



# Introduction and Road Map

“It’s hard to pray.” So writes David Powlinson in his forward to Paul Millar’s *A praying life*.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein D A Carson writes in the preface of *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*: “I doubt if there is any Christian who has not sometimes found it difficult to pray.”<sup>2</sup>

I find this encouraging. It means that I’m not alone in struggling with prayer. At the same time it raises a number of questions: why is prayer often so difficult? Does it have to be? Are there things we can do to strengthen and improve our experience of prayer?

It is important to be honest and realistic about the challenges involved. It is also important to be hopeful! And I am. For while prayer is part of the spiritual war in which the Lord Jesus Christ has invited us to participate and all war is difficult, experience tells me that we often contribute to making it harder than it needs to be.

Writing a book about prayer is also hard. Not simply because of the writing process itself, but because of both the profound nature of the topic and the limits to my own knowledge and experience. I write as a learner amongst learners, recognising that some (perhaps many) who read this will know a great deal more than I do about praying. But there are three key factors that have encouraged me to keep going with this project. The first is that I have had very good teachers and role models. (More about this later.) Second, the fact that the best guidance on prayer is found not in human experience or ideas but in God’s Word which is an open book to us all. The third key factor is that this book is not designed to be a stand-alone text but to be part of a corporate journey.

The idea is that we walk together as a church as we learn about, think through and practise prayer. In that context this book can act as a guide and stimulus – possibly even a troubleshooting resource if we get stuck. But it is only a part of our shared experience of prayer. It is in actual prayer together and on our own, that we will really learn. And because we are working on this together, both in our main services and in our Home Groups, Cells and Icons I am very hopeful that we will learn and grow in prayer and therefore in relationship with God.

I have included a few anecdotes in this book from my own experience with prayer – usually my own struggles. But I hope it will be clear that the emphasis throughout is on Scripture itself. It is a much surer guide than experience. And I hope that as we engage on this journey in prayer together each of us will be able to add anecdotes of our own to the pool of our experience as a church.

As we consider prayer, perhaps a health warning is in order. One possible side effect of a study series on prayer is that rather than dealing with our sense of guilt and failure because of our struggles with prayer, it actually increases it. That is not my aim! I don’t think God will be impressed with more guilt-ridden, joyless attempts to

<sup>1</sup> *A Praying Life*, Paul E Millar, Navpress, 2009, p.9

<sup>2</sup> *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, D.A. Carson, IVP, 1992, p.9

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please him! Rather the main aim is that we learn and grow together in this vital aspect of knowing God.

## **Learning about prayer**

This book really began with my dad and mum. They were the first people in whose lives I witnessed prayer. I have told the story before how as a boy I have a vivid memory of rushing into the house at lunchtime one Saturday to find my mum sitting in the kitchen, her Bible open on her lap deep in reflection. Thinking it better not to disturb her I ran into the front room to discover my dad on his knees praying. Prayer was real to them. Their relationship to God was real to them. They taught me to pray by their example.

The next major formative event in my experience took place in my teens. A young graduate and worker with Operation Mobilisation had just returned from India and was staying in our home. His name was Nigel Lee, later to lead the student ministries of UCCF in the UK and to be a great friend/mentor to me and many others, before he went to be with the Lord at the age of 58. Nigel began to talk to me about my dreams and aspirations. He was genuinely interested in me and for the first time I began to share my early and still vague convictions about God's call on my life. Then he suggested that we pray together. I had never prayed aloud with anyone, apart from as a child with my mother. That single event had a profound impact on my prayer life and I remain deeply grateful to God to this day for bringing Nigel into my life.

The third major influence was a short teaching series on prayer given by Prof David Gooding. It was his teaching that helped me to see how central the Bible is to effective prayer and encouraged me to learn in particular from Christ's prayers in the Gospels and Paul's prayers in his Letters. It was also through his teaching that I began to understand what authority we can have in prayer, what it means to persist in prayer (and when we should) and what our priorities should be in prayer. I also came to realise that prayer in the end is not about asking God for things: it is about getting to know God himself. I should add that Don Carson's book on prayer, already mentioned, developed my understanding further and remains the best book on the topic I have ever read.

One result is that while I am the author of this book the presence of my teachers is very significant in it. Indeed I find it impossible to say with any degree of certainty which ideas are my own – although I gladly take responsibility for any and all errors and mistakes!

## **The Road Map**

For those who would like to know what ground we are covering in this book I offer the following Road Map. Please feel free to ignore it and plunge straight into chapter 1. But some, particularly those involved in leading our discussions, might find the following details helpful.

### **Chapter 1: Why bother with prayer?**

The focus of this chapter is to answer the question 'why bother with prayer?' by considering some examples from the Bible of people in prayer and discovering why it

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was that each of them prayed. The chapter looks at some of the major contexts for prayer: for example, when we are sinking in the storms of life; when we are helpless and at the end of our tether; when the will of God is hard; when we are excited about God's purposes and plans; when we have sin to confess. In each context the people in the Bible adopted a physical posture that illustrated their attitude of heart and through this we consider the question of our heart attitude as we approach God.

## **Chapter 2: Listening to God**

The focus of this chapter is on the importance and helpfulness of linking our praying with our reading of God's Word. This is one of the major answers to a persistent problem we have in knowing what to talk about when we come to prayer. We look at the famous story of Mary and Martha to highlight the importance of choosing to make listening to the Lord the supreme priority of life. We also look at four ways in which we can link our praying with listening to the Lord through his Word.

## **Chapter 3: With Jesus in the school of prayer**

The focus of this chapter is the so-called 'Lord's Prayer' as a paradigm for how we should order and prioritise our praying. We consider the nature of the God we approach and our identity as we approach him: we come as children to our heavenly Father. Then we look in some detail at the five requests Jesus encouraged his disciples to make when they came to God in prayer, noting the order: first, two requests concerning God and his interests and then, secondly, three requests covering the physical, moral and spiritual dimensions of life.

## **Chapter 4: Persistence in prayer**

When should we persist in praying and when should we commit matters to God and leave them there – and, indeed, when should we learn to take 'no' for an answer? We look at two main Scriptures: the parable of the unexpected guest and the parable of the persistent widow. In both we are encouraged to persist in prayer for God has committed himself to answer. The first parable is about praying for the work of the Spirit in our lives; the second concerns praying for justice.

## **Interval: Practical lessons along the way**

In this short section we consider some collected wisdom regarding the actual practice of praying. The topics covered include: factoring prayer into daily living, keeping our minds from wandering (and our bodies from falling asleep), organization and lists and praying with others.

## **Chapter 5: Priorities in prayer**

The issue of this chapter has already been raised in chapter 3. Here we return to it again because the problem of aligning our sense of priorities with God's priorities for us is both deep and persistent. This problem particularly reveals itself in our frequent imbalanced emphasis on praying for the physical resources we need – and often here for the purposes of living long and happy lives rather than holy lives full of spiritual impact (whether they are long or short). The chapter stresses the importance of

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understanding first what are God's purposes for our lives and then selecting and ordering our priorities in prayer around those purposes. The key text is Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 where he prays in particular for the strengthening they need in the love of God and through the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill God's great purpose of building a dwelling place for himself within human history.

### **Chapter 6: Authority in prayer**

What authority can we have when it comes to prayer? Can we come confidently to God in the expectation that he will answer us positively? We look at Matthew 17 and the incident of the father and his demon possessed son. We also look at Christ's teaching in the upper room concerning praying in his name, confident that we will receive what we ask. What does this mean? And finally we take an example from Acts 4 of the disciples praying with authority and expectation in the context of opposition.

### **Chapter 7: Praying for others**

This chapter begins with a focus on the astonishing reality that the Lord Jesus, as our High Priest, is praying for us now. Why is this important? What is he praying for? Then we look at our own praying for one another, using another example from Paul – this time how he prayed for the believers in Philippi – to tackle some of the challenges we have in praying for others: finding room in our heart for others, knowing what to pray for, and finding the time.

### **Chapter 8: The reward of prayer**

The slightly unusual title of this final chapter comes from Christ's teaching about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount where he highlights two false and damaging approaches to prayer: that of the religious hypocrites and that of the pagans. The former turn prayer into a performance for the benefit of an earthly audience. The latter think that God will hear them as a reward for their many words and endless repetition. Both approaches can creep into our own praying. This raises the question of what prayer is actually about and where its true reward lies. The answer is that the true reward of prayer is the Lord himself. As Isaiah 40 reveals, it is fundamentally about waiting on him and renewing our strength.

# Why bother praying?

*'Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said...'* (2 Samuel 7:18).

*'But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed'* (Luke 5:16 NIV.)

*'Pray without ceasing'* (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

*'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people...'* (1 Timothy 2:1).

Let's start with what is perhaps the most basic question when it comes to prayer: why bother with it at all? After all, doesn't God know everything without having to be told? And why ask God anything? Either he is planning to do the particular thing I ask and will do it anyway, so nothing I say will change that; or he has no intention of doing the particular thing and nothing I say will change his mind. So what's the point of praying?

The first and most basic answer is this: because God tells us to pray! *"Pray without ceasing"*, we read in the New Testament (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We may not understand how prayer works or how anything we say to God can possibly make a difference. But if God commands us to pray – and he does – and if God never asks us to do anything that doesn't make sense (even if we can't grasp it), then, whatever the struggles we have with either the theory of prayer or its practice, let's make sure we pray and keep praying!

Is that all that needs to be said? No, of course not. God does not simply issue commands. He teaches, he explains, he illustrates, he encourages, he invites. He wants us to grasp as much about prayer as we can, for the more we understand the more motivated, intelligent and effective our praying will be.

## **Prayer is...**

How we answer our question – apart from saying that it is something God commands - will be shaped by what we think prayer is. I suspect that most of us think of prayer as 'asking for things'. If that is the case we will be particularly interested in what requests we are invited to make and in how we should make them. But prayer is more than simply asking for things. The simplest and best definition of prayer I know is this: prayer is *talking with God*.

This changes our question to: why talk with God? Let's suppose a recently married friend of yours comes to you a little troubled one day. After a little general conversation you ask him how he is getting on in his new life as a married man. He replies: "That's just the trouble. My wife wants me to talk with her. And I don't

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understand it. I mean, why should I talk to my wife?" What would you think? Would that seem a perfectly reasonable question? Or would it strike you as rather odd and that you would expect someone who has committed himself to a wife not to have to ask the question? The question should be: why wouldn't you talk to your wife? She's your *wife*!

Let's suppose your friend answers his own question: 'I've got it. I talk to my wife to ask her to do things.' What would you think now? It certainly is one reason but you might want to suggest gently that the primary role of his wife is not to take down his instructions and then carry them out without question. There may of course be the occasional request, just as she may (occasionally) make requests of her husband. But talking is about much more than making requests.

Why talk with God? We could equally ask: why talk to a friend? Why talk to anyone? We talk to one another because it is one of the most wonderful and meaningful things we get to do as human beings.

### **It's good to talk**

I didn't always see it this way. When I was a child I could easily get bored in adult company. All adults seemed to want to do was to talk (and drink tea). I found this very frustrating. I wanted to know when the football would start, or when we would start doing something exciting! Happily things changed as I got older and I came not only to see the point of all that talking but even to join in and enjoy it.

The facility for language and is one of the greatest gifts the Creator gave to us. One of the first tasks God gave Adam to do was to label the animals. Perhaps the man was given a fully formed language to use or perhaps he developed it. Either way it is challenging to imagine the creative intelligence that it must have taken to choose different sounds to attach to different creatures. But language was not simply used for the purposes of classification and organisation. The first words recorded as having been actually spoken by a human being are the words Adam used to express his appreciation of his wife. Animals are rather limited when it comes to such things. Humans are capable of poetry.

There is an even higher level of significance to our facility for language than expressing love and admiration to another human being. God created us ultimately for communion with himself. We read that God 'walked' with the humans he created in the cool of the day. He joined them for fellowship and conversation. What did they talk about? We are not told. There would certainly have been much to talk about in a brand new world. The incredible truth is that God not only created us capable of talking with one another, he created us capable of talking with him and invites us to do so.

Why pray? The famous BT advertising slogan was right: *it's good to talk!* Even on the human level we all know something of the importance of having someone to whom we can talk. I enjoy taking photographs of the beauty of the world around us and to do that I often go out alone. But I also love to share the photographs: the delicate beauty of the tiny bird, the twig laden with snow, the golden sunset. The pleasure and appreciation increases when we share. Just as we share with our human friends and family, God invites us to talk with him.

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## People in prayer

How should we approach him? Should we kneel or stand? Should we close our eyes? When should we pray? How often should we pray? What do we talk about? These questions and more easily come to mind as we begin to think more deeply about what is involved in talking with God. But I would like us to stay with our basic question for a little longer: why pray?

One of the main ways – if not the main way – the Bible teaches us about prayer is by giving us examples of people praying. Many different people in many different contexts. Looking at some of these examples will allow us to make our question more personal and specific: why did this particular person pray? If we can answer that question, even in a few cases, we will deepen our understanding of what prayer is fundamentally about.

## Praying as you sink

One of the most familiar contexts for prayer is when we are struggling to keep our heads above water in life. Such was the case with Peter. Literally. After a long session of serving the vast crowd that followed him, Jesus sent his disciples on ahead of him in the boat while he went up the mountain on his own to pray. In the middle of the night he came to them walking on the water.

At first the disciples were unsure and afraid. Was it really Jesus? When Jesus made this clear, Peter said, *'Lord if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.'* He did. Peter got out of the boat and began to walk towards him. However, the reality of the contrary wind and waves distracted his attention. In addition, perhaps, the sheer absurdity dawned on him of ever imagining that he could walk like Jesus. He found himself sinking. *'Lord save me'*, he cried (Matthew 14:22-23).

I'm pretty sure we all can relate to that prayer. The cry for help when we find ourselves out of our depth and feeling that we are sinking without trace. The physical storms of life are tough enough: illness, disability, hunger, poverty, death. And then there are the psychological and spiritual storms that threaten to overwhelm us and make us wonder how we ever thought that we could follow Christ.

Jesus saved him. He reached out his hand and rescued him. And once safe in the boat the desperate cry for salvation gave place to astonishment and worship.

Why talk with God? Because we need help. We need saving. There are times as followers of Christ, as we seek to walk in the power of Christ, that we get distracted by our circumstances. We are overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of following him and we begin to sink. And sometimes on those occasions there is little more that we can say than 'help!' Jesus responds, stretches our faith a little further and brings us to worship.

## Sitting before the Lord

In 2 Samuel 7 we read how King David sat before the Lord. He didn't stand, he didn't kneel: he sat. He wasn't being disrespectful. It was a totally appropriate response to what he had just been told.

The situation was this. King David had a driving ambition to do something very special for God. His desire was to build God a dwelling place in Jerusalem. Much to

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his disappointment it had not worked out the way he had wanted. God revealed to David that it would be his son Solomon who would build the temple. But then God began to share his plans for what he was going to do for David. Rather than David build a house for God, God was going to build a house for David. He was going to establish his royal house forever. And one day from David's line the King of kings would come.

It was a magnificent plan. The more he reflected on it the more amazed he became. It overwhelmed him to the point that he needed to sit down before the Lord, try to get his head around it and of course talk it through with him. What else could he do? If someone made a commitment to do some amazing thing for you – something so amazing that you can't take it all in at first – isn't that what you would do? Wouldn't you listen carefully, make sure you understand what is being offered and talk it through?

Listen to his language: *"Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And now, Sovereign Lord, in addition to everything else, you speak of giving your servant a lasting dynasty! Do you deal with everyone this way, O Sovereign Lord? What more can I say to you? You know what your servant is really like, Sovereign Lord. Because of your promise and according to your will, you have done all these great things and have made them known to your servant. How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you..."* (2 Samuel 7:18-22 New Living Bible). We catch a sense of a man grasping for words, so overwhelmed is he by the promises of God. And the more he talks it through the more wonderful it seems.

This is a very different context from the one Peter found himself in. Peter had no time (or place) to sit and calmly reflect. He was simply desperate to keep his head above water. King David also found himself in similar situations, as the Psalms bear witness. But this is different. Here David has taken the time first to listen to what God was promising to him (relayed to him through the prophet Nathan) and then to sit before the Lord and talk it through with him.

I wonder if you have ever done that? Have you ever really listened to God about his eternal plans for your life? He has such plans. He has plans to make his eternal dwelling place with you. He has plans to wipe away every tear that life has produced in your eyes. He has plans to lead and protect you as your eternal Shepherd. He has plans to make you part of the government of the world to come, with Christ. Have you ever taken time out to sit before the Lord, listen to his plans and talk them through with him?

Why pray? Because God wants to share his heart, his mind, his purposes with us. He wants us to listen to his revealed promises and sit down before him to talk them through. Life can overwhelm us in other ways, as Peter discovered. It is a good and healthy thing to allow God to overwhelm us with his plans for our eternal future. Sitting before the Lord revived and strengthened David. It will do the same for us.

Here's one suggestion for making this real in your own experience. Take a passage of Scripture like Revelation 21, listen to it – really listen to it – and then sit before the Lord and talk it through. The more you talk about it with him the more amazing it will come to be. And you may well find yourself like David at the end of his prayer,

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needing to reassure yourself by saying to God: “You will do this, won’t you? I mean, this is really going to happen? Please, God, do it!” How very human David was! We can learn a lot from him about prayer.

## **Standing (helpless) before the Lord**

In Chronicles we read of how Judah’s king, Jehoshaphat, stood before the Lord. In fact the entire people stood: men with their wives, their children and their babies. They stood before the Lord because there was nothing else they could do.

The context was this: Jehoshaphat had been working very hard to establish order and justice in his kingdom, to stamp out bribery and corruption and to eliminate pagan idolatry. On top of all these challenges, suddenly and without warning, a number of hostile nations joined together to come against Judah with overwhelming force. It was too much for Jehoshaphat and his people. It was totally beyond their resources to cope. He set out before the Lord his understanding of the hopelessness, humanly speaking, of their situation. As part of this he gathered the people together and *‘All Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives and their children’* (2 Chronicles 20:13).

It is very moving to read this account: adults standing with their little ones in their arms, their children at their side, a gesture that expressed their utter and helpless dependence on the Lord to intervene on their behalf.

Perhaps we have known times like that in our own lives. One pressure piles up upon another to the point where we are totally overwhelmed, can see no way out and the only thing we can do is to stand before the Lord to say: “Here we are Lord. We are completely helpless. We are utterly dependent on you. In your compassion look at us. And intervene for us.” For a time the people simply stood. It was a prayer without words. Sometimes even to say anything to God is beyond us.

Why talk with God? It seems that there are times in life when God allows us to come to the end of our resources. He allows us to get to the point where we realise that we cannot get through on our own and that we are utterly helpless and dependent on him. He lets us discover our weaknesses before revealing to us his strength. Of course we don’t literally have to stand. By talking about their posture in prayer on this occasion I’m not trying to suggest for even a second that there is a formula for prayer or a set of rules for whether we should sit, kneel, stand, close our eyes or whatever. Their posture points to an attitude of heart and this is what matters. We don’t always have to use words in prayer. There are times when all we can do – and all we need to do – is simply to be before him, helpless and dependent, casting ourselves on his compassion.

## **Standing to confess**

In Nehemiah we also read that the people stood before the Lord, not this time to express their helplessness in the face of overwhelming enemies but to confess their sin (Nehemiah 9:1-3). Under the spiritual leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah they had rediscovered the Word of God, which they had neglected for a long time. As they listened to it read out to them, they realised they had gone against God and his plans for their holiness of life and for their distinctiveness as God’s people in the world.

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They didn't try to hide or justify what they had done. They faced it. They stood as responsible, grown-up men and women and owned up to their sin.

This gives us another reason why we need to talk with God: because we have sins to talk about. We have things to confess. As it did with the people in Nehemiah's day, the Word of God cuts like a surgeon's scalpel. It exposes not just our obvious sins but the hidden thoughts and motivations of our hearts. This can be very uncomfortable. And our instinctive response is to hide, to cover up, to attempt to justify ourselves or place the guilt elsewhere. The problem is that unconfessed sins come between us and God. And the longer we don't talk to him about them the wider the gap will grow. Our sense of shame deepens and we find it harder and harder to talk. Some people don't talk to God for many years as a result of a mistake they have made, a sin they have committed. And as a result they often fall into even deeper sin.

God's invitation is for us to come boldly to him, take ownership of our sin and confess it to him. The reason we can come boldly and stand before him is that he has made a once-for-all-time provision for our forgiveness through the sacrifice of his Son. There is no need to try to justify ourselves. (We have no grounds anyway.) The love of God provides us a platform on which we can stand and admit the very worst about ourselves without needing to fear that he will reject us. With God there is real forgiveness.

Once again I don't mean that we must literally stand up in order to confess our sin. Nor am I implying that we must confess our sins in public in church. The gesture reflects an attitude of heart. It indicated an honest, clear and open willingness to admit their sin before God and to turn from it.

### **Kneeling before the King**

We also find people kneeling in prayer in the Bible. The most famous example is that of the Lord Jesus himself. It happened in a garden on the Mount of Olives just before his betrayal, his trial and his death on the cross for our sin and guilt. As he contemplated what was about to happen he kneeled on the ground and prayed. Once again the posture reflected his attitude of heart. He was voluntarily submitting to the Father's will.

Listen to his praying: *"Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will"* (Mark 14:34.) He didn't pretend. He told the Father honestly how he felt. He made his preference clear. But he kneeled to submit totally to the Father's will.

Hebrews comments both on the intensity of this experience and on its significance: *'Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears...'* (Hebrews 5:7). These passionate prayers constituted an *offering* to God. They were a sacrifice, made with tears. And sometimes our prayers will be also for it costs to bow our knees and say 'not my will but your will be done'.

Why talk with God? Because there are times like this in life when we recoil at the path before us; when our emotions pull us hard in the opposite direction; when the cost of obedience is overwhelming. God invites us to come to him without pretending and tell him exactly how we feel. But God is God. He is King and we are not. So we bow our knees before his will and say, "Not my will but your will be done", knowing that Jesus the Son of God has walked this road of submission before us.

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## **Kneeling before the Father**

Paul also knelt in prayer. He writes to his friends at Ephesus that in his prison cell he bows his knees to the Father to pray for them. What for? That God's purpose would become more and more of a reality in their lives. What was that purpose? To make a dwelling place for himself within human history: not a building made with stone or brick but a spiritual building made up of forgiven people who share his life.

Paul was chosen to participate in this purpose by bringing the good news of it to the Gentiles. He gladly submitted his life to this calling, despite tremendous personal cost, which included a variety of imprisonments, together with frequent beatings and other suffering and deprivation. But not only did Paul submit to the Father's will for his own life, he submitted to the Father's will for the church. Despite his chains he grabbed every moment he could to kneel in prayer for these new believers that they would be strengthened by the Spirit within, so that Christ would dwell as an increasing, glorious reality in their hearts. The purpose of time is to make progress in the purposes of God. So Paul committed himself to pray. Soon time for him would be over. There wasn't a minute to waste.

Why talk with God? Because God has called us to participate together in his great project of building the Body of Christ. Nothing is more important to him. He invites us to bow our knees also and submit to his purposes, praying for the strengthening work of the Holy Spirit. As we do so Paul reminds us that we are praying to someone who is able to do way beyond anything we can ask or even think of asking when it comes to his purposes for his church. God calls us to our knees not only to submit to his will for our own lives but also to pray for the fulfilment of his purposes in others. Perhaps we can't literally kneel. That is not the point. The point once again is our attitude of heart: the submission of our lives to the purposes of God for ourselves and for the Body of Christ of which we are part.

## **Lifting up holy hands**

Paul writes to his young friend and co-worker Timothy: *'I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good...'* (1 Timothy 2:1-3). He follows this up with, *'I desire that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling...'* (1 Timothy 2:8).

Why pray? And why lift up hands in prayer? Once again this is not a prescription for what physical posture we should adopt when we pray – although if we want to lift up our hands there is nothing in the Bible to say we shouldn't! The point is rather deeper than that. A very big part of prayer is praying for other people. This is intercession, when we come to God and plead to him on behalf of others. When we plead we tend to stretch out our hands. What Paul wants us to make sure of is that when we intercede for others our own hands are clean.

Once again he doesn't mean that our literal hands must be physically clean (although it is good practice to wash!). He means praying with pure and undivided hearts. He means that when we pray for others we should not harbour known sin in our hearts. How easy it would be to pray for others and at the same time harbour

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grudges and petty jealousies against them. How easy to pray for the work of the Spirit in their lives when we are resisting his work in our own. How easy to pay lip service to the need of others to come to salvation when in fact we take no practical steps towards and make no personal investment in getting close enough to them to share the message.

## **Fixing our eyes on home**

What should we do with our eyes when it comes to prayer? As a child I was taught to close my eyes and fold my arms for prayer. The habit of closing my eyes has been with me ever since (although folding my arms has not!). I can understand why it is practical advice. For example, when I'm on my own at home, closing my eyes helps avoid my being distracted by the things around me. When I'm with others it helps avoid my being distracted by them and also avoids me making them feel uncomfortable by looking at them while talking with God! But Jesus didn't always close his eyes. On occasions he '*looked up to heaven*' (Matthew 14:19) or '*lifted up his eyes*' (John 11:41; 17:1).

This wasn't because heaven was in the clouds or just the other side of Mars. The physical gesture was symbolic of looking towards home. It is worth noting that Jesus mentions heaven when he talks about prayer. "*Father in heaven*" (Matthew 6:9) is how he begins to teach the disciples about prayer. "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10). The amazing truth is that when we pray as God's children we are communicating with heaven. Heaven is home for us. Because of Jesus we are welcome there and have right of access at any time. When people occasionally ask me if I can be sure of heaven I usually reply, "Of course! I was there earlier today!"

Looking up is not so much about a physical gesture as it is about an attitude of heart. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be, said Jesus (Matthew 6:21). So, where is our treasure? Where have we placed it? What do we see as the supreme values in life? Jesus raised this question with his disciples: "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...*" (Matthew 6:19-21). For all the good things we may enjoy in this life, they are only temporary; they spoil and fade. The real treasure is in heaven. If that is what we truly value then we will often look towards it!

Currently we are absent from home. We are resident aliens in this world. It isn't our home. It is a tragedy, as Paul points out with tears to his friends at Philippi, when people fall in love with the temporary and end up making gods out of the satisfaction of their physical appetites and their appetite for entertainment, their eyes and minds firmly fixed solely on earth. Our citizenship is in heaven, he writes, '*and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself*' (Philippians 3:20-21). Why talk with God? Prayer is the best way to keep in touch with home.

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## Questions for discussion

1. Why do you pray (when you pray)? As you review your own experience of prayer, what is most likely to prompt you to pray?
2. What are the main difficulties you have encountered with prayer? Which of them belong to the category of the Theory of Prayer and which to the category of the Practice of Prayer? Take a note of your difficulties so that as we work through this series you can relate what you are learning to your own struggles. Which do you consider to be real difficulties and which do you think may simply be excuses for not praying?
3. Consider the various contexts and motivations for prayer that are covered in this chapter. Which of them resonated most with your experience? Which resonated least? Have you a specific experience of any one of these areas that would be profitable to share?
4. Why do you think the Bible so often mentions the physical posture people adopted when they were praying? What can we learn from that? What role might physical posture play in our own prayer lives?
5. Choose a passage from the Bible – perhaps Revelation 21 as mentioned in the chapter – and use it both individually and as a group to ‘sit before the Lord’. That is, pray in response to what you read in these verses.
6. What has been the most challenging thing you have considered in this study?

# Listening to God

*'Mary... sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching' (Luke 10:38).*

*'One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples"' (Luke 11:1).*

At the heart of Christianity is a two-way relationship with the living God in which he speaks to us through his word and we speak to him in prayer.

Have you ever thought just how incredible and miraculous this is? One danger of a book like this one, which spends considerable time analysing this provision that God has made, is that we can fail to step back in sheer wonder at how amazing it is that communication and fellowship with our Creator are even possible.

Luke brings both aspects together in his account of the life of Christ. At the end of Luke 10 he records what took place in the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. The main point of the incident was to teach them that the number one priority in life is to spend time with Christ, listening to his Word. The very next thing that Luke records is that one day when Jesus had finished praying his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. It is surely not by accident that Luke has brought these two things together. Nor can it be explained simply by chronology. He has brought them together because they belong together and in this chapter we are going to spend some time thinking through the significance of this.

## Choosing to listen

*'Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her"' (Luke 10:38-42).*

There can be no doubt that Martha really loved the Lord Jesus. It was out of love that she wanted to provide the very best for him. After all it is not everyday that Jesus comes to dinner! It was not that she didn't enjoy the Lord's company or that she found his conversation boring. Quite the contrary. But she had very strong ideas of how best to serve him when he came to dinner. So she planned, prepared, organised, cooked, baked, cleaned and tidied, building up a considerable head of steam and resentment against her sister in the process. The more Mary sat enjoying listening to the Lord, the more frustrated Martha became. And what made it even more

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annoying was that the Lord did not appear to notice what was happening – or if he did notice, he didn't seem to care.

Instead of taking the hint from Jesus' encouragement of Mary to continue spending time with him, she allowed her frustration to boil over. "Don't you care, Lord?" In theory, of course, she knew that the Lord cared for her. But he had a strange way of showing it. How could he not see the unfairness of what was happening? "Tell her then to help me!"

We notice that Martha simply assumed that Jesus would agree with her. She did not ask what he thought. She did not ask for his guidance. She never even questioned her own sense of priorities despite the fact that Jesus clearly didn't share them. It was obvious to her that Mary was not only wrong but also unfair, making life even harder for her.

Gently but firmly Jesus had to correct her. He did not question her motives. He did not question the genuineness of her love for him. But he questioned her sense of priorities. She was anxious and worried about many things. But when choices have to be made only one thing was really top priority: spending time listening to his Word.

It must have been a massive shock for Martha to discover that Jesus did not agree with her for the possibility had never entered her head. How had she got things so badly wrong?

Luke puts this incident in the context of the journey Jesus and his disciples had embarked on. They were on their way to Jerusalem. His time with Mary and Martha was therefore very limited on this occasion. In such circumstances Jesus would have much preferred Martha's company and conversation than her service for him in the kitchen. While it was of course necessary to eat, the shortness of the time made Martha's extravagant preparations not only excessive but detrimental: they crowded out the time that she could give to Jesus himself. A few simple preparations would have sufficed. Martha's sense of proportion and of priorities was false.

Faced with the same considerations Mary also had to make a choice as to how she would spend the limited time she had. She chose to make the most of every second she could sit at Jesus' feet listening to his word. It was the better choice, said Christ, and he wasn't about to take it away from her.

Priorities are not easy to sort. Life has so many opportunities and so many demands. But despite what the advertisements proclaim, we cannot have it all. We cannot do everything, go everywhere, see everyone – and we are not meant to. Time with Jesus – time to sit, and really listen to his word - that is our first priority. And when we have to choose, everything else must take second place to this.

The irony was that in the way Martha chose to express her devotion, she deprived Jesus of the one thing he really wanted and herself of the one thing she really needed: time with her Lord.

On the face of it doesn't it seem strange that we sometimes struggle to find time for our Creator? Not only has he designed us but he has also honoured us with his desire for our company and fellowship. Surely it should not be out of mere duty that we choose to find time? Should it not be our joy?

However busy we are in any given day we always have choices to make. Often we can do nothing about the demands made upon us, for our daily work needs to be

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done and our responsibilities need to be fulfilled. But even then there remains an important element of choice not just to live out our day before the Lord but also to take some time for him alone. The question for us then is this: will we choose to make time with the Lord our priority?

On other occasions, as with Martha, we choose our busyness, adding good but unnecessary things to our day, which fill up all our available time and demand all our available energy. Indeed we can even be busy in what we genuinely intend as service and devotion to him when what we really need – and what Christ really wants – is time with him. The good is often the enemy of the best. Unless we positively choose to put first our time with the Lord other things will swamp our day. Cultivating our relationship with the Lord will not happen by accident. It happens by choice. Indeed, how would we ever know what our priorities in life should be unless we choose first to spend time listening as Jesus teaches us.

### **Prayer as response**

As we've noted, the very next incident involves lessons on prayer. This makes sense, for if life's first priority is to listen to the Lord speak to us through his Word, the second is that we talk with him. In addition, Luke places the two incidents side by side because listening and speaking belong together. They are two core aspects of what is involved in developing our relationship with God.

To focus on one at the expense of the other is a mistake. Not simply because it produces imbalance but because it detracts from both. Only spending time in God's Word but not in prayer will lead to increasingly dry and academic study which fails to find its way into our heart and our life. God's Word is living, active, powerful truth. But we can turn it merely into doctrine.

On the other hand, to focus solely on prayer and not to spend time in the Word impoverishes our praying and risks turning it into a mere recital of our thoughts and wishes designed for our own purposes and glory and addressed to a God recreated in our own image. For how can we know him without allowing him to reveal himself to us through his Word?

It is also possible that the order of these incidents is significant. To speak first without listening usually means that we are setting the agenda and not the Lord. We can be like little children who occasionally charge noisily into the room to speak to their mum or dad because they have suddenly thought of something they need. But they rarely stay for real conversation. They are preoccupied with themselves and once they have what they wanted – or not, as the case may be – off they go.

If this is how we behave when it comes to prayer it should be no surprise if we do not know God as we should. How will we ever get to know him if we never take time to listen to what he wants to say to us and are simply chasing after the good things he gives rather than after God himself? The habit of insisting on setting the topic for any conversation with God is just one more way we find to feed consumerism and foster spiritual immaturity.

So here's a suggestion: let's allow God to set the topic of conversation so that prayer comes as a response. By this I mean that we listen to his Word before asking God to listen to ours.

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## **Bringing listening and speaking together**

How do we do this? Throughout this short book we will consider a variety of ways in which we can tie particular Scriptures more closely to prayer and help cultivate deepening two-way communication in our relationship with God. For the moment here are four ideas to get us started.

**First**, link your praying to your regular programme of Bible reading. This assumes, of course, that you have a regular programme of Bible reading! If you don't I encourage you to start. There are a number of ways you can do this. Many people follow a read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year approach. An alternative, or addition, is to select one of the shorter books of the Bible and spend a month or longer reading and re-reading it. Another approach is to follow the Bible teaching programme of the church. For example, if 1 Corinthians is the main book for a few months, spend those same months reading 1 Corinthians.

With a regular programme of Bible reading in place, simply talk to God about what you have read. In other words let the main topics of your reading become main topics in your praying. If your reading is in James about the taming of the tongue, make this important topic a matter of prayer, reflecting on the details of James' teaching and asking God to work out the reality in your own life and in the life of the church. Or if your reading is about the Lord being a shepherd, talk to God about what that means and thank him.

**Second**, select one of the Psalms or prayers of the Bible – we will consider a number of the major prayers in the New Testament – and use it as a guide and template for your own praying either for yourself or for others. For example, Psalm 8 is a wonderful song of praise. Having read it a couple of times, use it to express your own praise of God for the magnificence of creation. Or take what Paul asks his friends at Colossae to pray for him as he shares the Gospel and use it both for yourself, the members of your small group, the leaders of your church to pray that God would open up opportunities to share the message and enable them to explain it as it needs to be explained it as they ought to do it (see Colossians 4: 2-4).

**Third**, respond to God as you are reading. Ask for his help to understand what you read; thank him for each individual truth that you recognise; look for application to your own life and pray that the Holy Spirit will make it real in your experience.

**Fourth** use the 'ACTS' approach. This is a widely known approach to prayer that was explained to me almost exactly 40 years ago and which I have used frequently ever since. The four letters of 'ACTS' each stand for a different aspect of prayer. 'A' stands for adoration; 'C' for confession; 'T' for thanksgiving; and 'S' for supplication. When this is combined with reading of Scripture it can be very helpful, especially in providing order and balance to our praying.

For example, in the passage you are reading on any particular day ask what there is in this passage that you can praise God for, that reveals more of his glory and that as you meditate on it draws your affections towards him. Then ask if there is anything in the passage that exposes weakness or sin in your life that you need to confess. Continue like this for thanksgiving and for supplication.

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## The benefits of listening

This approach to prayer – connecting our speaking with our listening – runs through most of this short book. It is of course not the only approach. Nor should we imagine that it answers every question of problem that we have with praying. It doesn't. But it does help with some of them.

One of the big struggles I have encountered in prayer has been not knowing what to say. Once I had gone through the usual list of personal and family requests I dried up quickly. And even when I prayed for myself or my family I found myself repeating the same things. Was this all there was to prayer? And were my requests even the requests that God wanted me to make? Was I actually praying according to his will or just bringing my own shopping list in the hope that he might agree at least to some of them? And as for praise and adoration my prayers felt very flat. However, when I began to respond to actual Scripture in my prayers, talking over the issues with God, turning what I was learning into thanksgiving or petitions for others speaking with God took on an entirely new dimension.

My personal struggles with prayer and what I have learned from others about their struggles have convinced me that a failure to tie our prayer life more closely to God's Word lies behind some – and perhaps much – of our weakness in prayer.

## Teach us to pray

We began this chapter with a quotation from Luke: *'One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples"'* (Luke 11:1).

Christ's answer to this request will be the focus of the next chapter. Let's finish this chapter by considering their request. They had seen and heard Jesus speak with the Father on many occasions, and were clearly attracted by the place prayer had in his life. This essential and natural part of Jesus' life awoke within them both a desire to learn how to pray and a sense of their personal inadequacy in praying. Wisely they asked him for help.

I think many of us will find it encouraging that the disciples felt they needed to be taught about prayer. We should also find it an encouragement that the climate that Jesus had created with his disciples was obviously one in which they could talk about their spiritual needs and ask for help. And we should definitely be encouraged that Jesus responded so positively to their request.

All of us need taught to pray. We may even need to be 'un-taught' in that we may have picked up unhelpful attitudes and approaches to prayer from our background. The disciples were aware that John the Baptist taught his followers about prayer – indeed a few of them had been part of John's movement before they had met Jesus. They also had been brought up with the practices of prayer in the Jewish synagogue and the Temple. But they clearly sensed there was more to learn and perhaps much to un-learn. Jesus didn't appear to fit neatly into any category they knew.

There is nothing to be gained by refusing to admit our need and our struggles. Indeed before we proceed any further in this book it might be helpful for us to take some time to identify what are the main difficulties we have with prayer.

For some of us it is the theory or theology of prayer. We do not understand how 'it

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works'. We do not understand how any words of ours could possibly make any difference with a Sovereign God who is in ultimate control of the universe and who works out all things in accordance with his purposes. So even though we pray, at least on occasions, we have the sneaking suspicion that it is actually a waste of time. For some of us it is the practice of prayer: what do we say? How do we approach God? What pattern or order should there be in our praying? And some of us struggle with the issue raised by the Martha and Mary story: choosing to spend time with God and prioritising so that it doesn't get squeezed out by busy lives. Clarity and honesty about where we are weak will help us seek the help we need and identify it when we see it.

But now let's join the disciples in Jesus' school of prayer.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. How much sympathy do you have for Martha? Why do you think that is? What wrong assumptions did she make and can you relate to these from your own experience?
2. What would you say are the major hindrances to prayer in your life? To what extent is busyness one of them? Do you think that being busy is a good excuse for not praying or a good reason for praying?
3. In what ways do you choose to listen to God's Word in your daily life? What are the barriers to this and how do you/could you overcome them?
4. Which of the four suggested ways of linking listening with talking do you think is/would be the most helpful in your own prayer life?
5. In what practical ways could we encourage one another to make the daily, positive choice to listen to God's Word?

# With Christ in the School of Prayer

*‘One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation”’ (Luke 11:1-4).*

So we come to what is usually known as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. It might equally (and perhaps better) be called ‘The Disciple’s Prayer’ for it was the pattern prayer Jesus taught his disciples in answer to their request.

Christ’s intent with regard to teaching his disciple this prayer has often been rather obscured. Many have taken from it that this is a prayer we should repeat, word for word, rather than a pattern to help us order our praying and as a result have missed out on the practical guidance in prayer that Jesus intended.

There is nothing in itself wrong with repeating this prayer provided that we do not do so in a thoughtless and mechanical way, or in a superstitious, mantra-like way as if there were a special power in the mere act of repeating the actual words.

During my first visit to what was then Eastern Europe – towards the final days of the cold war and of the Berlin wall - I remember listening to a group of believers reciting the famous words: “Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” For them in their context this was deeply meaningful. It was certainly very moving to witness. In contrast, daily (and mostly mindless) repetition of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ was part of my school life. In fact, the first punishment I ever received (but not the last!) came about when I engaged in a private competition with another boy to see how fast we could say the prayer, deliberately causing confusion to those around us!

Jesus warns against mindless repetition in Matthew 6:7: *“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.”* He did not give the disciples this prayer as a set of words for them to repeat but rather as a pattern to guide them in their praying. In other words, they were to pray *like* this.

Prayer at its heart, as we have seen, is talking with God. It is not to be codified and packaged into a formal religious activity presented to God to obtain his admiration or favour. Nor is it a type of religious magic through which, if we manage to find the right formula or incantation, good things will happen. Nor is it to be a religious mantra, which we use to restore and maintain our mental and emotional equilibrium. Prayer is real communication and communion with God.

This brings us to the key issue in prayer: who is the God we are speaking to and

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who are we in relation to him? Who we understand God to be will shape what we say. In Jesus' model prayer the fundamental approach is clear: we are to come to God as *children to a father*.

## **The Father and his children**

'Father' is perhaps not the best translation of the Aramaic word 'abba' used by Jesus. It is a term of endearment and intimacy as well as respect (not quite 'daddy', but perhaps 'Dear Father'). It was also a revolutionary term to use of God in Jesus' day because the Jews did not address God directly like this in public prayer in the temple or the synagogue. They simply did not know God in this way and would have been shocked at Jesus' use of the term.

Many still are. Although the majority of our world's population believe in 'God' there is great diversity when it comes to how they think about him. For some he is the Supreme Being, Creator of the universe, but remote, unreachable and largely unknowable. Such people would not dare address him as Father. For others God is completely impersonal and any thought of actual communication with him is absurd and out of the question. And for others he needs to be woken up, attracted, cajoled, persuaded – even bribed – to look in our direction. Even then they wouldn't address him as 'Abba'.

Jesus has challenged and changed all that. He came into the world both to reveal to us what God is truly like and to bring us into a relationship with him in which we have the right and privilege to call him Father.

It is important to be clear on this point. It is normal to hear people refer to God on occasions as 'the Father of us all'. Scripture is much more precise than that. According to the Bible we are all *creatures of God* but we are not all his *children*. Creatures are created. Children are born.

John makes this distinction clear in the first chapter of his gospel where he explains that in order to be children of God we must become his children. We do that through receiving Jesus as the Son of God and trusting in him. *'To all who receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God'* (John 1:12, 13).

In a similar vein Paul writes: *'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"'* (Galatians 4:4-7). Jesus came so that we might become what we weren't before. He came to make us more than creatures of God: to make us sons and daughters of the living God. This is achieved through the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We are born from above, born of the Spirit. As a result we share in the life of God himself. This is what makes personal relationship with God possible.

This means that until and unless we become his children, God will remain distant. As our Creator he knows us, is constantly aware of us and hears us if we pray. But there is no experience of forgiveness and new life through the Spirit. There is no intimacy of relationship. Prayer will mean little to us unless we become God's children and approach him as Father.

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## Coming to God as Father

One of the difficulties of approaching God as *heavenly Father* is that some people's experience of their earthly father has been anything but positive. As a result for them the term 'father' evokes painful memories of violence, abuse, promises not kept, disappointments, lack of affection, lack of communication or even absence. Such experiences can negatively impact how we think of God. Where that is the case it is important to recognise it and to allow Scripture rather than our own life experience to shape what 'father' means to us.

Similarly it is possible that our experience or concept of father is rather that of a sentimental parent (or perhaps grand-parent) who gives his children all that they want, never allows them to experience difficulty or pain and never says 'no' to them. Once again it is important to recognise how this view of father can also distort our concept of God.

Our identity as children of God makes all the difference. We can now come to him on intimate and personal terms, knowing that he always welcomes us. As a father myself, I could hardly wait until my children started to learn to speak so that they could communicate more and more deeply with me and learn the vocabulary that would enable them to share life. God loves us to come to him. He loves to hear us speak. He wants to see us grow up into his mature sons and daughters so that the level of communication and sharing constantly deepens. And he is always available to us. We have access to him at any time.

At the same time he is Father and not simply 'daddy' or even (worse) our 'old man'. When I was very little (I'm told) my father loved to look after my bath time. It was fun! As I grew older, however, I began to discover other things about my father. He was concerned about my learning and about my future. He could ask very awkward questions about my progress in school and about how I was spending my time. He was a disciplinarian and could be both stern and strict. He needed to be with me and I am grateful for it now, if I wasn't always then!

We should beware the over-sentimentalised view of God that is so prevalent in the Western church. Let's listen to Peter as he highlights one of the implications of approaching God as Father: *"if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear..."* (1 Peter 1:17). Peter's point is simple. This Father has ransomed (redeemed) us from an empty way of life so that we can grow and develop in positive holiness and service to him. The cost of this redemption was immense: the perfect and spotless life of Jesus laid down at the cross for us. God as our Father therefore has the right to evaluate our lives, ask probing questions and hold us to account. If I as a parent sacrifice in order that my child may have a quality education, do I not have the right to find out how he or she is doing? Would I not have the right to intervene if I were to discover that he or she were simply wasting time in trivial pursuits rather than studying? Fathers are not just about bath time!

Paul reminds the believers at Thessalonica of his role in their lives when he was with them: *"For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory"* (1 Thessalonians 2: 11, 12). This is also what father's do.

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Hebrews takes this further by talking about the father's role in discipline, citing Proverbs 3:11, 12: *"The Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives"* (Hebrews 11:6). Love and discipline go hand in hand. The writer expands on this: *"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline. If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness"* (Hebrews 11:7-10).

## **Making requests**

Understanding that we approach God as children to their heavenly Father (who is also King of kings) Jesus gave his disciples five requests that would order and frame their praying: first, two requests focussing on God and then three requests focussing on ourselves and others. The order is significant. When it comes to prayer we start with God and his interests and purposes rather than with our own.

When we think about it, the fact that Jesus encouraged the disciples to ask anything of God is remarkable. He was inviting them to come boldly to their heavenly Father and make real requests of him, in the expectation not only that he would listen but that he would respond.

What amazing honour and value this gives us! We are not cogs in the vast, impersonal machinery of this universe. We are persons, designed for fellowship with God. We are God's children, invited to come to our Father so that we can talk with him and participate in what he is doing in the universe. We are to pray because *it matters that we pray*. We must pray, in fact, because the great gifts that he wants us to enjoy do not come to us automatically. We are invited to come to ask, to share our desires and ideas. We have influence. And in the asking we develop our relationship with God and grow up into his adult children.

## **Two requests focussed on God**

### **The honour and glory of God**

First, *'Hallowed be your name'* (Luke 11:2). 'Hallowed' is not a word in common usage these days. The basic idea is to 'set apart as special'. It is to pray that God's name comes to be honoured and set apart as the most valuable thing in the universe. It is to pray that God will be glorified as God.

If we trace the brokenness of our world back to its source we find it in the fact that although men and women knew God, they didn't glorify him as God. Not that they got rid of God altogether – at least not immediately. What they did was to devalue him; whittle him down to their level and even lower, to the level of mere animals. When God is devalued, all that he has made is also devalued. This means that human beings are devalued; everything is cheapened; life is built on the lie that the universe created us; and wonderful gifts such as our sexuality are corrupted (see Romans 1:18ff). It is only when God is given his rightful place that everything God has made, including ourselves, will also be restored to its true value.

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We are to pray for this first and foremost. It is so easy even for Christians to lose our sense of the holiness of God, of his supreme value; to lose our sense of awe and reverence in his presence. With the result that we no longer know the true value not only of God but of one another, of life itself and all the good things God has given.

One day every knee will bow at the name of Jesus and every tongue will confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10, 11). We pray for that day. But we are also praying for now and for ourselves. As we come to him as Father our chief desire is to see his name being honoured in every aspect of our lives.

This is a grown-up prayer! A characteristic of young children is that they see everything in life as being about them. Their parents look forward to a time when their relationship with their children is about more than the children's needs, wants, feelings and preoccupations. Similarly as children of God: an evidence of growth is that our concern becomes more and more with God's reputation, honour and glory rather than with our own. This is to be the primary motivation of our lives.

The honour of God's name means putting first God's interests and purposes both for the world and for our lives. This entails living in a way that represents the Father's values and principles and not simply or primarily our own. It means refusing to do anything that would dishonour the Lord. It means positively choosing to do those things that bring honour to him.

We have the opportunity every day in how we work, how we treat our colleagues, how we care for our family, how we live and serve together in the Body of Christ treat our family and live together to bring honour to God's name and reputation. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, people should be able to see our good works which will then lead them to glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). By praying "may your name be honoured in and through my life today" we make a clear statement of the core motivation of our lives.

### **The kingly rule of God**

The second request is "Your kingdom come." We know of course that one day God's kingdom will come in its ultimate and most public sense. Jesus will return. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. We pray for and look forward to that day. But this request is also about today, whether or not it is today that Jesus returns. We are not to think fatalistically about the coming of God's Kingdom – that it will happen anyway, whatever I do. We are to play an active part in its coming. In the context of the basic needs of life – food and clothing – Jesus taught his disciples to 'seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness'. The term 'kingdom' as used here means government or rule. To pray "your kingdom come" is to pray for God's kingly rule to be real in my life. It is to ask God to govern and direct me in all things today.

This second request is connected to the first: for the only way that we will honour God's name is by submitting to his rule as King in our lives. We don't naturally think the way God thinks. Our ways and values are not his. Our basic need is to come each day and present our bodies and minds to him so that they come under his rule. However there is little point in praying for God's kingdom to come if in some area my heart is actually resisting his rule. That would be to pretend to pray. That would be to be guilty of empty repetition.

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The challenge we face is that very often we have our own plans, our own ideas of what we want to do in life. These can so easily dominate our thinking and our praying so that when we come to pray, our focus is on our own and family interests. This would be to pervert the purpose of prayer. Instead of seeking to align ourselves to God's rule we are seeking to align him to ours. Instead of praying for God's kingdom we are praying for our own. Just imagine the disaster if we did actually get our way, with all our selfish ambitions, our ignorance of God's right purposes and our facility for really messing things up! We need to seek God's kingdom as first and dominant priority for unless our own plans are joined to his they will ultimately prove futile and a waste of our lives.

Each day provides a new and unique opportunity to learn about the rule of God and to align our wills to his. May God give us insight to see the possibilities of this day and every day to seek his kingdom in our lives. The days and opportunities are limited. God will run out of days that he is going to give us. So let's not wait for another day. Take this day and seek God's glory and kingdom in it.

### **Three requests focussed on ourselves**

In Jesus' pattern prayer there now follow three requests concerning our own needs. God does indeed want us to talk to him about what we need but we can see now the wisdom in starting first with God himself. For it is only when we grasp what the primary motivation of our lives is to be that we are in a position to recognise what it is that we need in order to fulfil God's purposes for us. In other words, our requests for ourselves are shaped by and flow out of our requests for God's honour and kingdom.

### **Physical needs**

First, we are invited to pray for the material resources we will need to live to honour God: '*Give us each day our daily bread*'. That is, "*Give us day by day the food we need to live.*"

It is sensible to start with the physical because we can't serve God without our bodies. And our bodies need food. Be as spiritually minded as we like, we need to eat to live. God designed it that way. He is interested in keeping us alive physically in order to fulfil his purposes for us. He invites us to ask him for our 'daily bread' so that even the basic activity of eating food can be transformed into an experience of fellowship with our Creator, in which we ask him to provide, accept what he provides with thanksgiving and enjoy it as a provision of God.

There are millions of people who pray this not knowing where their next food is coming from. For these people this is a very real request. For those of us who don't know such extremes of poverty such a prayer seems perhaps to be rather unimportant. We know where our food is coming from. There is plenty of it. Why should we pray for something that is already there?

This prayer is far from unimportant. Jesus is teaching here that even at the physical level we are utterly dependent on God. Our food as well as everything else ultimately comes from him and depends on him. If we are invited to talk to God about our daily food it seems sensible to think that we can talk with him about all our physical concerns. It is healthy to learn the daily discipline of expressing our dependency on

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him and of giving thanks for all the good things he gives.

However, though physical needs are the first thing mentioned, they are not the only thing, nor the most important. While there is one request for physical needs, there are two requests for our moral and spiritual needs.

### **Moral needs**

The second request concerns the moral resources we need to honour God and experience his rule: *'Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.'*

Is there ever a day in your life when you go to bed at night and can justifiably say, 'Lord, I don't need forgiveness today; I did everything 100% right and out of totally pure motives'? If there is, please introduce yourself to me and tell me how you did it! I expect most of us would reply with an emphatic 'no'. We need forgiveness.

It is important to distinguish between the eternal forgiveness we receive as a gift through Jesus Christ and the daily forgiveness we need for life and fellowship in the family of God. Jesus is here talking about daily life in the family of God. For that life to be healthy we daily need forgiveness from God and for one another. The closer I walk with the Father, the more aware I become of the reality of my own heart – the jealousy, selfishness, anger, pride, wrong motivations and desires – and thus the more aware I become of my need of his forgiveness. That's normal!

When we ask God for forgiveness it sensitises us to the need to forgive others and provides the resources to do so. We forgive because we ourselves experience the unearned, magnificent grace of God in our own lives. That grace fights the arrogance, self-righteousness and feelings of personal superiority that so often beset us. If we expect God to forgive, we should make sure that we forgive others when they ask, whether they ask us seven times or seventy times seven! Forgiveness is not complete until it is received and it is meaningless without repentance.

It is important to make this a part of daily praying. But be aware that it is easy to be condescending and super spiritual here and fail to realise just how much God has forgiven us. There is also a danger of being consumed by bitterness and hurt.

### **Spiritual needs**

The third request concerns our spiritual needs: *'And lead us not into temptation'* In addition to asking for forgiveness for sins we have committed in the past, we are to pray for spiritual protection in case we fall into temptation and sin in the future. It is not that God tempts us. But on occasions, in his wisdom, he will lead us into situations where we will be tempted, just as he did with his Son in the wilderness (Luke 4). On a daily basis we are assailed by temptation of all kinds. How do we prepare ourselves for this?

In reality it seems that too often we go out into daily life unaware of and unprepared for the spiritual war in which we are involved. Peter was like this. He boldly and adamantly claimed that he was ready to go anywhere with Jesus – to prison and even to death if necessary, despite the warnings Jesus gave him of his weakness and lack of readiness. He made it as far as the garden. Jesus asked him to stay and keep watch as he prayed. But Peter fell asleep. *"Watch and pray so that you do not fall into temptation,"* Jesus warned (Matthew 46:21). Peter went back to sleep.

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When he eventually woke up he found himself surrounded by those who had come to arrest Jesus. Bewildered, not knowing what to do he seized his sword and swiped at the first man who came close, cutting off his right ear. Jesus had to undo the damage. And then overwhelmed by confusion and fear, completely unprepared, Peter ran. Momentarily he recovered his composure and followed events at a distance. But on being challenged three times about his connections with Jesus, three times he denied that he knew him. At this point he went out into the night and wept.

There is a happier ending to the story. Peter came to the realisation that Jesus had been right all along: he wasn't ready, even though deep down he did genuinely love the Lord. He was restored to friendship and service and went on to demonstrate enormous boldness in his witness for Jesus. It is this Peter who writes: *'Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour'* (1 Peter 5:8). He writes as someone who was almost devoured. How much better for Peter if he had realised his own weakness and had asked for Christ's protection. *'Lead me not into temptation.'*

We have an enemy and we are no match for him on our own. Satan has vast intelligence, power and thousands of years of experience in tempting the human race. In addition, we have a rebel within: something within our hearts that wants to respond positively to his temptations. To go heedless and overly self-confident into our daily world constitutes a clear danger to our spiritual survival.

## Questions for discussion

1. What prompted the disciples to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray?
2. Discuss the biblical portrait of God as Father. What implications has this portrait for how we speak with God?
3. List and discuss the practical reasons why it is important to focus first on God and his interests when we come to pray. Might there be any exceptions to this?
4. Discuss what it means practically for us to pray: *'hallowed be your name'* and *'your kingdom come'*.
5. Why is it important to talk to God about our physical needs?
6. What is the impact on our relationship with God when we harbour unconfessed sin in our hearts? What do you think would be the impact on a Home Group/church where there is unwillingness to say sorry and ask for forgiveness and unwillingness to forgive?
7. Can you relate to Peter's experience of careless self-confidence? Why are we sometimes so blind to the possibility of temptation until it is too late? What are the major points of temptation we experience? How might we pray for one another in this area?

# Persistence in prayer

If prayer always came easily and naturally to us there would be a lot less need to encourage each other to pray. The reality for most of us is that prayer is hard and gives rise to a variety of challenging questions. In the previous chapter we looked at one of these: what is the point of praying, especially when God already knows all we need before we ask? What is the benefit, the true reward, of prayer? In this chapter we will consider another: persistence in prayer. When is it right to persevere in asking God for something and when should we learn to take “no” for an answer and stop asking?

The question arises in many contexts. For example, if you have a disability or illness and have prayed to God, but he has not yet intervened: do you keep on asking? Or if you are experiencing a particular strong temptation and have asked God to change how you feel, but the temptation hasn't gone away and seems as strong or stronger than ever: do you keep praying? Or if you have financial challenges and have asked God to provide a solution and yet the bills keep piling up and circumstances get steadily worse: do you persevere in prayer?

## Biblical confusion?

Some statements in the Bible encourage us to persevere in prayer. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Jesus tells us to pray and not to give up (Luke 18:1). Therefore Christian leaders, preachers and writers encourage us to keep going. They tell us that prayer changes things, but it is hard work because God won't respond to people who fail to demonstrate their seriousness by consistent and persistent asking. We are thus told to wrestle with God like Jacob and only then will we get the answers we seek.

Other statements in the Bible seem to suggest the opposite. For example, we have Paul's famous *“thorn in the flesh”* (very likely a physical disability of some kind) about which he writes: *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul asked God three times to remove it. Having received a “no” each time, it would appear that Paul stopped praying about it and accepted his circumstances. Is this the example to follow?

On the basis of these examples we could arrive at two opposite (and dangerously wrong) extremes: on one hand making God's intervention in our lives depend totally on our persistence in prayer and on the other coming to the conclusion that to ask anything of God is presumptuous and insulting on our part and will achieve nothing in any case. The former turns prayer into a matter of employing the right techniques or formula and persisting in them until we achieve the result we seek. The latter leads to a kind of fatalism (accepting we can do nothing to affect anything) and thus we

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simply don't ask. **How do we make sense of this?**

It is not easy and I need to warn you that by the end of this chapter we will still have unanswered questions. At the same time I hope that in the following pages we will cover some key principles that will both encourage us to persist in prayer and guide us as to what such persistence involves. Once again we turn to Jesus and two stories he taught to illustrate persistence in prayer.

### **Story 1: An unexpected guest**

When Jesus responded to his disciples' request to teach them to pray (see chapter 3), he didn't give a set of magic words to keep repeating like a mantra. He gave them a pattern for prayer – and for *daily prayer*. This prayer didn't just include worship and confession, but a number of requests. The *first* requests concern God himself: that his name and reputation would be the most valuable thing in our lives and that we would live under his kingly rule. Second for our own needs: physical (*daily food!*), moral and spiritual. These are things that God wants us to talk to him about all the time (i.e. persistently)! But notice in this prayer the balance is not towards our material needs but towards our spiritual needs. To emphasise this Luke provides us with a story Jesus told about an unexpected guest.

*'Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him'" (Luke 11:5-13).*

Our understanding of what Jesus is teaching here hinges on understanding Middle Eastern hospitality. According to their hospitality code a person in the position of the man in Jesus' story was bound to provide hospitality for an unexpected guest, even at two o'clock in the morning! And not just hospitality in the form of a quick cup of tea: he was bound by the code to provide the very best spread he possibly could. If he did not have the provisions at hand he was perfectly within his rights to go to his neighbour down the street - waking him up if necessary – in order to provide food for an unexpected visitor. And he would do so without embarrassment for not only his own reputation was at stake but also the reputation for hospitality for the entire village. No self-respecting, hospitality conscious neighbour would protest that he was too tired and comfortable in his bed to do anything to help. Because of the man's shamelessness (a better translation of 'boldness') he would get up and provide what he needed.

Hospitality in Northern Ireland is also legendary but perhaps doesn't work quite the

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same way. (Don't worry, I'm not about to test it on you at two o'clock tomorrow morning to find out!) So perhaps a more contemporary illustration would help us understand the point. As a parent I know some of the difficulty involved in deciding whether to call out a doctor when a child is sick. It can be embarrassing to cause a fuss only to discover that by the time the doctor arrives the child is fast asleep and doing fine! But there are times when there is no question of embarrassment. If my wife were to discover in the middle of the night that I was having a heart attack she would call the medics and insist something is done. There would be absolutely no shame, no embarrassment, no feeling she needed to apologise. The critical nature of the situation demands action.

Since this story was obviously intended to be analogous to the nature of prayer, what is so urgent and critical in our lives that we can bring persistently to God without any embarrassment or shame, expecting a positive response? According to Jesus, the answer is: the *Holy Spirit*. He is our most urgent need. Just as a child needs fish and eggs (a solid, basic diet for physical life and development), so we need the Spirit! The Holy Spirit is as important to our spiritual life as basic food is to our physical lives.

### **Asking for the Spirit**

At this point you may be thinking: but didn't we receive the Holy Spirit when we came to Christ and received the gift of forgiveness and eternal life? Why do we need to ask for what we already have? And if the Holy Spirit is a gift, why do we have to keep asking? This was a good enough statement at the time Jesus spoke it, before Pentecost. But now Pentecost has come – surely we don't need to pray for the Spirit any more?

We do indeed receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we trust Christ – otherwise we would not have new life and we would not be in the Body of Christ. It is impossible to be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit. And yet it is undeniable that Jesus teaches – and Paul repeats – that we need to ask for the Spirit.

In Ephesians Paul explains to the believers that when they believed in Christ they were *'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance...'* (1:14). He also tells them that in that same Spirit they have access to the Father and that they are being *'built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit'* (Ephesians 2:18, 22). So as believers they have the Holy Spirit. But that doesn't stop him praying for them that God would give them the Spirit and strengthen them by the Spirit. The operation of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not a once-for-all-time event but an on-going process.

In chapter 1 he prays that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation in their knowledge of Christ. Why do they (and we) need this? First, so that we know the hope to which God has called us. That is, that we know exactly why God saved us. Some of us can be like a person who purchases a computer, brings it home and then has no idea why he bought it! Our Christian hope needs to be more than an idea or theory in our heads. It needs to get a hold of our hearts so that it shapes and motivates every aspect of our living.

Second, we need the Spirit to illuminate our hearts so that we grasp the sheer

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wealth of God's inheritance in his people. We are so used to thinking about what we get out of salvation; have we ever asked what God gets out of it? Consider your fellow Christians. They may not look like much now (!). But if only you could see what the person sitting beside you in your small group Bible study will one day be like you would be tempted to fall down on the ground in worship! A very big part of our eternal wealth is our Christian brothers and sisters. Perhaps if the Spirit opened our eyes more to this we would treat one another differently?

Third, we need the Spirit to open our eyes to the reality and nature of the power of God at work in our lives. We don't always see it, do we? We need spiritual illumination so that we grasp what the power of God has already achieved in us, raising us from spiritual death and already seating us in heavenly realms with Christ.

Paul prays these things for the Ephesians and if we have any sense we will do the same. This is not only important, it is urgent. So much so that, to go back to Christ's illustration, God invites us to persist shamelessly in asking for the Spirit, any time of the day or night.

### **Are we serious?**

Will God answer us? That will at least partly depend on how serious and consistent we are in asking. Do we really mean it? Or do we just pray like this when we are stirred by a wonderful time of praise or an inspiring message? The work of the Spirit in our lives is not a matter of a moment but the process of a lifetime.

Our sincerity in asking will depend in turn on how important and urgent we consider the Spirit and his work in our lives to be. It will also depend on whether we think we can do without it.

When my children were young and a birthday or Christmas was approaching Heather and I would ask them to think about what present they might like. Often they couldn't make up their minds. And when we thought they had, next day they changed! It can be the same when it comes to our spiritual lives. There are some days when we determine to make progress and grow up spiritually. There are other days (sometimes weeks or months) when we lose sight of this goal and other things establish themselves as priorities, demonstrating what we actually value. This inconsistency makes it apparent that the work of the Spirit in us is not urgent enough to us that drives us to ask God for it at all hours of the day and night and to keep asking.

James highlights this issue of inconsistency and being in two minds. He encourages us, if we feel that we lack wisdom, to come to God at any time and ask him for the wisdom we need and God will give it. But then he adds a qualification: 'But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways' (James 1:5-8). To come and ask the Lord for wisdom one day and then forget about it for the next two weeks and then come back and ask again is not a demonstration of genuine faith: it is a demonstration of instability – of faith that hasn't made up its mind what it really wants. God will not entrust his wisdom to a person who is not sure that it is what he wants and is simply considering it amongst other options.

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The man in Jesus' story was not in two minds. He was desperate. His need was vital and critical. He saw that clearly. Our need is also, if only we can see it.

God's purpose is to transform us so that we become more and more like his Son. He has provided us with all the resource we need for this purpose to be fulfilled in our lives. However it will not happen automatically. It will happen in the context of relationship with God in which we make it our highest priority to ask, and persist in asking, for the work of his Spirit in our lives.

### **Those who ask, receive**

Jesus continued: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. This is God's commitment and he will not break it. If we ask for the Spirit and his work, God will answer.

Sometimes we are disappointed because nothing happens at once. So it appears that God hasn't responded. But God does respond. Jesus suggests we think of the normal attitude of parents towards their children. If a child comes asking for a new bicycle or something even more exotic a parent will not always respond positively! But if a child comes asking for the basic food he needs, parents don't refuse and certainly don't play cruel games by giving something inedible or even dangerous in response.

When we ask sincerely and consistently for the Spirit and his work in us God always responds positively. But let's remember that we are asking for something that is itself a lifelong process and not a one-off event. We will rarely see results the first day! But if we are serious in our asking and persist in our intent God guarantees the Spirit's work to us.

I have attended many prayer times over the course of my life. I have heard thousands of prayer requests. How many of these requests have been of the type: 'Fred has asked us to pray that the Holy Spirit will illuminate his heart so that he understands the hope he has in Christ'? Very few. Yet which of us would claim that we don't need this and that our hearts are sufficiently illuminated?

If we reflect on our praying over, say, the past month what does its content reveal about our values? How prominent a part has praying for the Spirit and his work in our lives played? Was it our top priority? Or was it scarcely even mentioned? The challenge of Christ's teaching is not simply that we should persist in prayer but that we should persist in praying for those things that God has established as the key priorities for our lives and which he has guaranteed to give us.

### **Story 2: The Parable of the persistent widow**

*'Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who*

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*cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"* (Luke 18:1-8).

The point of this story is clear from the outset: that the disciples should always pray and not give up (literally not faint).

Jesus told this story in the context of teaching them about the future coming of God's Kingdom and a warning that preoccupation with material things and the ordinary activities of this life will leave many people unprepared for that future. Of course there is another side to the coming of God's Kingdom and the return of Jesus as King. His disciples are waiting for that day with great expectation, for amongst other wonderful things it will mean that all the injustices they have suffered or experienced will be put right.

There are times in life when as followers of Christ we find the going tough, the waiting long and the answers hard to find. Jesus warned his disciples that this would be so and in fact it didn't take very long for the first major persecution to break out (see Acts 8). Opposition, misunderstanding, misrepresentation, suspicion, persecution, martyrdom – these all have been the frequent companions of the Gospel. From Christians being tied to poles and set on fire to provide light for Nero's entertainment in 1st century Rome to the persecution and death meted out on Christ's followers in many places in our contemporary world. We think also of the many believers who have suffered for their insistence on honesty and integrity in the work place; the business men who have been forced to take huge losses because they refuse to take bribes; the Christian students and faculty members derided and discriminated against for their faith in God as Creator. We live in an evil and corrupt generation and it frequently costs to stand clear from it and live loyally for Christ.

Our hearts instinctively cry out to God in protest at such injustice. And when God does not intervene in justice we can be overwhelmed and find ourselves giving up praying altogether. After all, what is the use of talking to God if he does nothing? Why pray to a God who appears disinterested in the suffering of humanity? Is God really interested in seeing justice finally done? Does he care? Why doesn't he intervene?

Jesus tells his disciples this parable so that they would not collapse under the physical, mental and emotional pressure of it all but would keep praying.

The parable tells of a widow who was being unjustly treated. She was probably being exploited by the rich and powerful. She brought her case to a judge who didn't care what God thought of him or what people thought of him and had no interest in doing anything for her. But he had reckoned without the woman's persistence. She simply would not let go. She kept coming back with the same plea for justice. Eventually the judge relented and gave her what she wanted. He didn't do this because he had a deep commitment to the principles of fairness and justice (Jesus explicitly tells us that he was unjust!). Rather, it was because of the woman's sheer persistence in asking!

So what's the point? Jesus compares the actions of the widow and the unjust judge to prayer: *"And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to*

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*him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”* In other words, if an unjust judge will eventually respond, how much more will the God of all justice!

So what would it imply if we decide to give up praying? What would we be saying by not persisting in prayer? By giving up on God we are effectively demoting him to the level of a corrupt court official who doesn't care about anyone or about justice. Is that really what we believe about God? Don't give up praying because in our praying we show what we think of God.

## **Praying for justice**

Some find the idea of asking God for justice from our enemies very unchristian. They claim that the desire for justice is a poorly disguised desire for revenge. After all, they say, aren't we to be like Jesus who prayed forgiveness for those who crucified him?

Well, of course Jesus would never command us to do anything that is not Christian. What Jesus is telling us in this parable is that when faced with injustice and persecution we are not to give up but to keep praying. He is not deviously asking us to pray for revenge! We are to ask, as this woman was asking, that *justice* will be done. Her cause was just; she had been cheated; she was only asking for what she had been cheated out of. She wasn't seeking revenge, just justice.

Furthermore, it is true that Jesus prayed forgiveness for those who crucified him. As he explained, they did not know what they were doing. But a few weeks later Peter raised the matter again with the Jerusalem crowd. He also spoke of the ignorance of those who nailed Jesus to the cross. But the situation had now changed. God had raised from the dead the Jesus they had crucified. So now they did know what they had done: they had killed their Messiah. What would God do to them now? Amazingly, according to Peter, God was offering them forgiveness. But in order to receive it they needed to repent. And as it turned out, thousands did and were forgiven: but thousands more did not and were not forgiven.

Jesus did more than pray for their forgiveness. Peter gives us insight into the mind and heart of Jesus as he went to the cross. He writes that Jesus committed his cause to *"him who judges righteously"* (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus hadn't given up on justice. This was no fatalistic acceptance of the injustice he was receiving. He had a total confidence in God as a God of justice and that there would be a day of final judgement when all wrongs would be put right. And in that confidence he was free. He didn't threaten nor did he retaliate. He took the suffering and injustice and gave his life for our sin and guilt so that we might receive forgiveness and new life.

That conviction – that God is a God of justice who will one day judge righteously – sets us free to take the pain and injustice also. God will intervene one day. As we wait for that day let's not give up praying.

## **When heaven is silent**

This is not to say that holding on to faith in the justice of God and his ultimate intervention is easy. In the final line of the parable Jesus asks: *'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'* In other words, will he find people still

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praying, still believing in him, even though God hasn't intervened and dealt with injustice yet? This is a striking question that raises another: why would we give up not just on prayer but on faith itself? Because waiting in silence is hard.

The silence of heaven is a very big problem for many of us. Even John the Baptist struggled with it. He had done what God had asked him to. He had prepared the way for Messiah by preaching righteousness and the need for repentance. He had taken his message to the highest in the land, challenging Herod himself about his immoral lifestyle. For that Herod had him thrown in prison. John waited and wondered. Why had God not intervened to release him? If Jesus was truly Messiah, as John had told the people, why had he not come in person to release him? Did the fact that he hadn't mean that he wasn't Messiah after all? So he sent messengers to Jesus with his question: are you the One who was to come or should we look for another? Jesus gave the messengers evidence that pointed unmistakably to his identity as Messiah. But then he added: "*Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me*" (Matthew 11:1-6).

Many do stumble because of Jesus, especially when he doesn't immediately answer and intervene the way they want. As in John's case, they are not released from the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. Many find it so hard to wait in the silence of heaven that they are overwhelmed and crippled in their faith. This isn't because of an absence of all evidence that Jesus is the Son of God – the miracles, teaching, life and especially the resurrection of Jesus stand as testimony for all time to that. But it is because of the presence of what seems like conflicting evidence: God doesn't always intervene as we want. Happy are those who do not stumble and trip up because of it – who can hold onto God in the silence. But some not only find this hard – they find it overwhelming for them.

The book of Revelation pictures a scene at the altar of incense, which was the place of prayer in the Jewish Temple, but this time in heaven. A colossal celebration of praise by countless thousands of believers is followed by complete silence. For half an hour.

Can you imagine 30 minutes of silence from a crowd that cannot be numbered? Imagine the difficult, tense atmosphere. But then the silence is broken. Not by an angel blowing a trumpet but by the prayers of 'ordinary' believers. A mysterious container is depicted as holding all the prayers that believers have ever prayed. Every 'how long O Lord do I have to take this?'; every 'why is it so hard to follow and serve you?'; every 'why will you not remove this thorn in my flesh?'; every 'why will you not return my husband to me?'; every 'why will you not?...why did you not?' God keeps all our prayers. None is forgotten. And one day the great voice will announce: "*There will be no more delay!*" The waiting will be over and God will come. For now we are asked to wait but we will not wait forever.

Will we keep the faith while we wait? One of the ways in which we demonstrate that we have kept the faith is by praying and persisting in praying for God to intervene with justice and righteousness.

## **To persist or not?**

As we finish this chapter we come back to the question we started with: should we

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pray and keep on praying? We have discovered that, at least in part, the answer depends on *what we are praying for*.

There are some things we must keep on praying for and never give up for God has guaranteed to answer. We are to pray for the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives. We are to pray for Christ to return and bring justice not just to our lives but to the whole world. If it is a promise of God don't give up.

But there are things that are not guaranteed to us. We are not guaranteed health, wealth and general physical prosperity. As Paul expresses it in Romans 8: not only does the whole creation groan with pain because it is currently in bondage to the corruption that sin has caused; all Christians, even though they have the Holy Spirit, also groan for the same reason (Romans 8:18-25). The pains are like those in childbirth as they point towards a future release. But they are still pains. Many believers are very poor and die in poverty. Many are disabled. Many have all kinds of illness.

Because there are things that are not guaranteed to us, we shouldn't persist when God gives us 'no' as an answer. Paul suffered from a physical disability – his 'thorn in the flesh'. It was distressing for him and on three occasions he pleaded with God to remove it from him. But God said 'no'. Paul needed to learn that all our legitimate desires are not always fulfilled in this life. He needed to learn that "my grace is sufficient for you". One day all thorns will be removed. Paul knew that. But for now, though he would love to be without it, God's purposes didn't require its removal. In fact Paul's thorn in the flesh – as Paul himself came to recognise - would help ensure he would not get proud, arrogant and independent. It would lead him to discover that God's grace is all he needed.

It is easy for us to focus on God's "no" and ignore all the things he has said "yes" to in our lives. God may intervene in the way we desperately desire because it coincides with his work to develop our moral and spiritual character. But if it would be for our spiritual good not to grant that healing, but to call on us to bear the difficulty in order to deepen our faith, moral fibre, and character, he may not remove the problem. God never loses sight of his goal: he works all things together for the ultimate good of conforming us completely to the image of Jesus. God's purposes for us are beyond the world of now, and so often we forget this future hope because our purposes are so often limited to this world.

Can you find his grace sufficient? Can you learn to accept his 'no' in this area, so that you can say your 'yes' to him? Will you learn to pray persistently for the Spirit to develop your understanding of his ways, to develop your spiritual character?

## **Not my will**

The supreme example in this area is the example of our Lord himself. Three times he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Abba, Father." Here was the perfect Son praying on the basis of the Father's love. "All things are possible with you." He was praying also on the basis of his Father's power. "Let this cup pass from me." If God is all loving and all powerful why would he not let it pass? Why would he allow his child to suffer? And yet are we not glad that Jesus didn't stop there? "Nevertheless not my will but your will be done." Because he allowed the will and the purposes of

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the Father to prevail even as he was praying and pouring out his heart with strong crying and tears, our salvation was secured.

We are also to pray on the basis of the Father's love and on the basis of his power. If God has promised – if it is really his will and not just something we hope he will do (or imagine that he has personally promised to us) – we can be confident he will do it. But if it is something that he has not guaranteed to us then we must pray, “but not our will but your will be done”.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. If we reflect on our praying over the past month either as individuals or as a group, what does the content of our praying reveal about our true values? How prominent a part has praying for the Spirit and his work in our lives played?
2. Why do we need to pray for the Holy Spirit? And what are the main reasons that so often we don't?
3. Can you relate to the illustration of children changing their minds about which present they want for Christmas? In what ways can we be unstable and double-minded when it comes to prayer and especially prayer for God to work in our lives and give us his wisdom?
4. Discuss this statement from the text: “It is easy for us to focus on God's “no” and ignore all the things he has said “yes” to in our lives.” Share some of the really big things that God has said ‘yes’ to in your life.
5. In what way does the conviction that God is a God of justice help and encourage us to keep praying?
6. What practical suggestions can you make to help one another to cope with the silence of heaven and not stumble in our faith?

# Some practical advice about prayer

## 1. Be careful about allowing others to be prescriptive for you when it comes to when and how you should pray.

I am referring to advice like the following: "Jesus got up very early to pray, so we should do the same." Jesus also slipped away during the day. He prayed also at night. He prayed on his own. He prayed with the disciples. Be careful about turning individual biblical example into law

We are all different. We are all different *physically*. Each of us needs different amounts of sleep and that will impact your prayer life! We are different *temperamentally*. Some of us are more comfortable in solitude and are easily exhausted by too much company and find it hard to express ourselves in a group. Some are more comfortable in a group, stimulated and inspired by company. This impacts prayer. The tendency will be either to go with what makes us more comfortable or to feel guilty and under pressure because we aren't like others! We should be aware of both tendencies and where necessary fight against them.

We are also different *functionally*. Some of us are more "thinking types": we focus more on logical thought, on ideas and tend to be ordered and disciplined in how we function generally. We can work well with regular time slots, with prayer lists, prayer journals, prayer diaries. But some of us are more "feeling types". We are more comfortable with expressing feelings and reactions. We prefer to be more spontaneous than organised. We tend to be more effusive and expressive, often making the more "thinking" types uncomfortable. Neither is "wrong": each has its strengths that must be built on in prayer and its weaknesses with which we must learn to come to terms.

## 2. Remember that our individual contexts are also often very different.

I remember reading biographies of some of the great missionaries of the 19th century and discovering that they used to get up to pray at four o'clock in the morning. I was impressed! So I tried it. I managed just a few days before almost collapsing exhausted. Then I discovered that in the parts of the world they were serving they went to bed very early in the evening because there was no light. If I could get to sleep by 8pm I could certainly get up every morning at 4! I realised also that their working contexts were usually very different from mine. They didn't all have to help get four children ready for school and then get into school themselves to face thirty 14 year olds and try to motivate them to learn French!

Each of us has different responsibilities in daily life. As one Christian leader once put it to me: instead of beating yourself up about the 30 minutes you can't spend in prayer, make the most of the 10 you can! And let's be careful not to judge one another on this. None of us really knows the exact circumstances of anyone else. Rather let's work on encouraging one another to love and good works, including prayer!

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**3. Some order in our praying is helpful.** The Lord Jesus indicated that we should start with God and his interests before moving on to our own. He also isolated five separate requests, which can help us think in a more structured way about the content of our praying, make our prayers less random and haphazard and help us achieve a sense of proportion in our praying, so that we are not simply focussing on one thing. Many find the ACTS structure helpful: A = adoration; C = confession; T = thanksgiving; S = supplication.

**4. Factor prayer into the flow of each day** rather than saving it all up for a few months and then letting it all out at one long session. Long sessions of prayer can be good, if they are possible for us. But remember we are cultivating a relationship with God as our Father, not an occasional audience with a remote and often inaccessible monarch. My father used to quote to me something he found both helpful and liberating. An older believer he much admired had said to him: "I've never spent ten minutes in prayer in my life." Then, after a pause, the man had added: "And I have never spent ten minutes out of prayer in my life."

Once, years ago, in an attempt to get physically fit I asked some colleagues what I should do. I was told that running was a good idea. So I ran six miles the next day and never ran again in my life! It is not a sensible approach. Similarly when it comes to spiritual fitness.

Work out the general daily rhythm of your life and build prayer into it. Better shorter times more frequently than infrequent long periods. (Better still, try doing both: frequent short conversations with God plus longer set periods for prayer as you are able to organise them.) Try to reduce the length of time you go without prayer during your waking hours. I pray a lot in the car. As a teacher I used to pray during test and exam supervision, before refereeing rugby matches, when marking homeworks. Now that my time is more flexible I spend more time praying as I walk and as I go out in pursuit of my enjoyment of photography.

**5. Use visual aids to stimulate prayer.** My mum explained to me once how she factored prayer into the busy day of caring for children and running a household (back in the 1950s). She prayed for each child as she made the beds and tidied the rooms. She also took time out to read and pray each day when she had her cup (or cups) of tea. Others use photographs as a stimulus to pray for individuals. You could keep a photo-book of people dear to you specifically for the purpose of praying for them. (This might be a more inspiring alternative to a prayer list.) As you walk to the bus, pray for the neighbours who live in each house as you pass it. If you regularly travel the same route you could pray for particular people or situations each time you have to stop at a particular set of traffic lights. Discipline yourself to pray for a few moments each time you get into the car. Pray as you read the newspaper or listen to the news, turning the news items into prayer items.

**6. Try journaling.** This usually involves keeping a kind of spiritual diary in which you record what you pray for, the Scriptures you read and the thoughts that have particularly captured your focus. Some people find it helpful to write out their

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prayers in full. Journaling is a way of helping us to focus as we pray. It also provides a record, which we can periodically review. And it provides a way of reminding ourselves of what we prayed for so that we can thank God for his answers. This does not suit everyone but it is unlikely to do any harm to try (as long as it doesn't result in feelings of failure if it doesn't work for you.)

**7. Develop tactics to combat a wandering mind.** We probably all know what it is like to have our minds drift all over the place when we pray. Our minds flit like butterflies from one thing to another. To combat this I like to pray aloud (when I am on my own!) as this greatly helps me to focus. I also find I need to watch my posture. Any posture that is conducive to sleep is likely to be a problem! Having a structure to prayer also helps with mental discipline and tying prayer to Scripture is helpful to keep my mind more stimulated.

**8. Take regular opportunities to pray with others.** Some of us shy away from this temperamentally, or through fear of what others may think if we suggest it, or because of our own spiritual apathy. But this is one of those areas of life where we may need to struggle against our own preferences. It is a healthy thing to gather with other believers to pray. I have learned so much and been encouraged so much by listening to others pray.

At various points I have had particular prayer partners – close friends with whom I prayed regularly. This again can be very encouraging. However make sure that you are not praying with a member of the opposite sex. Prayer is an intimate and emotional activity and if we are not careful intimacy in one area can lead to intimacy in another. An alternative is to develop a 'prayer triplet'.

Sometimes we have to make the opportunity by suggesting to others a time of prayer together. Prayerlessness in our individual life is a habit that is hard to break. And prayerlessness when Christians get together is a habit that is hard to break. It is a struggle because it is unnatural to our old nature, but natural to our new life in Jesus. The more we engage in prayer with others the more natural it will come to be.

**9. If you are in any form of spiritual leadership, work as hard on your public prayers as you do on any other aspect of your leadership.** D.A. Carson makes precisely this point (op. cit. p34). It is not something I would have agreed with some years ago. But I have come to learn its importance. The goal is not to try to impress people with our erudition but to lead, teach and encourage. In addition, people need role models for prayer and it is important that we provide good role models for them. If, for example, the way church leaders pray is theologically sloppy, vague or even incorrect they should not be surprised if others follow their example.

Some leaders write their prayers out in full every time. I generally prefer greater spontaneity. But I do think about it carefully. Praying for the pastoral needs of the church requires great sensitivity as well as accurate information. Praying for the needs of the country and of the world requires the same. And praying at the end of a talk often will provide the words that individuals need to enable them to make a response.

## Priorities in prayer

In the last chapter we were considering the question of persistence in prayer. We discovered that God has invited us to persist in prayer for those things that he has committed himself to provide for us because they are essential to the *fulfilment of his purposes* for us. The important questions now become: what are those purposes? And what do we require in order that they are fulfilled?

Let's suppose, for example, that God's main purpose for us is that we stay alive for as long as possible and remain healthy and happy for as much of that time as possible. If that is the purpose then we probably have a very good idea of what we need to pray for: our health, physical and financial security, relational happiness, fulfilling job and so on. These will be priorities in prayer. Of course, if we already enjoy much or all of these good things, while we might remember to be thankful, we will be less motivated to pray for them. However, if we lack these things we will be much more motivated to pray. This may explain why individual and group prayer times can be something of a struggle, unless someone is very ill or in some other dire physical circumstance.

But have we identified the purpose correctly? Is it really true that God's major purpose for us is to live long and prosper? Certainly we are to pray for our physical needs, as we saw in chapter 3. But praying for our physical needs is not an end in itself. God's purpose is not to keep us alive for the sake of it. Rather he concerns himself for our physical needs because it is impossible for us to fulfil his greater purposes for us apart from the physical. It is impossible to live the Christian life to the glory of God without having a physical body. So we are invited to pray for the physical resources we need.

But the purposes of God for us go far beyond the physical. They are moral and spiritual and to fulfil them we will need moral and spiritual resources. So in this chapter we are going to think some more about what the priorities for prayer should be in light of God's purposes. On this occasion we will do this by looking at how Paul understood God's purpose for the church and the resources necessary to fulfil that purpose when he prayed for the Christians in Ephesus.

### **Paul's prayer for the Ephesians**

*'For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do*

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*immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen' (Ephesians 3:14-21).*

## **God's amazing purpose**

How does Paul see God's purpose? According to Ephesians 2:22 God's great purpose in history is to build a dwelling place for himself by the Spirit. This building is not made out of stone or wood. It is made out of people who have been born from above, born by the Spirit of God and who are now spiritually joined together in that Spirit in what is called the Body of Christ, the church.

This is an amazing project. It is also amazingly difficult. Building a huge building with inanimate material like stone is hard enough. To build a spiritual building made up of people is at a much higher level of difficulty! People come in different shapes and sizes. We each have our own personalities, experience, tastes, gifts and viewpoints. We each have a will of our own. Imagine the difficulty of building with living stones, each with its own idea of where it should fit, what function it should have in the building.

Now with that in mind, think about what Paul is saying in this prayer. He says that God is constructing a building in which Jew and non-Jew (i.e. people of every tribe, race, and language) are brought together. And not only that, he is constructing this new humanity ("one new man"; 2:15) so that he might dwell within it by his Spirit. What a massive project! And one that has been more than 2000 years in the making! But the astounding thing is: we who are believers are part of it. Each one of us, as Peter puts it, is "a living stone" of this new building.

The process of building comes at a huge cost. It above all cost God the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. But it also cost his servant Paul. God had singled him out for a task that would involve a great deal of personal suffering and sacrifice. Even as he wrote this prayer Paul was a prisoner. He refers to his many sufferings in the preceding verses (including persecution, physical suffering, strenuous work and much emotional strain).

Let's imagine Paul adrift on a raft in the Mediterranean, hungry, tired, with the sun and storms beating down, clinging on for his life. Suppose we were able to ask him at that moment: "Paul, how are you feeling? A bit disillusioned perhaps? All this misunderstanding and suffering at the hands of your own people. And some of the Christians haven't been much better! Is it really worth it, Paul?"

His answer would be a resounding "Yes!" He tells the church in Ephesus not to be discouraged (v.13). He explains that his suffering was for their glory and that the end result of God dwelling in their hearts was so magnificent it was worth any price. And it was certainly worth him getting down on his knees, day after day, night after night, despite his prison chains, and asking God to fulfil his purpose in their lives.

What about us? Do we think God's project is worth it? Paul saw it as the greatest project on earth and that just to be part of the building made the pain of the building process worthwhile. Do we? Is it a big enough project to us that we also bow our knees before God's will and pray for our brothers and sisters in the church that they will experience the dwelling of God as an increasing reality?

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There's something more here. It was not only God's magnificent purpose for humanity that drove Paul to prayer. It was also his awareness of his personal inadequacy and weakness, and his utter dependence on God to complete the task. Paul needed help and so do we.

Motivated both by the scale of the project and by his own inadequacy to achieve it he prays. What does he pray for? Let's listen in and see what we can learn about the priorities in praying for one another in the Body of Christ in light of God's purpose.

## **1. To be strengthened with power in our inner being through the Holy Spirit**

When we come to faith in Christ it is not simply that we believe something that we didn't believe before or that we behave differently than we behaved before: something supernatural occurs in our lives. Jesus describes this as being *born of the Spirit*. Peter describes it as being *born again or becoming partakers in the divine nature*. John talks about *receiving Christ*. And Paul talks about being *saved and regeneration*.

Each phrase is a different way of describing the same event: the experience of conversion when Jesus Christ comes to dwell in the heart by the power of the Spirit. This power is not some abstract, impersonal force. It is personal. It is inseparable from the Holy Spirit and derives only from Him. It is the life of God taking up full and permanent residence within us.

It is by the Spirit that God fulfils his purpose of building a dwelling place for himself in the hearts of men and women. God directs this power at our inner being (i.e. our heart, the centre of our person) and not at our outer being. So much of our culture is interested in the outside, on external appearance. Of course it is important to look after ourselves since our bodies are the dwelling place of God. But we constantly need the reality check of 2 Corinthians 4:16, "*Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*" Paul reminds us that the outer being is decaying. Even if we haven't suffered persecution, our outward being is struggling. I hate the fact that I have to wear reading glasses. It wasn't always the case, but eventually my eyes stopped focussing as well as they used to. So it is with the rest of our body: every part is subject to decay.

The great news is that our inner person is being renewed day by day. In addition, it will not always be housed in this decaying lump of flesh. (I'm speaking personally, of course!) One of these days we are going to receive a new body. It will be a body with no weakness and one in which our transformed inner being, by the power of the Spirit, will reside. Don't you want to fill that new body with as much of the transformed life as you can? For me at least, I would love there to be the maximum amount of progress in my life now so that the new body will be filled with a grown-up, transformed person in Jesus Christ. That's what the power of God is directed towards. He has invaded our bodies with his presence and his plan is to bring us to perfection in Christ.

But that's only the beginning. We need to pray. God does not obliterate our personalities and turn us into robots when we come to know Christ. Nor does the Spirit somehow take over and just carry us along. In his love God's purpose is to

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change us from the inside out and this doesn't happen automatically. He seeks our involvement. We are invited to pray that we will know transforming activity of the Holy Spirit in our heart in order that we are strengthened and empowered. We are invited to pray that the Spirit will transform and develop our thinking, motivations, values and priorities. There is work to be done and progress to be made! Do we really grasp the importance and opportunity of this? Then we will pray as Paul prayed.

## 2. To be rooted and established in love

The metaphor Paul uses makes it clear why he feels it is such top priority to pray that we are rooted and established in the reality of God's love. It is the secret to being stable and secure both with God and with one another. Just as a tree without a healthy root structure will lack anchorage, growth and security, so we will lack the spiritual nourishment, vitality and stability we need to stand tall and strong if we do not root ourselves deeply in God's love. Our growth will be stunted, our hearts empty when it comes to worship and there will be little evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in our character. We will begin to fear God's rejection and find it increasingly difficult to trust him. We will not have the spiritual capacity to be gracious, forgiving, patient and generous to one another.

Paul writes in Romans 5:5 that the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Spirit given to us. What does this mean? I used to think it meant that there was some kind of spiritual 'container' full of a substance called 'the love of God' which the Holy Spirit poured out on us, which resulted in our being filled with warm feelings about God. But the love of God is not some separate substance kept in a container. It is God himself loving us. It is God demonstrating that love in real time. What the Spirit does, as Paul explains, is to open our eyes to the meaning of the cross and the death of the Son of God for us. The Holy Spirit reasons with us, even argues with us, to get us to see and grasp God's love.

In particular the Holy Spirit points to God's timing. As Paul explains, '*God demonstrates his love to us in this: that **when** we were still sinners Christ died for us.*' The Spirit comes along side us and asks us the question: when was it that God began to love you? It wasn't when you decided to turn over a new leaf and try very hard to be holy, was it? Not at all. God loved when we were still sinners; still weak, rebellious, ungodly, enemies of his. In other words he loved us when we were at our worst and knowing the very worst about us. God is never surprised at us. There never will come a day when God will say: "I'm totally shocked. I never knew you were capable of that. I can no longer accept you." And if he loved us before we trusted his Son, how much more will he love us now, especially because his Son valued us so much to give his life for us! It is the Holy Spirit who writes this on our hearts and minds, arguing with us and convincing us of the love of God.

As he does so, our roots begin to grow a little deeper into the rich, nourishing soil of God's love. The Spirit constantly brings us back to the love of God. Sometimes this is accompanied with fabulous feelings of relief and release, as if a massive burden has been lifted (and it probably has!) Sometimes we feel very little. The Spirit's goal is not that we will find stability and foundation in *feelings* of love, but that we will root

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ourselves in the cross: God's great demonstration in space and time of his love for us in Christ.

This is one of the major battles of life. So often life's circumstances – physical suffering, hardship, personal failure, heartbreak in family life and relationships – threaten to fill the entire horizon of our thinking and squeeze out the love of God. Indeed they can bring us to doubting in the reality of that love. If we have not grown our roots sufficiently deep in God's love we will find it hard to stand under the storm of dark thoughts and painful emotions. Now is the time to prepare our hearts and pray that we become more firmly established in God's love every day.

### **3. To grasp God's purpose in all its dimensions**

According to the NIV translation, Paul encourages us to grasp the breadth, depth, height, and length of "the love of Christ". But in the original language there is no object: it is just the length, breadth, depth and height. Of course it includes the love of God. But I think it goes beyond that. I think it refers to the whole magnificence of the purpose of God for us: namely, uniting Jew and Gentile into one new humanity and creating a spiritual dwelling place for himself in our lives.

Grasping this lies beyond our natural ability and understanding. We need the power of God to help us even begin to understand each dimension of his purpose. And it is multi-dimensional, as Paul's words indicate. This will involve some solid thinking on our part, of course. But it is not merely some abstract theory, some complex piece of theology, which we are trying to grasp. It is an incredible and actual spiritual reality. It is easy to repeat words – for example that Christ is dwelling in our hearts - without really understanding the reality they express. We never really grasp anything until it grasps us. It is hard to be passionately engaged with what God is seeking to do in our lives if Christ dwelling in us is simply a fine-sounding theory we think about every now and then. If, however, we really grasp it – and it grasps us – it will profoundly influence not just our thinking but also every aspect of our lives.

Our need is to mature both in real understanding and in experience of the truth of God's purpose. It is vast in every direction. However high, or wide, or deep or long we go we will find that it is higher, wider, deeper and longer. Let's not be content with paddling at the edges of it. Let's pray that by God's Spirit we will be able to plunge into this ocean of God's plans and purposes for this universe and that he will increase our capacity to take in more and more.

### **4. To know the love of God that surpasses knowledge**

This is the second reference to love in the passage. It is not just that we are to be rooted in love, but we are to come to mature knowledge of the vastness of God's love. The vastness of a love that the more we know it the more we realise we don't know it.

When I was a child I knew my mum loved me. But my appreciation and understanding of this love deepened when I became a parent myself. Perhaps you've had the experience of sitting up all night with a child who is ill, and you wondered how you were ever going to go out to work in the morning. Perhaps you've struggled to get your child to eat what she should be eating. Perhaps your patience

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has been stretched to new limits as you have sought to cope with the energies of a strong-willed child as he seeks to defy the laws of gravity or deliberately provoke his brother! Such experiences always reminded me of what my own mother went through with me and this in turn gave me a glimpse of how much God must love me. The more I discover in life about myself, the more amazed I am at the love of God for someone as weak, struggling, insecure and inadequate as I find myself to be.

We can't know everything there is to know of the love of God, but we can know something and we can get to know more and more. Why is this so important for us? One of the big reasons we need to grow in our knowledge of the love of God is that it will bring greater security and inner peace in our relationship with God and we will find a new ability to cope with things that might have overwhelmed us when we first believed. Not because there is less pain, but because there is more knowledge of God's love and greater security in his sovereign grace.

Some of us are not there yet. Not yet mature, not yet all that we can be through the power of the Spirit. And we will never be unless it becomes so important to us that we make it a top priority for prayer, in the realisation that this is not something that we could ever achieve for ourselves. It will not happen simply by our wishing it to be so or by our self-discipline or our learning. We are dependent on the activity of the Spirit in our lives. Nor will it happen automatically. We need to ask. It is then that we will discover the truth of what Paul states: God will do much more than we can ask, think or imagine (v. 21). God has no shortage of resources!

We will soon be in eternity, perhaps sooner than we think. The opportunities to pray for the Spirit to work in us and through us in this life will be over. Let's make the most of the time God gives us to grow in the love of God and to make progress as God counts progress.

## **Question for discussion**

1. Summarise God's purpose in human history as revealed by Paul in Ephesians. Why is it important to know this and to understand it more and more fully?
2. How important a role does/should the local church play in our spiritual stability and development?
3. What does a review of our individual and group prayer life reveal about our priorities in prayer? How does this match up with Paul's priorities?
4. How does God's focus on the inner self clash with the focus of our culture?
5. Why do you think Paul places so much emphasis on the love of God? What is involved in both being rooted in God's love and growing in our knowledge of it?
6. What have been the main challenges of this study for you?

# Authority in prayer

When we come to prayer, what authority do we have? What expectation can we have that God will actually do what we ask?

This question was prompted in my own life by some of Jesus' statements that appear to promise that whatever we ask he will do. For example, when Jesus said, *"If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it"* (John 14:14). Is it really true? Is prayer a kind of blank cheque for whatever we want? I suspect most of us think it doesn't work like it sounds. Or else we blame ourselves for not having enough faith. Because all of us can point to things we have asked for, which have not been done for us. So what expectations can we have when it comes to praying?

## The disciples and the demon possessed boy

We are in good company with this question. In Matthew 17 we find the disciples also struggling when it came to the issue of authority in prayer.

Jesus had taken three of the disciples up a mountain and there his physical appearance transformed before them. These men, as Jesus had promised a week earlier, were given a glimpse of the reality of the eternal kingdom. They were given to see in quite spectacular fashion some of the sheer glory of Jesus, as his face shone like the midday sun and his clothes became brilliantly white. It was an awesome experience.

However, only three of the disciples witnessed it – Peter, James and John. The others were down at the bottom of the mountain trying to cope with a man who had come to them with his boy who was demon possessed:

*"When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. "Lord, have mercy on my son," he said. "He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me. Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you'" (Matthew 17:14-20).*

The disciples were unable to cast the demon out of the boy. Only when Jesus himself came down from the mountain and intervened, was the demon cast out. The disciples asked him privately: why could we not cast out the demon? Jesus did not say "because this is impossible for you since you are mere humans – I am the Son of God." Rather, he explained, it was because of their 'little faith': *"if you have*

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*faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you''' (Matthew 17:20).*

We read a similar statement in Mark, after the disciples were astonished that a fig tree that Jesus cursed actually withered up, Jesus responded, *"whatever things you ask in prayer, believe you have them and you shall have them"* (Mark 11:24).

## **How little is little?**

What did Jesus mean by *"your little faith"*? How little is little and how much is enough? Does it mean that our faith has to be 100% pure and strong every time in order for God to respond?

I really struggled with this in my teens, especially when it came to the question of my assurance of God's acceptance of me. I knew that a person is only saved by faith. But how much faith? The Bible says that the demons believe in God and they tremble. They couldn't possibly be saved. So we need stronger faith than that. So, I did my best and prayed as best I could that God would forgive and accept me. This was fine for a day or two, then the doubts started. So I prayed again, this time adding a few more theological words I had recently learned and as much passion and intent as I could muster. This satisfied me for a few more days but once again the doubts emerged. I had it in my mind that unless I believed 100% the right way, with faith levels at 100%, without the slightest doubt, I couldn't possibly be sure that God had accepted me. It wasn't until later, after various 'attempts' to believe that I realised my approach was turning faith into a work that I had to get completely right in order to merit salvation. And that couldn't possibly be right because salvation is a gift, *'not of works so that no one can boast'* (Ephesians 2:9).

I identified very much with the father who said to Jesus: *"Lord I believe, help my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24). It struck me then that Jesus didn't reply, *"Absolutely not – until you get your faith up to 100% strength I can never do anything for you!"* Of course not! He responded and saved his son.

When Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water at Jesus' invitation, it went well for a while. But then he began to waver. Jesus didn't let him drown, saying, *"Too bad! A pity you didn't have more faith."* He reached out his hand and pulled him to safety. Peter was a genuine believer. But mixed in with his faith there was also personal weakness, lack of understanding, over confidence in his own ideas, zeal of the kind that could lead a person to great personal sacrifice but which was not coming from trust in Christ. It is encouraging to learn from Jesus' rescue of Peter that he doesn't wait until we have our faith totally sorted before he acts. He will respond to the faintest flicker of genuine faith. But once he had Peter safely in the boat he was not slow to give him a short but pointed personal lecture on the fact that his faith had been weak when it shouldn't have been. Jesus did the same with his disciples in Matthew 17 and Mark 11.

This suggests two things. First, that there are situations when God responds to the simplest, feeblest spark of faith: for example, when it comes to receiving the gift of salvation God doesn't wait until our faith is at 100% strength before he responds. As the Bible expresses it, those who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. When we call on him from a genuine heart, we can be confident that he responds

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and makes us children of God.

Second, there are situations where God expects our faith to be stronger and for us to be decisive and not to dither around. For example, when it comes to stepping out in service for Christ, as Peter sought to do. This is the area where we have to be strong. We can't afford to waver around all over the place. It is where our faith needs to grow up. We need to be able to pray and act decisively. We need to come to God and pray not just with persistence but also with authority and expectation.

As parents, when our children were small, we wanted to provide an atmosphere of total security, in as far as it lay with us. We wanted the children to know that they were our children, we loved them and we always would. At the same time we wanted our children to mature so that they could take their own place in life and be responsible adults. A father who wants his daughter to take over the family business won't expect her when she is 30 and one of the directors of the company, to be dithering around, incapable of making a decision and full of insecurity. Otherwise the business will eventually collapse. Rather he seeks to bring her up confident in knowing what her father stands for, what his name means in business, confident in his goals and principles and able to act decisively without dithering around in order to be able to run the business according to her father's desire.

It's that kind of thing, it seems to me, that God is looking for and that Christ means in these particular circumstances as he trained his disciples to be his servants. He wanted them to grow up and to learn to exercise faith with authority and expectation.

## **Exercising faith with authority and expectation**

How then will we get strong faith? How do we grow up so that we can ask with authority and expectation that God will respond?

On his last evening with his disciples most if not all of what Jesus shared with them was designed to prepare them for the time when he would no longer physically be present with them. He was preparing them for mission and service. He was preparing them to act in faith and not to dither around in his physical absence.

Listen as he taught them a central principle: *"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it"* (John 14:13, 14). And again, *"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete"* (John 16:24). And again, *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you"* (John 15:7). The key principle is *learning to pray in the name of Jesus*.

What does this mean? Does it mean if I want a new house and ask for it in Jesus name, that I have the authority and therefore can have the expectation that I will receive it? And if I don't receive what I ask for, does the problem lie with me? Is the explanation that I don't have enough faith or emotional intensity or spiritual focus? The reality is that some of us have prayed for something with all the passion, all the faith and all the intensity that we can call on, without receiving what we wanted. So what does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus?

The context of these statements is that of the disciples' identity when it comes to

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servicing God. We have previously considered prayer in the context of our identity as children coming to a loving Father who knows what is best for us and will give us what is best – but loves to be asked! This is now a different context, explained by Jesus in terms of the disciples as branches in a vine and as the servant-friends of Christ. The context is one of work, of service, of producing something for God.

### **Branches in a vine**

We who believe on Christ relate to him as branches relate to the vine of which they are part. We are spiritually joined to him, incorporated into him like branches into a vine. The purpose of this relationship is made quite explicit: *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples”* (John 15:8). In other words, Christ provides the inner source of strength to produce through us the kind of fruit that brings delight to God. Like the sap that runs from the vine into the branches, Christ’s love, joy, words and strength flow to us as the resources we need to live our new life. The fruit, as Paul later explains, are qualities of Christian character known as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23).

It is in this context and with the production of this spiritual fruit in mind that Jesus says: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask anything in my name and it will be done for you”. As we allow the word to reveal to us what these qualities are that please God, we can then come and ask in the name of Jesus for the development of these qualities by the power of the Spirit in our lives. This will not happen automatically. We are not lumps of unthinking wood as branches are. We have real human personalities. So there is an invitation to ask: to come and ask in total confidence that God will respond.

### **Servant-friends of Jesus**

Jesus explains further (15:9-17). The disciples are the servant-friends of Christ, working together with him, under his direction. In fact, they are not just servants but friends. As Jesus explained, servants aren’t usually let in on the secrets and strategy of the boss. But this master, Jesus, has shared all that the Father has given him openly with them. At the same time they are not just friends but servants. To be a true friend of the Son of God is to do what he commands.

Friendship with the Son of God is the highest level of life that we could ever imagine. We are not ‘pals’ of a Jesus of the ‘Jesus is my best mate’ variety! He is Son of God. If he walked into the room we would fall on our faces before his glory. But he offers this special friendship. He has chosen us to be in his friendship circles as the loved and trusted servants next to the King.

### **Asking in the name of Jesus**

In the context of our service and work for him, we are invited to come and ask “in the name of Jesus”. What does this mean?

It is not a phrase we use at the end of a public prayer to indicate to others that we are finished praying. Rather it is the entire ground and basis of our praying as servants of the King. First, it means to ask *in his merit*, not in our own. It is good to

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think of that when it comes to prayer. It is not what we deserve, but what Christ deserves. My own merit would not get me very far! When it comes to God's work and purposes in the world, we can't imagine God saying, "You know, my Son Jesus deserves a lot – but he doesn't deserve that!" There is nothing that is too good for him.

Second, it means to ask *in his authority*, not in our own. If I came into your place of work and gave a directive in my name, it wouldn't mean a great deal! But if I came in the authority of the name of the CEO with a piece of paper bearing his name and signed by him you would pay more attention. Even then, if I said everyone is to get a 110% pay rise back dated ten years, you might of course like the idea, but you might want to check the signature because you know the CEO – a fair man, but not likely to do such a foolish thing that would put the company out of business! You would want to check with the CEO's own words.

What are the things to which the Lord Jesus would gladly put his name? Left to myself I can think of a long list of things I would like to happen. The trouble is that these things may not be on Christ's list. None of us naturally knows the things that would honour the name of Jesus in every situation. It is so easy to make our prayers self-serving. "Lord, it would really glorify your name if you would..." we pray, when in reality the honour of his name is not our first or ultimate thought.

We can be as convinced as Martha was when she asked Jesus to tell her sister to help her; or as the man was who asked Jesus to tell his brother to share the inheritance fairly with him; or as James and John were when they suggested that Jesus might want them to call down fire from heaven and burn up the Samaritans who opposed him. They were all wrong. We can so easily convince ourselves that the provision of a particular amount of money, or the healing of someone we love is exactly what the Lord wants. We may be wrong.

Listen again to Jesus: "*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask...*" I sometimes come across people who have not remained in close fellowship with Christ, who spend very little or any time with him but who, when a sudden crisis hits, come rushing to him with their request and expect him to give them what they ask. Their asking has not been shaped by personal fellowship with Christ or by intimacy with his purposes and ways. It takes time for us to get to know him and become acquainted with his desires. It takes time for the Word of God to shape our own thinking so that we are truly asking for what Christ would ask. We are not serving ourselves, but Christ! If I come to God, in the merit and authority of the name of his Son, asking for something that I can be absolutely sure Jesus would ask then I can ask with his authority and expect God to answer.

### **Authority in prayer: Acts 4**

On the same evening, when he was teaching his disciples to ask in his name, Jesus also warned them that in this world they would encounter opposition, some of it severe. It was only to be expected because of the world's hatred of Jesus himself. It did not take very long for Jesus' words to come true. The early presentations of the message of Christ in Jerusalem were met by increasing opposition from the Jewish leaders who, in an attempt to prevent the Apostles from teaching and preaching in

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the name of Jesus, had Peter and John imprisoned. This was followed by threats of worse to follow if they did not stop teaching and acting in the name of Jesus. Luke describes the response the disciples made:

*‘On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: ‘Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.’ Indeed Herod and Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly’ (Acts 4:23-31).*

The first instinct of the disciples was to pray. How did they pray? Did it sound like this: “God, if it wouldn’t be too much to ask, and it might possibly be in your will, would you consider possibly glorifying the name of your Son in this situation and vindicate him?” Absolutely not! There was no dithering! It didn’t matter how powerful the opposition was. They approached God in confidence with authority.

First, they let their minds focus on who God is, the Creator of heaven and earth. Their sense of the vastness of God put the human opposition they were facing in perspective. We can certainly learn from that. How important it is, whatever challenge we are facing, as we seek to produce the fruit of the Spirit in our life, as we seek to act decisively for God whatever the opposition, that we turn and focus our minds on the reality of who God is as the Creator. And not just as Creator but as the one who is sovereign and in control.

Second, they focussed their minds on what God had himself recorded in Scripture. God had said that the leaders of the earth would get together in opposition against God and his Messiah. And he had told them what he would do: he would mock their attempts. What a slap in the face it was for all their scheming against Jesus when God raised him from the dead and then brought him to his right hand in heaven! It was the declared desire and purpose and will of God to vindicate and glorify Jesus.

Third, they prayed in the name of Jesus. They prayed that they would have the courage to speak the message with all boldness. That God would do signs and wonders to vindicate his Son. God responded, they continued to share the Word, and God did powerful things.

What a challenge to us as we face our particular part in what God is doing in the world. We will face situations where we can’t afford to dither, like Peter did on the water and almost sank as a result. We need to go forward in faith.

They prayed for boldness. Some, like Peter, had more outgoing personalities than

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others. But going forward in faith despite the opposition was not about having a particular type of personality. All of the disciples needed God to strengthen and encourage them.

We don't always know what way God will work out the details but that did not appear to concern them. We notice, for example, that they didn't pray that the opposition would stop. They didn't tell God exactly what he had to do. They knew God's objective - to honour and vindicate his Son – and that was enough. God sent his Spirit into the world to convict people that they are wrong and that Jesus is right; that God has raised him from the dead; that he has invited him to take his rightful place at the right hand of the eternal throne in the universe; that he will one day stage his return as Lord and King, at whose name every knee will bow. We are invited to pray with all the authority of the name of Christ in the expectation that God will act in response to our prayer.

In our work in the church we don't always know what next we should pray for. Over the years I have prayed about many details that in the end proved to be only my ideas of what God might do. But the overall goals for the church are clear: God wants his people to grow up in their faith, to grow to full maturity – to become conformed to the image of his Son.

This does not happen automatically. The Holy Spirit himself prays for us according to God's purposes. And we also are invited to come boldly to God and pray with all the authority of the name of the Lord Jesus that God would fulfil his purposes here in our lives. God is not a genie who answers us if we rub the lamp with enough prayer and grants us three wishes for whatever we want. Prayer is about his purposes, not ours. As we allow his Word to shape our desires and ambitions concerning what will truly be to God's honour in our lives and in the church we will grow in our experience of authority in prayer.

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## Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think the disciples had such little faith? How can we grow our faith?
2. What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus?
3. Summarise what it means for us to pray in the name of Jesus.
4. Give examples of things that we can pray for with confidence knowing that we can pray them in the name of Jesus?
5. What are the key lessons to learn about how the believers prayed in Acts 4? Why do you think they didn't pray for God to change their circumstances? What were their priorities?
6. Are there any lessons here for us regarding corporate prayer? Presumably more than one person prayed and yet Luke is able to summarise the praying of the entire gathering. What does this reveal, for example about their unity of heart, understanding and purpose?
7. In light of our own context in Belfast/Newtownabbey and the opposition we face here to the Gospel, what are the major priorities for corporate prayer?

# Praying for others

At the heart of Christianity is a two-way relationship with the living God in which God speaks with us chiefly through his Word and we speak to him in prayer. We have been learning about prayer, and especially learning from our struggles in prayer, by turning to the Bible and looking at examples of people in prayer. The challenge we will look at here is *how we can be more effective in praying for others*.

From the example and commands of the New Testament it is clear that praying for others is a major part of a healthy prayer life both individually and as a church. This is what Paul wrote to his friend and colleague Timothy who, at the time, had a challenging and complex role in the church at Ephesus:

*'I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:1-4).*

Praying for others flows out of our understanding of the character of God himself. God is described here as God our Saviour, who wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. On this basis we are invited to join him in that desire by praying for others, and especially for our rulers and all in authority, not only that through their leadership we are able to live in peace and godliness but also that they might be saved.

So much of the praying in the New Testament consists of prayer for others, what is often called "intercession" or "intercessory prayer" (i.e. "to intervene on behalf of another" or "coming to God on behalf of others"). Most of us struggle with this kind of praying for at least three reasons. We struggle with our hearts: we are often so preoccupied with our own problems, or those of our family, that there is little room left for anyone else. Second, we struggle with the content: we are not exactly sure what we should pray for others and we end up with 'God bless everyone' prayers. Third, we struggle with finding the time: it is hard enough to factor prayer into the busyness of daily life, let alone organising ourselves to praying for others.

In this chapter we are going to consider each of these challenges to effective prayer for others. But before looking at some of the practical steps we can take I would like us first to be encouraged and have our hearts inspired by looking at Jesus in prayer for his disciples.

## The example of Jesus

On the evening when he was betrayed, before he endured trial, torture and eventual death on the cross, John tells us that Jesus spent much of that evening in prayer for his disciples. This was not uncommon. Luke in particular refers to Christ's

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prayer life and tells us that he often would slip away to a lonely place to pray. Only rarely are we told what he prayed – until John 17. For here Jesus deliberately allows his disciples to listen in so that they will be encouraged and their hearts filled with joy (John 17:3).

That will be the effect on us if we take the time to read through how he prayed for his friends. Space doesn't allow us to consider the prayer in detail here – a whole book could be written on this prayer. Here are some of the highlights. Jesus prays first for their security in his name and all that his name represents. He prays for their protection from the evil one. He prays that they will be set apart for God by his Word of truth. He prays for their spiritual oneness, which was fulfilled with the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when they were all baptised in the Spirit into the Body of Christ and when all received the same Spirit to live within them.

At the end of his prayer we listen to him saying these fantastic words to the Father: *'I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory'* (v.24). Here he was praying not only for the men in front of them but for all who would come to believe on him down through the ages as the message went out into the world. In other words he was praying this for us. As we reflect on this it should give us an enormous sense of security: the Son of God asking the Father to ensure that we will be with him eternally and share in his glory. We can be sure that what the Son asks for he receives!

### **Luke 22:31, 32**

We have another example of Jesus praying for others in Luke 22. On this occasion he prayed for an individual, Simon Peter. In the course of all his teaching he turned to Peter and said: *"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers"* (Luke 22: 22, 23). Jesus knew precisely what Peter was like, his strengths and his weaknesses. He also knew exactly what was about to happen to him. And foreseeing the battle Peter was about to enter, Jesus prays specifically for him.

Jesus knew that Peter would fail in battle. He knew that he would deny three times his association with Jesus. He explained this also to Peter. But Peter was not in a receptive mood. He was convinced that Jesus was wrong about him. Even if all the others ran away, he never would, he claimed. In fact Peter believed he was ready to go both to prison and to death itself for Jesus. He certainly would never deny him. But he did. It was a devastating experience for Peter and potentially life shattering. So we should pay particular attention to precisely what it was Jesus prayed for. He prayed that his faith would not fail.

Everything else for Peter failed that night: his courage, his self-control, his zeal for Christ, his witness, even his language. But Jesus didn't pray for those things. He prayed for his faith. For faith is what joins us to God. If his faith could be broken, Peter would have ceased to be a believer. But Jesus prayed for him. And while everything else failed and to all appearances Peter was not a follower of Jesus, deep down he never ceased to believe. It was something that Peter would never forget. He owed everything to the fact that Jesus prayed for him.

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What Jesus did for Peter, he does for us all. Hebrews 7:25 says, *'He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to **intercede** for them.'* I wonder do we ever think about what Jesus is currently doing. We know what he has done: he came into our world, he lived, he died, he was raised again from the dead and has now gone back to be with the Father. We know also what he will do: one day he will come again. But what is he doing now? Here is one of the things he is doing: he prays for us. Jesus is our eternal High Priest whose task and joy it is to come to God on our behalf and talk to God about us by name.

To explain this further, the writer uses an illustration that God himself had given them, namely, that of the Old Testament High Priest. In the God-designed ritual of the temple the particular function of the High Priest was to represent the people before God. When he came to pray on behalf of the people he wore special clothes. This included a special breastplate, which was embroidered with 12 precious stones, each engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes. And on his shoulders he carried two shoulder pieces, each with a single precious stone. On each of the two stones were likewise engraved the names of the tribes – six on one stone and six on the other.

The symbolism of this arrangement was clear for all to understand. When the High Priest came to the Altar of Incense in the Temple to pray for the people he was literally carrying the names of the tribes both on his shoulders and over his heart before the Lord. It was very meaningful to the people at the time. God was interested in them by name. And they had someone who was able to represent them in this personal way before God.

According to the writer of Hebrews this arrangement was a foreshadowing or picture in advance of a greater reality. What is that reality? The key point, we are told (Hebrews 8:1), is that we have a high priest to represent us to God. He is by far superior to the High Priest in the Temple. Our high priest is none other than the Son of God who always lives to make intercession for us. This means that if you are a follower of Jesus, you need to know that Jesus carries your name on his heart before the Father. He is utterly committed to you – to your support and development.

In my struggles with prayer, I find it so encouraging to remind myself again and again that Jesus prays for me. He does not have my struggles in prayer! He has room in his heart for me: he carries my name on his heart. He has no difficulty knowing what he should pray for me. He knows exactly what I need and prays for me according to the will of God. And he has no problems in his organisation of time! In addition to holding the universe together by his powerful Word, he has time for me: and my name doesn't slip off his list and get forgotten. I find that enormously encouraging, and I hope you do too.

## **The example of Paul**

Paul's letters are full of prayers. Some are prayers of praise and thanksgiving. But primarily we see Paul in prayer for people. Let's consider one more of his prayers as we think through the challenges we face in praying for others. This one is found right at the beginning of his letter to his friends in Philippi.

*'I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I*

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*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 1:3-13).*

Paul had people on his heart. For him prayer was the natural expression of his compassionate concern for others. He had been involved in establishing the church in Philippi and as a result knew personally many of the people to whom he was writing. And yet when we come to other letters, such as Colossians, we find that he prayed just as fervently for those he had not yet met.

### **Challenge 1: making room in our heart for others**

This brings us back to the first element of our struggle: making room in our heart for others. We naturally think of praying for our family and close friends. It is often hard for us to find room to pray much beyond that, for example for the wider membership of the church and perhaps especially for the people with whom we have no natural affinity. The New Testament challenges this. While we mustn't equate love for God with love for people, it remains true that one of the measures of the reality of our claim to love God is the reality of our love for others.

If we are committed to Christ, we are committed to what he is committed to. Christ is committed to his people. He loves the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, mature, and grown up. Even now he always lives to make intercession for his people.

We see a similar heart in the apostle Paul. He is personally overwhelmed by the love of the Son of God for him and committed himself to what the Son of God is committed to. When we allow the Spirit to pour out the love of God in our hearts we will discover that God's love opens up our affections and allows us to make room in our hearts for all that God loves.

### **Challenge 2: knowing what to pray**

One of the best ways of learning to pray is to follow the example of others, and especially the inspired examples the New Testament gives us. Of course we can (and should) pray for the specific needs as we know them. But in addition, the prayers of the New Testament provide detailed and varied guidance as to what to pray for others.

When I was little and first taught how to pray by my mother my daily prayer began like this: "God bless daddy and mummy and [insert the names of my three siblings and sundry others] and make me a good boy. Amen!" I wasn't quite sure what 'bless' meant except that it meant I was praying for their good. At least God knew what it meant. The habit of praying for others stayed with me. Unfortunately so did the

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word 'bless'! As I grew older another word crept in: 'just'. So the phrases rolled off my tongue: "Father, I just ask you to bless... Lord I just ask you to bless..." I'm sure the Lord was happy to hear me pray but perhaps my conversation could have been a little more interesting? In any case, I made a decision to try to eradicate both words from my praying vocabulary. It was tough! I had actually got used to not thinking much further about what others might actually need in terms of 'blessing'.

It was then that I began to discover the prayers in the New Testament, especially the letters. And over the years they have become more and more part not just of my vocabulary but also of my thinking. Increasingly they have shaped the way I pray.

I discovered that Paul never simply prays, "Lord bless the Philippians" – not even "Lord, *just* bless the Philippians"! Rather he takes time to think through before God what precisely the Philippians need. His praying is specific. His mind has been shaped by his knowledge of the Lord and of his Word to the point where he knows what to pray.

So, instead of praying, for example, "Lord, bless the elders" – not a bad prayer (they certainly would welcome blessing!) – I would pray, "Lord, may the elders grow in their love for you, for each other and the church, in all knowledge and depth of insight..." using the language of Philippians. Doing this radically changed the way I talk with God.

### **Paul's prayer for the Philippians**

Let's take a moment to look in more detail at exactly what Paul prays for his friends at Philippi. He prays that their evident love would increase in all knowledge and depth of insight, to the end that: they will be able to discern what is best; they will be pure and blameless until Jesus returns; and they will live fruitful, productive, positive lives to the glory of God.

Paul is not simply praying for more love as an end in itself. Nor even for more love and understanding as an end in themselves. These are means to an end. He prays for these things so that his friends at Philippi will be able to *discern* what is best. That's the centre of his prayer. In other words, he prays that they would be able to make wise choices – to choose the very best at every decision and crossroads of their life. This will lead to purity of life and it will lead to living a full, productive, fruitful life to the glory of God.

What a great way to pray for people! What a great way to pray for a whole church including for ourselves! Don't we want to be a growing, maturing church, heading for what is best? Without the ability to discern and choose what is best, we will not grow in holiness and we will not grow in fruitfulness. How will they (and we) develop the ability to discern what is best? Paul sets out some important steps.

Love must increase in knowledge and depth of insight. We don't always naturally see the connection between love on one hand and knowledge and insight on the other. Knowledge without love becomes harsh. But love without knowledge descends quickly into sentimentality. It is not true to say "All you need is love!" We can see the importance of knowledge and insight if we put their opposites into the sentence. In other words, should we pray that love would increase in ignorance and lack of understanding; or that love would increase in stupidity and ineptitude? Of

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course not. Love and knowledge go hand in hand.

If love does not increase in knowledge and depth of insight, we will not achieve what is best in our individual lives or in our life as a church because we will not have the necessary discernment. There are countless issues both in individual and church life where the answers are not simple, not immediately obvious and where it is not a matter of choosing right from wrong. These are issues where we need to be able to weigh up options and choose what is best. To do this love must increase and increasingly be shaped by knowledge and insight. It is vitally important to develop a Christian mind; a worldview that is biblical, an ability to assess everything by God's truth and deepening insight and understanding based on increasing knowledge of the mind of God.

Without this we will neither discern nor choose what is best in many of the challenging areas of life: how we invest our time; how we maintain a godly life balance; what we do with our financial resources; how we strengthen our relationships; how we influence others to seek and do God's will.

### **Challenge 3: finding the time**

I'm not sure how much help I can be with the challenge of factoring prayer into busy lives. We are all different and one approach will not fit everyone. We could start with the obvious: we all have exactly the same amount of time. Second, we all have all the time there is. Third, time is limited for all of us.

The problem comes with how we use it. And here it is to some extent a matter of choice. I say to *some extent* because we have to be realistic. For most of us a large part of our day is planned for us. It is planned by children's schedules, the demands of daily work, medical appointments and many other things. But within that structure we also all have choices. What we choose to do with our time really matters.

In chapter 2 we considered the incident involving Mary and Martha. In her zeal to serve the Lord, Martha allowed good things to become the enemy of the best things. Jesus told her that fundamentally spending time with him was a matter of priorities and choice. Yes, they needed to eat. But they didn't need to eat quite so many courses! In the end what Martha appeared to value most was her own feelings of fulfilment and achievement in her service rather than spending time listening to Jesus.

At the very least we should carefully review the choices we make and what they reveal about our values. We should also look for the time thieves. Work tends to expand to fill the time available. Can we work more efficiently? Hobbies are good and healthy in their place. The trouble is they don't always keep to their place! The more gadgets we have the more time we need to spend learning how they work, using them and maintaining them. Are they all really necessary?

If we don't plan to pray we will pray much less than we should. Prayer will be inconsistent and we will not grow and mature in it.

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## Questions for discussion

1. Why is it important to pray for kings and all those in authority? What does that mean in our local context?
2. Why do we need Jesus to pray for us as our High Priest? How do you respond to the fact that the Lord Jesus is praying for you?
3. What can we learn from Christ's praying for us when it comes to how we pray for one another?
4. What are the main things we can learn from how Paul prayed for his friends in Philippi?
5. What do you think about the comments on 'bless' and 'just'? Do you agree that the overuse of certain words and phrases can get in the way of more thoughtful and meaningful prayer? Have you noticed any other words or phrases that are overused and potentially unhelpful?
6. Share ideas for how prayer for others can become a regular and systematic part of our life? How should we decide who goes on our 'list'? Should we have a list? How might we organise our praying for others when there are potentially so many?

## Prayer's reward

In this final chapter we are returning to the issue we raised in the first: why bother with prayer? Only this time I would like to put the question differently: what is the ultimate reward of prayer?

Our first response to this question is probably: when we see positive answers to our prayers. Many of us have experienced the thrill of clear and positive answers to prayer. Of course, some are cynical about this. To them so-called 'answers' to prayer are merely coincidences. I'm reminded of the famous words of Archbishop Temple in reply to similar cynicism: "When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don't, they don't!"

God answers prayer. We have already considered some particular requests that God has committed himself always to answer, whenever we come to him. In addition there are other requests that we have made, which God has not committed always to answer positively but which he has been gracious to grant in keeping with his purposes. Perhaps we think of the words Zechariah heard from the angel in the Temple: "*God has heard your prayer! Your wife Elizabeth will give you a son*" (Luke 1: 13, New Living). God's historic promise to send the forerunner of Messiah was to be fulfilled through Zechariah and Elizabeth as God incorporated their story into his. At the same time we have also discovered that God's ways are not always our ways; that sometimes heaven is silent; that sometimes God makes us wait; that sometimes he teaches us that his grace is sufficient for us.

When the 72 returned after their mission (see Luke 10) they reported back excitedly about all the wonderful things they had experienced. Jesus, however, pointed to a different focus for celebration: "... *do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven*" (Luke 10:20). The chief ground of our confidence is not to be in the results that attend our praying, but in the security we have in God's acceptance. Especially in those more barren times, when we experience little in the way of tangible results, these words bring healthy balance and a place for our hearts to rest in times of waiting.

### **Jesus and the reward of prayer**

It was the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount who raised the question of prayer's reward: "*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*"

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*Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him”*  
(Matthew 6:5-8).

Jesus here highlights two false attitudes to prayer: that of the *hypocrites* who pray to be seen and that of the *pagans* who think they will be heard because of their proficiency and quantity in prayer. In both attitudes, the question of the reward of prayer is central. In the case of the hypocrites, they think the reward is to be admired by others. Whereas in the case of the pagans, they think the reward is to get what they want by long-winded application of their prayer rituals until God eventually does what they want.

According to Jesus both clearly miss the point. But what is the point? What is the true reward of prayer? Let's think a little more about these false approaches to prayer.

### **The hypocrite's attitude to prayer**

The basic meaning of the Greek word for hypocrite is “play actor”. Religious hypocrites pray for show. Although they *appear* to be talking to God, they are actually playing to the public gallery. They use fine phrases and grand theological terms to impress, along with pious look and deep, well timed sighs. Their real focus is on the approval of the crowd.

In short, hypocrites turn communication with the one true God of the universe into a means of showing off to people. No doubt Jesus had seen this in the synagogues as services there were frequently preceded with a time for personal devotions of prayer to God. And unless he was exaggerating for effect, he saw it also on the street corners (Matthew 6:5). Such people received exactly the reward they went in for: the admiration of the people who saw and heard them. “What a godly man!” the awestruck listeners might have said. “What wonderful praying! That man must really be close to God!” This made the hypocrites feel really good about themselves. And that was where the benefit ended: it was the only reward they were ever going to get. It wasn't true prayer; it was playacting. God was invoked but he wasn't involved.

Don't do that, says Christ. Don't fall into the trap these hypocrites have fallen into. Our hearts can easily deceive us and it is possible for anyone of us to turn praying into a show of personal piety and theological expertise when praying in a public setting. Yes, we talk to God – but we can't help wondering what those listening think of our wonderfully constructed prayers and look forward to the approving “*amens*” and even positive commendations afterwards from those who heard us. We need to ask ourselves whether we are talking with God, or putting on a show to impress our friends.

One way of checking the authenticity of our prayer life is by making sure that a large proportion of it takes place in private, where only God is our witness. As someone who is active in leadership and in the public ministry of the church I have discovered that it is all too possible to neglect private prayer but continue to be active in public prayer, as if on continuous intimate terms with God.

Christ's words don't mean we should forget about everyone around us when praying in public. When Paul teaches about different kinds of participation, including prayer, in corporate church settings he explains that the motivating factor is that “*all*

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*of these should be done for the strengthening of the church” (1 Cor. 14:26).* In other words, all teaching, singing and praying should strengthen and build up those who hear it. For that is the loving thing to do.

So when it comes to public prayer: first, we should use language that those around us understand so that they can say “amen” to it (a word from Hebrew which means to agree, to associate ourselves with something). Second, we should chose content for our public praying that will encourage, strengthen and build up those who hear. Third, and most important, we should ensure that the motivation for all public participation, and not just praying, is love.

Public prayer is not to be a hypocritical show but genuine communication with God, which is also a means of encouraging and building up our brothers and sisters.

### **The pagan attitude to prayer**

The problem with the pagan attitude to prayer is not so much the motivation to be admired by others, although no doubt that enters the picture. Rather it lies in their false and pagan concept of what God is like. The pagan god has to be cajoled, brow beaten and pressurised. The pagan approach to prayer is based on the belief that constant repetition of the same phrases will eventually prevail upon their god to turn his ear to them and give them what they seek.

This is very different from the kind of persistence in prayer that the New Testament encourages and which we will consider in the next chapter. In the right context persistence is good. In the wrong context it is empty and betrays a pagan approach to prayer.

The context of these warnings is Jesus’ teaching on coming to God as Father (as verses 6 and 8 make explicit). Now if it is really true that God the Father only responds to his children if they persist to the point where he feels obliged to give them what they want, the Christian life would be very bleak indeed. Think of what it would mean. It would mean that although God knows what his children need he is reluctant to provide for them and only those who ask loudest and longest will receive from him!

It is true that sometimes an earthly parent will give in to constant pressure like that – I know I have! But is that what God is really like? If he were, what kind of heaven would we expect? It would be a heaven spoiled by the suspicion that God was holding out on us. We would suspect him of being ungenerous and reluctant to provide.

That is not God. Think for a moment of what he has already given without being asked. I didn’t suggest to God that he should send his Son into the world to die for my sin. Nor did I suggest to him that he should raise me and seat me in heavenly places with Christ. And it wasn’t my idea to plan an eternal kingdom and provide me with the opportunity to trust Christ and be part of that kingdom. It would therefore be very strange if, for much smaller things, we have to cajole God and twist his arm before he would give us what we need.

God is a loving Father. We don’t have to badger him, pray long prayers, or repeat requests endlessly to pressure him through much asking into giving what he otherwise does not want to give. God is God. He doesn’t need to be informed. He

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knows and sees everything. He knows what we need before we ask. Yet he encourages us to come and ask.

When I was very small I liked ice cream. (I still do.) My mum occasionally would go to the local shop and buy some, placing it in the freezer. She knew that sooner or later I would come and ask if I could have some. She had already made provision for that. But she wanted me to learn to ask because, even in simple things such as enjoying ice-cream, she didn't want it to be a matter simply of my taking it but of my developing a relationship with her.

Now there were occasions when she said 'no' to my request. And at that moment to my childish mind she was the worst mother in the world! But she had a greater consideration than my liking for ice cream. She knew that to give me ice cream every time I asked would not be good for me. She loved me enough to say 'no'. She loved me enough to run the risk of her son not liking her because he misunderstood. She knew that one day I would understand.

Occasionally my mother did give in to my pestering. But God will never do that. Not because he isn't loving but because in his love he does not allow sentiment to cloud his judgement or obscure his purposes. He is prepared to endure our disappointments, resentments and misunderstandings. He wants us to develop a relationship with him, to learn to trust his judgement and wisdom and to get to know him deeply as a person. Ten thousand years from now we will be grateful that he did. As we look back then on the things we thought we needed we will say thank you to him for not giving them to us because in his love he sought to teach us the big things, not the little things.

## **The real reward of prayer**

This brings us to the heart of our subject. God invites us to come and ask because he wants us to learn to value not only the gifts but the Giver as well. He wants us to build a relationship with him and to discover what he is like as a Person. This is the true reward for prayer. Not simply what he gives us but **God himself**.

It was like this with my father. He encouraged me to come and ask him for things. And occasionally he gave me what I asked! But for him that was not the prime object of the conversation. The main goal for him was to build a relationship. And sometimes through talking I would discover that the thing I had come to ask about really wasn't what I needed. On other occasions I would end up forgetting what it was that I had come for in the first place!

Unfortunately for some people conversations are little more than negotiations. They know what they want and they know the other person well enough to know what buttons to press. The reward of conversation is to get what they want. And when they get it they move on, until the next time they need something. Even at a human level this is ultimately unsatisfactory. It doesn't build genuine relationship and ends up with people feeling used. If we try that with God, not only will it not work in terms of what we want: it will not work in terms of what we need, and that is genuine relationship with him.

After God had liberated his people from their slavery in Egypt he asked them to assemble before him so that he could speak with them. These words lie at the heart

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of what he said: *"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself"* (Exodus 19:4). The goal of the Exodus was not simply to bring the people to the Promised Land but to bring the people to God himself. Even as they travelled God had them construct a special portable temple as a dwelling for him so that he could presence himself among them. This has always been God's purpose: to dwell with people so that they know him and live in communion with him. And it always will be. As the Book of Revelation expresses it: *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God"* (Revelation 21:3).

We are to come with our requests. More than that, we are to stay to talk, to do what the Old Testament describes as 'waiting upon the Lord' for the chief reward of prayer is relationship with God himself.

### **Waiting upon the Lord**

Isaiah 40:29-31 tells us that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength: *"He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."*

The context of these famous words was the Babylonian exile, which was God's just discipline because of their repeated unfaithfulness and rebellion against him. They were also given in the context of God's promise that one day he would bring them back to their land, back to Jerusalem and that a king from David's line would come and bring peace, not just to Jerusalem but to the whole world. Some of the Jews did indeed return to the city. By God's help they rebuilt the city and its temple. But the rebuild was on nothing like the scale and magnificence of what had been promised. The city and its people continued to experience a precarious existence, struggling for food and survival as little more than pawns of the super powers that surrounded them. This in turn led to widespread disappointment and disillusionment.

However, the prophets came with the message declaring that God meant what he said but that they would have to learn to wait on the Lord. In other words, they were to hope in the Lord. Hope means, by definition, that the desired event doesn't happen now. We hope for things that we don't yet have or see because they are things still in the future. Hope means trusting that God will do it. It means being prepared to wait for God to do it in his own good time.

But that is hard. Hope deferred makes the heart sick and often results in our thinking that God has forgotten about us. This is illustrated in Isaiah 40:27: *"Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"*. Israel felt that God was no longer interested in the case they had presented to him. We can feel the same when God appears to be silent after our persistent praying. We begin to think he is tired of us, has gone to sleep and forgotten all about us.

What do we truly believe about God? Does he fall asleep on the job? Does he forget? The prophet is adamant that God doesn't grow weary and doesn't forget:

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*"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom"* (v. 28). God knows our case. He knows all our circumstances, suffering and disappointments.

But then we might ask, 'If this is true, why then does he ask us to wait?' The answer comes in these words of the prophet Isaiah: *'those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.'* Renew means change; like taking off an old coat and changing into a new one. What is renewed? Our strength, not our circumstances. And such change of strength often comes in the middle of difficult circumstances while we are waiting.

### **Changing our strength not our circumstances**

In the waiting God makes us stronger. When children start school they often struggle both with the demands of learning and with their fellow pupils. Sometimes their circumstances become overwhelming to the point where they plead with the parents: "please don't make me go". This can be heart breaking for parents as well as traumatic for the children. But the parents know that if their kids don't learn to face this, it will be harder for them to face even bigger things. Looking back I am glad my parents made me face the early struggles I had with school and didn't allow me to stay in the lovely warmth of the nursery, playing with toys!

God wants us to grow up! He wants us to learn to live in the real world and grow into mature adults who have learned to trust him even in difficult circumstances.

Are we becoming tired and weary, lacking strength? Isaiah tells us: *"Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing"* (Isaiah 40:26). God invites us to take in this awesome sight. He invites us to take our eyes off our own circumstances for a moment, look up at the universe and ask what brilliance it was that thought it up and what power it is that maintains it. Certainly not ours! Just as God calls the stars by name (all the millions upon millions of them), so also he knows my name and your name.

God has designed a salvation for us that includes an eternal future where we will share in the government of the universe to come. For the moment he is asking us to wait and hope in him, so that our strength changes rather than our circumstances; so that we receive power to cope with our circumstances; so that we learn to rise up like eagles do; so that we keep running and not get weary; so that we keep walking and not collapse with exhaustion.

It is worth the wait. One day we will run the universe with Christ. In preparation for that task God wants us to change our strength, to grow and develop. When we see what he always had in mind for us, we will understand why he asked us to learn to hope in him. We need to let the magnificence of creation put the very real difficulties of life into their true perspective: so that we find new strength, hope and courage, until the time when God moves in answer to our prayer.

Come to God. Talk with him. Discuss the universe with him. For the true reward of prayer is not the things God gives, but God himself!

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## Questions for discussion

1. What are the key differences between genuine praying and play-acting in prayer? What are the particular pitfalls of public prayer? How can we distinguish between playing to the crowd and loving others in public prayer?
2. How might a 'pagan' approach to prayer reveal itself?
3. The main teaching of this chapter is that the true reward of prayer is God himself? What does this mean to you?
4. What does it mean to wait on the Lord? Why is it important? What does it look like in practice? How should we respond when God does not answer our prayers the way we would like but tells us to wait?
5. As this is the last session of our series, take some time to review the main learning points and challenges you have experienced and share them with one another.