul's praying.

Here's a superb example of one of Paul's prayers – it's his unceasing prayer for Christian friends he had never met, but which were in the Church of God at Colosse:

we … pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:9-12)

Paul's prayer for them begins with the request that they should come to know God's will. We often tend to think of 'knowing God's will' in terms of the choices we have to make – perhaps about who to marry, or about a relocation or some major commitment. In other words, we can find ourselves being focused on *our* vocation, *our* needs and *our* own personal future. The Psalmist took a different line in Psalm 143 when he prayed 'teach me to do your will, for you are my God' (v.10). The emphasis there is on the doing, isn't it? The Bible, in fact, tells us in broad terms what God's will is for each of us – for example, 'it is God's will that you should be sanctified' (1 Thes.4:3) and we also learn that giving 'thanks in all circumstances … is God's will' for us (1 Thes.5:16-18). Our problem – very often - is with the actual doing of the will of God as it is commanded in the Bible, and not with what we don't know. Doing God's will in the broad outline in which it's revealed through the Bible's commands is an

issue we need to work on first – before we concentrate on knowing all the details regarding our personal choices. It's not that we should not do the latter; but that we definitely should not overlook the former, that is, the higher level commands that apply to everyone and which are there in the Bible in order to be obeyed.

The reason Paul prays that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God's will is so that, he says, they may 'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord'. By any standard this is an astonishing prayer, and one I want us to think about.

We have already mentioned prayer requests in which we often ask God for recovery from illness; for safety on the roads; success in job promotion interviews – that kind of thing. But of all the requests we direct to God in prayer, we could ask ourselves 'which of them will make any difference in one billion years from now?' I know that raises all sorts of issues about eternity being outside of space and time and all that, but I hope the basic point is clear nevertheless – it's got to do with the importance of our prayers from an eternal perspective.

Whether or not I got the promotion I was chasing will soon pale into total insignificance over against whether I lived a life worthy of the calling to be a Christian. It's that issue that will be key when Jesus Christ examines the quality of our life of service at his judgement-seat tribunal. Time and time again this business of 'living worthily' features as one of Paul's top prayerful concerns. For take next his letter to the Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4:1-3 ESV)

Paul helpfully shows us there something of what's involved in walking, or living, in a way that's worthy of our calling - in terms of the kind of character we must express. The Christian calling is a collective one, and living up to it in a worthy way will include quality relationships with other Christians with whom we are called to serve. This angle is the one Paul develops when he writes to the Church at Philippi, instructing them to:

… let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27 ESV)

So that's another dimension of this matter of worthiness, seen here in how we testify together to the saving, good news of Jesus Christ. But we need to be clear about this. This is not about establishing our own worthiness. We were

not considered worthy by God to become a Christian - to have all our sins forgiven. We never were, nor ever will be worthy based on our own merit. All our worthiness is found in Christ by the grace of God. Of any worthiness seen in the life of a Christian, he or she can truly say 'by the grace of God I am what I am'.

That first prayer on this theme which we looked at – the one from Colossians chapter 1 – expands very helpfully on what it means in practice. There, living 'in a manner worthy of the Lord' is clarified as 'pleasing him in every respect' and 'bearing fruit in every good work' – where we at once acknowledge that it's God by his Spirit who works in us to produce the fruit which we're only called upon to bear. The text also goes on to talk about 'increasing in the knowledge of God' and being strengthened by God's power so that we persevere in times of difficulty. It's obvious then that any worthiness can only be by his enabling.

God by his grace was going to enable the Thessalonian believers to respond to Paul's exhortation to them, when in First Thessalonians chapter 2, he …

… encouraged [them] … to walk in a manner worthy of God, who [called them] into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:12)

Obviously, God did supply the needed grace and enabling, because in his second letter to these same Thessalonian believers Paul says:

… we … boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering--

and adds:

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. (2 Thessalonians 1:4-11)

When we see all these examples of Paul's praying we ought to get the message that our priority in praying should not be that we might become successful or wealthy or healthy or happy or even that all our problems might disappear. A truly worthy request is the request that we be worthy – worthy of the Lord and of the call we have received as Christians, yes, worthy of the gospel and the Kingdom of God!

This prayer fits in with so much New Testament teaching, teaching which basically urges us to become what we are. By that I mean we are to live out in practice, and in public, what God has already made us in his sight by his grace. For example, through faith we are made righteous before God, that is we are given a right standing before him. Now, as Christians, we are called upon to

live righteously, in other words to choose right actions instead of wrong ones. Again through God's grace in Christ, and by means of the faith he has granted us, we are no longer sinners in God's sight, but we have been made holy in Christ. As a result, the Bible commands Christians to live increasingly holy lives – others observing us are to see a practical difference as old sinful patterns of behaviour fall away. Do you see what I mean when I say we are to become what we are? We have no worthiness of our own, it's entirely the worthiness of Christ, so it's as we let more of Christ be seen in our lives that we will be seen to live worthily of him and the Christian calling.

It's a challenge to us to think how often we pray this prayer of Paul – for ourselves, for our family or church friends. Is it true that we tend to spend more time and energy praying that we, our children and friends will pass exams, get good jobs, and recover health rather than praying that they live lives worthy of what it means to be a Christian?

And widening it slightly, what about our general aspirations for those we love. Sometimes when families meet, they exchange news about how their children are doing. Often the news that's shared may be in terms of 'Oh, our Susan's getting married to a lovely fella. He's a partner in a law firm that's doing really well. Her own career as a research scientist is really taking off too, so it's an exciting time for her! And Johnny – that's her brother - he's into computing, you know - top of his university year group, he is, and what's more, he's already got a super job lined up. What did you say? Spiritually? Oh, how they're getting on spiritually – well, they travel a lot you know, and Johnny particularly's not really walking with the Lord right now, but we're sure it's just a phase.'

How do these values appear in eternity's perspective? When we stand before the Lord in glory the only issue will be if we have lived a life worthy of our Christian calling, whether we have lived for Christ and for God's Kingdom and its values. Nothing else will matter.

Now, how is that thought going to shift the balance and focus of our prayer-life?

All Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Standard Version, unless otherwise stated.

Search for Truth Radio Broadcasts
International Schedule

Trans World **Radio**
Every **Saturday** to **Europe;** 8.15 a.m. British Time
31m band Short Wave (approx. 9870 kHz.)
49m band Short Wave (6045 kHz.)
Listen live **online**: http://www.twr.org.uk/live.htm

HCJB, Kununurra, Western Australia
Every **Sunday** to **South Pacific** at 19.45 UTC
19m band Short Wave (11765 kHz.)
Every **Wednesday** to **South Asia** at 13.30 UTC
25m band Short Wave (15390 kHz.)

SKY Digital Channel 888 in the **UK**
Every **Saturday** at 8.15 a.m. and 7.45 p.m.

'Search for Truth',
P.O.Box 111, LEIGH, England WN7 1WJ
P.O.Box 748, Ringwood, Victoria 3134, Australia
web site: www.searchfortruth.net
e-mail: sft@ChurchesOfGod.info