

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## With deep desire for saints - 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; 5:23-25

This is the second of four sessions looking at “How to pray like Paul prayed”, that is, how he prayed. We are to consider the fact that, when Paul prayed, he prayed with a deep desire for the benefit and blessing of his fellow-believers. In doing so, we shall have to consider also how his desires were fulfilled. Then, as we go along, we must also be thinking about what we can learn about what should govern us in our prayers for others, and how our desires for them are to be achieved. Among other things, we shall look at how these things are demonstrated in Paul’s prayers as recorded in 1 Thessalonians chapters 3 and 5. You know, Paul was continuing in a long line of those who prayed with great desire on behalf of those whom they loved and cared for, in some cases even before they were born.

In 1 Samuel 1:10-11, we read that Hannah desired a family. In prayer, she committed herself in advance to hand her child over to the service of God. Her prayers were fulfilled. I wonder if we have fulfilled the prayers of our parents and grandparents before we were born? Then, in Daniel 11:36-37, we hear the consistent cry of godly Jewish women who had a deep desire to be the mother of the long-promised Messiah. Who knows what great work will be done for the Lord by our own children or grandchildren? Have we the faith for it? Have we any reservations? Are we prepared to make the sacrifice involved? In Luke 2:25-35, we read that Mary the mother of Jesus had to learn that her soul would be pierced through with untold sorrow as her son came to an age when most mothers would begin to see a happy answer to their prayers for their family. If the Lord does indeed answer our prayers, it might well involve great cost to ourselves. In happier vein, in 2 Timothy 1:5, we read of Eunice/Lois/Timothy – three godly generations in succession as the result of prayers by them and for them.

First of all, then, what motivated the Apostle Paul in his prayers for the people of God, his fellow Christians? Following on from that, even more basically, what should govern any of us in desiring the very best for those we love?

The basic desires of the Apostle Paul can be simply expressed. Firstly, “Lord, what will Thou have me to do?” Acts 9:6. Secondly, “My ambition is to please the Lord” 2 Corinthians 5:9. Thirdly, “Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 11:1. In so saying, Paul desired the very best for himself, and the very best for those he loved, his fellow believers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

We read of the Lord Jesus Himself that, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end, or through everything. Paul certainly modelled himself on that, and it shows very clearly in his recorded prayers on their behalf.

First of all, a few basic remarks. Before we engage in any activity, we do well to ask ourselves certain basic questions, such as Why? What? How? When? Where? And, if necessary, Whom?

As to principles, at the very outset, and starting at the very top, we must remind ourselves that we read in Luke 18:1 that the Lord Jesus Himself established the basic principle that ‘Men ought always to pray and not to faint’. Men on earth, as God’s creatures, are intended to live in expressed dependence on God in heaven, and to express this dependence in prayer.

The Apostle Paul himself writes in 2 Corinthians 3:5, “we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; our sufficiency is of God.” That is, we are no more capable now of living the Christian life, or serving the Lord, or helping on our fellow believers, than we were of earning our own salvation in the first place. The reason for this is plain. It is not God’s intention that we should ever be left independent of Him. The more we get to know ourselves, the more we become aware of our own inconsistency and basic unreliability, the more grateful we are that He does not leave it to us to muddle along on our own without Him. The Mighty God has put tremendous resources at our disposal. We can only use those resources rightly in a spirit of true dependence upon God. This dependence is expressed in prayer. We are to ask for help, then give thanks for help received, when we get it (and that might be months or even years later).

Clearly, we pray in words, but our attitude is at least as important as the actual words that are used. Because of this, if we want to pray properly, our minds must be saturated in the Word of God. This is obviously not that we might be

able to impress others by quoting scripture verbatim, at tremendous length. Rather, our minds need to be formed and conditioned by the Word of God, to promote and maintain in us a spirit of prayerful dependence in His presence. We are reminded in Romans 8:26 that there are many occasions when we do not even know **what** to pray for as we ought. Nevertheless, minds that are conditioned by the Word of God, lived out in godly behaviour, will be guided in prayer in accordance with the will of God.

A very good guide to the manner and variety of prayer is given in the instructions of Paul to Timothy in the opening verses of 1 Timothy 2. "I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all who are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Think about that. We supplicate. That is, we are in touch with One Who can supply all our needs. We pray. That is, we live in expressed dependence upon Him. We intercede. That is, we do not only pray for ourselves. We intercede for others. What a privilege! We give thanks for blessings received, and for answered prayer, even if the answer is not what we would have preferred. We accept that He knows far better than we ever could what is for the long-term spiritual benefit of ourselves and others. We give thanks. That is, we give thanks, not only for ourselves, but also, representatively, on behalf of those who do not give thanks for themselves. It is the privilege of Christians to give thanks to God for His many mercies, not only to ourselves, but to all men. Furthermore, we pray for those whom God allows to rule, that conditions may be maintained that will allow us to get on with our Christian lives and service without hindrance. Note, it is not that we might have an easy time. Oh, no! It is that the Christian testimony to the saving grace of God might continue to ring out loud and clear.

We recognise, of course, that the supreme example of praying is seen in the Lord Jesus Himself. This is particularly demonstrated in Luke's Gospel, which depicts The Life of the Perfect Man. The Perfect Man was A Man of Prayer, confirmed by the fact that seven times over in the Gospel of Luke it is recorded that 'Jesus prayed'. If appropriate for Him, how much more so for us, with the addition for us of James 1:5: "if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God."

The early Christians, too, continued in prayers (Acts 2:41) because they realised that they had no power in themselves. All power was in their ascended, glorified Lord, and in the Holy Spirit given to them. Therefore, constant dependence by them was essential. This dependence was expressed in prayer. Clearly, the Apostle Paul's prayers continued in the same vein. Like them, also, he was specific in his prayers.

Now, The Epistle of James, universally recognised as a very practical Epistle, ends with a crescendo of prayer. In 5:13-20, prayer is referred to no less than seven times. The lesson is unmistakable. Prayer is a very practical matter. In verse 16 we read, "The fervent effectual prayer of the righteous man availeth much." Fervency in prayer, backed up by a righteous life, avails much in the presence of God. In line with that, Paul prayed fervently, with great intensity.

1 Thessalonians 5 tells us in verse 18 that we are to pray with thanksgiving. Even before we get the answer, whatever it might be, we are thankful for the privilege of bringing the matter to the Lord.

Jude, in his Epistle, verse 20, exhorts us to pray "**in** the Holy Ghost", the Holy Spirit. Prayer is a **spiritual** activity. It can only be undertaken in the power of the Holy Spirit, the only power for **any** spiritual activity.

Lastly, as to **how** we are to pray, we read in 1 John 5:14 and 15, "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: And if we know that He hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him." This is surely a wonderful thing. We are to pray confidently. We have full confidence in Him. We know He cares. We know He listens. We know He understands. We know He loves us. We know He will answer in accordance with His will for us, and for our eventual spiritual good. What more could we want? For all these reasons, prayers need not be long or involved. But, they should be specific.

Then, TO WHOM should we pray?

It would be improper to lay down hard and fast rules, but I do have some suggestions to make. In everything important connected with Christianity, the three persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are deeply involved. So, in prayer. Let us consider first the role of the Holy Spirit. Scripture speaks about praying **by** the Spirit (Philippians 3:3), and **in** the Spirit (Jude 20), but not **to** the Spirit. What clinches that for me is this. The Lord Jesus Himself is the perfect example of everything that is good and pleasing to God. Not once in any of the four Gospels is there any indication that He prayed **to** the Holy Spirit. As with all aspects of life and service, the Holy Spirit is the only power **in** whom and **by** whom our prayers can be effective. That is very different to saying that we should pray **to** Him. We do get in scripture examples of prayers to God the Father and to God the Son, the Lord Jesus. There is no example of prayer **to** the Holy Spirit.

Consider also this. The Father is the true source of all blessing. He is the great Provider. It seems to me to be consistent with that to pray to the Father about family matters, creature comforts and material needs. Also, true

spiritual worship, the acme of Christian experience, is the worship of the Father. Likewise, the Lord Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master. It seems to me to be equally appropriate to pray directly **to** the Lord in respect of our service **for** Him.

There is no doubt that these principles were exemplified in the prayers of the Apostle Paul for his fellow believers. As we think about Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians, recorded in 1 Thessalonians 3, certain questions inevitably arise.

1. If there was an Apostle like Paul alive today, am I the sort of Christian to whom he would be free to delegate such a responsibility as he gave to Timothy? Timothy was asked to visit the Thessalonians to see how they were getting on, and to bring back a fair report to the Apostle. It is well worth the time and effort to trace through Timothy's background and history in chronological sequence from Acts 14:6-7 to Hebrews 13:23 to find out what sort of Christian he was.
2. If such a delegate came from such an Apostle to my local spiritual home, what sort of report would he take back? Am I, are we, making progress in my or our own soul(s)? Am I, are we, doing all that I or we can do to promote the progress of others?
3. Do I, or we, live and serve in the light of the coming of the Lord with His saints?

Then as we turn to 1 Thessalonians 5, other important questions arise. As to the chapter itself,

- Verses 1-10 tell us about The Day of the Lord and associated matters.
- Verses 11-22 allude to the practical issues resulting and the present effect of knowing what will happen in the future.
- Verses 23-28 give general salutations, benedictions and doxologies.

Together, this gives a good summing up of important issues.

Let us think in particular of verse 23-25:

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it. Brethren, pray for us.

Indirectly, these verses bring before us the important issue of total, full, wholehearted commitment to the Lord, and the joy and benefit of doing so. Let me tell you what I mean by posing an important question.

Is there any way in which or by which the Christian believer might be preserved from being carnal and might give evidence of that **spiritual** life implanted and empowered by the Holy **Spirit**? Thank God there is! The preservative is to be fully committed to what we know to be true. How is this to be achieved? The way is outlined in Romans 12:1-2. It involves our whole being, **spirit** and **soul** and **body**. The Christian accepts the need to commit himself totally, unreservedly to God, in **spirit** and **soul** and **body**. Beseech – by the mercies of God. The heart is so deeply touched by the sense of all that God, in His rich mercy, has done for the **soul** as outlined in chapters 1 to 8, that there is only one way to respond. Present your **bodies**, every activity of the members of the **body**. Your intelligent service This is the only rational, reasonable, intelligent conclusion and response of the renewed mind – the **spirit**.

Now, in our chapter here, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 Paul prays for the total, entire, complete preservation of the believers, in **spirit** and **soul** and **body**: "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly (through and through); and I pray your whole, that is, entire, **spirit** and **soul** and **body** be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen." If we have made the once and for all wholehearted commitment taught in Romans 12:1-2, we shall be the more able and likely to live in the good of that final benediction in 1 Thessalonians.

As a climax to this talk, let me refer you to Luke 11:1. It is obviously significant that this prayer is recorded in Luke's Gospel, which depicts the Lord Jesus as The Perfect Man. One of the disciples came to the Lord, and said, "Lord, teach us to **pray**." Note that. Not **how** to pray, which we have properly considered today, but actually to **pray**. It is well said in respect of many skills, the best way to learn a job is to do it. Provided, of course that suitable guidelines are laid down at the outset. Christians, let us **pray**. As so often, the Lord's own words, recorded in John 13:17, are the most telling. "Ye know these things. Happy are ye if ye **do** them." Amen to that!

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