



THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER

The priority of prayer

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday evening, 5th November 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: 1 John 5:14-15

Introduction

Since the end of September we have been considering the topic and practice of prayer.

Prayer: Autumn Bible study series

- The **purpose** of prayer
- The **privilege** of prayer
- The **power** of prayer
- The **principles** of prayer
- **Persistent** prayer
- The **priority** of prayer

First, we looked at the purpose of prayer, then the privilege that it is to come into the presence of our holy God. Then, we looked at the power of prayer, considering the example of Daniel. Then more recently we looked back at the Lord's, or rather disciple's prayer, considering the principles of prayer. Then last week we spent some time thinking about what it means to be persistent in prayer.

Tonight, as we round out this series, we're going to consider the *priority* of prayer. And as we consider the priority it *should* have, we'll do well to consider whether it *does* have that priority in our individual lives, and in the life of this church.

Why should prayer be a priority?

So then, let's start by asking why prayer should be a priority in the first place. Simply put, prayer is communion with God — it is both talking to Him, and hearing from Him. It is that sweet fellowship with Him that existed in the Garden of Eden until mankind fell, and it is therefore what Jesus restored by paying for our sin. That is, those that put their faith and trust in the completed work of Christ, can now approach God in confidence, with their relationship with Him restored. No need to offer sacrifices, or go through a priest. The fact that this fellowship with Him is so central to why Jesus died for us, should be reason enough to prioritise it in our lives.

Indeed, given all that Christ did for us, we should *want* this relationship with Him, out of *gratitude* to Him — drawing ourselves close to Him, going to Him in both our times of plenty, and times of difficulty (and not forgetting our first love). This closeness to Christ should prompt the same desire to pray as the disciples had — for they didn't ask Jesus how to preach, how to run ministries, or how to love others (as important as those things are), but rather the one thing they asked Jesus to teach them to do was how to pray. And we already looked at the disciples prayer that He gave to them, saying “when you pray, pray *like* this...”. Not exactly this, but *like* this.

But beyond that sweet communion we can now enjoy with our heavenly Father, there are also innumerable reasons to pray. Both in thankfulness for all God has done — not only in saving us but in our individual lives — but also in our needs, for they are many! To neglect to take our needs to Him is kind of crazy, for we have such a loving God. We read in Peter's first letter:

1 Peter 5:6-7

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

And more than mere invitation, we're even instructed to pray — to pray without ceasing, and to continue steadfastly in prayer.

Why don't we prioritise prayer?

Why, then, don't we prioritise prayer? Simply put, when we don't prioritise a particular thing, it's because we're prioritising something else. That might be our jobs, our families, our hobbies. It might be social media, music, films, TV, or sports. It might even be the busyness of ministry.

Another reason we don't prioritise prayer may be because we don't see the need for it. We don't look up from our phones enough to notice that people are dying without knowing Jesus as their Saviour. We don't give it a second thought that so many of the trials around us are manmade, and if only people knew the Lord, and they obeyed Him, their lives would work out so differently. We struggle to understand the Bible, and don't consider that we could and should be going to the Lord to ask Him to reveal more of Himself to us. We dither and dally around what decision to make, and forget to ask the Lord for His leading. But prayer needs to be a priority in all these things — that the gospel might be shared, that we might grow in the Lord, and that we might honour Him in all we do.

I think there's further reason, if we're honest, that we don't pray. And that is our hearts are unthankful. We forget what great lengths Christ went to in order to pay for our sin. We forget how kind and gracious God has been to us in our lives. We forget how wonderfully He has blessed us as a church family over the years.

And then, perhaps most worryingly of all, perhaps we don't prioritise prayer because we've accepted the lie that it is ineffective. We think we'll get by far better by our own efforts, rather than surrendering everything to the Lord in prayer. Maybe we think God isn't interested in our problems, when that couldn't be further from the truth, for He is the God who sees — just as we looked at this morning — and He never wastes a single tear we shed.

Finally, we don't prioritise prayer because we just don't feel like doing it. We don't pray because we think we're not close enough to God — yet ironically, we don't feel close to God because we're not praying regularly. But what do we read in James?

James 4:8a

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...

What a wonderful promise that is. It's one we need to take God up on! RA Torrey had this to say:

When we feel least like praying is the time we need most to pray. Many of the most blessed seasons of prayer I have ever known have begun with a feeling of utter deadness and prayerlessness, but in my helplessness and coldness I have cast myself upon God.

RA Torrey

Our reasons for not prioritising prayer are shallow at best.

How do we make prayer a priority?

So how do we help ourselves?

Some of it comes down to the simple things — such as routine and commitment. Practical aids can help — from a post-it note on your fridge, to a reminder on your phone. You can even get apps to prompt you to pray for a variety of topics or people at different times. Prayminder is a good one. My Dad even used the "Time to stand up" reminder on his watch to remember to pray for Judah while Siân was pregnant with him. We can help and encourage each other in these things — maybe after the service ask someone what they find helpful in remembering to pray.

But most of what we need is not post-its or apps, but to be grounded in God's Word — the Bible. You see, if we are reading the Word regularly, if we are reading what it tells us to pray for, if we're looking at the examples of prayer in it — then I really don't think we'll fail to be left with a lasting impression, even a lasting desire to pray. So as we go through the remainder of our study this evening, we're going to take a look at the pattern of prayer seen in the early church in the book of Acts, we're going to look at what things were prayed for in the early church, and then the specific requests and instructions to pray throughout the New Testament.

I intend to make minimal comment on these verses, because I think it is helpful for us to realise *how much* the Bible has to say on this.

Examples in Acts — a pattern of prayer

Starting in the book of Acts, in the very first chapter, and *immediately* after Jesus ascended into Heaven, we find Jesus disciples (and not just the 12) gathered together for prayer. It was the first thing they did! We read:

Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey. And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Following Pentecost, the church grew rapidly, and persecution started, with Peter and John arrested at the start of chapter 4. They were soon released, but instructed not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. So what did they do? We read:

Acts 4:23-31

And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the LORD and against His Christ.' "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and **grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word**, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, **and they spoke the word of God with boldness.**

Prayer was already a priority. And it was effective.

Then, in Acts 6, as the first dispute in the church arose, the disciples underlined the priority for the leaders of the church. We read there:

Acts 6:2-4

Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

They realised that without prayer, they would not be effective. And without the Word, they would merely be organising a social club for folks who liked Jesus. Both prayer and the Word were central.

Another way of looking at this is to ask why it is important that church leaders are devoted to the ministry of the Word and prayer. I think the simplest conclusion is that you would not want anyone make decisions in the church who was not a man of prayer and the Word. Imagine a pastor or elders who didn't pray and didn't study the Word!

In chapter 10 we see Peter's important vision that clarified the gospel was for gentiles, and not just the Jews. When did he receive it? When had he specifically set time aside to pray. It was while He was praying that God showed him that vision.

Then in chapter 12, we find Peter in prison once more — but this time there is no intent to release him. So what did the church do? They prayed. We read in verse 5:

Acts 12:5

Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.

What happened? An angel visited him, told him to stand up, and his chains literally fell off. He was led from his cell out of the prison to the streets. And from there he goes on to show up at the prayer meeting where his freedom was being prayed for.

And this was just the start of the church.

What things were prayed for?

As the Word of God went forth from Jerusalem to the towns, cities and nations around, prayer was not forgotten. And we see multiple things were prayed for. In John's third letter, to the beloved Gaius, he noted how he prayed for his general wellbeing. We read:

3 John 1:2

Beloved, I pray that **you may prosper in all things and be in health**, just as your soul prospers.

While Paul in Romans prayed for his countrymen to be saved:

Romans 10:1

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God **for Israel is that they may be saved.**

Throughout his other letters, Paul spoke of prayer that others would draw close to God, and honour Him in all things. In 2 Corinthians we read:

2 Corinthians 13:7

Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified.

And a couple of verses later:

2 Corinthians 13:9

For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete.

In Philippians he also spoke of praying for this completeness in Christ:

Philippians 1:3-6

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;

Furthermore he wrote:

Philippians 1:9-11

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

To the Colossians he wrote:

Colossians 1:9-12

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

And in his second letter to the church in Thessalonica he noted:

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

While in the first chapter of Ephesians he bubbles over with sharing how he prayed for them:

Ephesians 1:15-21

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers : that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him , the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling , what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

Then, to the Thessalonians, he spoke of praying for fellowship with them, and that he might be able to further teach them in the things of the Lord:

1 Thessalonians 3:9-10

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

But beyond example, we also have both requests for prayer, and instruction to pray, all throughout the New Testament.

What things are we instructed to pray for?

So what things were the readers of these letters, including you and I, encouraged to pray for? Let's start in 1 Thessalonians, where we are instructed to pray with thanksgiving:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks ; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Likewise in Philippians:

Philippians 4:6

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

Later in 1 Thessalonians the request was more simple, simply saying:

1 Thessalonians 5:25

Brethren, pray for us.

Of course, sometimes it is good to know the specifics to pray for. But we can use the heads God has given us to consider what someone might need prayer for. Indeed, sometimes the Lord will lay on your heart to pray for someone, and you won't even know why.

In Jude's letter, he noted the importance of praying in the Spirit, in line with God's will:

Jude 1:20-21

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

And through several of Paul's letters we find a plea for prayer — not for himself, that he would benefit, but that the gospel might be shared. To Timothy he wrote:

1 Timothy 2:1-4

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

To the Ephesians:

Ephesians 6:17-20

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints— and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

To the Colossians:

Colossians 4:2-4

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

And then to the Thessalonians:

2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.

We should not forget what we read in James of course, that we are to pray in the midst of our trials:

James 5:13-18

Is anyone among you **suffering** ? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you **sick** ? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be **forgiven** . Confess your **trespasses to one another** , and **pray for one another, that you may be healed** . The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

And, we should pray for the persecuted, as Paul asked for in 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 1:8-11

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us, **you also helping together in prayer for us** , that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many.

And likewise in Philippians:

Philippians 1:19-21

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

If nothing else, if we simply, diligently, and regularly prayed for these things, what a change we would see in the church. Not just this church, but *the* church. What a change we might see in our own lives too!

Something strikes me as I read Romans 12:12... it says:

Romans 12:12

...rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, **continuing steadfastly in prayer** ;

It seems to me that Paul is taking for granted that they were already doing this... that they were already praying. And therefore he's just saying, continue doing what you're doing! So, are we willing to *continue* steadfastly in prayer? I guess we should ask, *are* we already steadfast in it?

Conclusion

In the end, we cannot look at the early church, or scripture itself, and come to the conclusion that prayer was or is unimportant. In fact, quite the opposite — for we should come to the conclusion that it is a necessary and critical part of our Christian walk.

So, what things should we pray about as individuals? Well, we know our own needs, our own questions, and struggles — and we also know the prayer's God has answered in our own lives, and how we should be praising God in that. Since we should pray about everything, that includes those things, right!?

But, what things should we be praying about as a church? Well, given the weight of what we've just read from the Bible, there are a few things that I believe are key.

- First, that we would see souls saved. There cannot be any higher priority than this. We can't skirt around who we do or don't pray for at prayer meetings. If we know someone that is not saved, let's pray for them! That the gospel would go forth.
- Second, that there would be growth in the believers in our fellowship. We cannot neglect this. We should pray for obedience, and growth in each person's walk with God. Lifting them to Him in prayer, as we see example of in Scripture.
- Third, we should pray that God would add to our number. Not through our own efforts, or for our own egos. But that Christians in this area would be part of a church that teaches the Bible. There are too many Christians that are frankly being malnourished in poor excuses for churches, where the Bible barely gets a look in. Just recently a friend asked their parents what the sermon was on that morning — and it was on global warming. May we pray that Christians would be well fed. It doesn't have to be *this* church, but may they commit to a *faithful* church.
- Fourth, we should pray that God would provide for our needs as a fellowship. That we would have the finances and able bodies to take care of the building God has blessed us with. But furthermore that we could have a pastor who doesn't have to work a full time job as well as serve in ministry. We should pray that God would provide for us to support one full time, for the benefit of the church in various ways.
- And fifth, we should not be insular. We should pray for the persecuted church. For those in ministry who have upped and left comfortable lives for uncertain futures. We should pray that God would accomplish His will in those situations.

Last week, Bob took us through a study on persistent prayer. And it was a great reminder of what God did when we were once serious in prayer, praying for a building. God not only provided a building for *free*, but the finances to renovate it. Talking to him afterwards, I recall him saying "maybe it's time we got serious about persistent prayer again". There's only one thing I would change in what he said (and I'm sure he won't mind). And that's the word *maybe*.

Let me draw to a close by reading from 1 John:

1 John 5:14-15

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.

If we want to see the Lord move in this place, we need to be close to Him. We need to be obedient to Him. And we need to commune with Him. Prayer is critical in doing that. We need to make it a priority. Not next year, or next month. But now.

For the audio recording of this Bible study, and for additional studies, please see the DCF web site:



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