



Prayer and the Christian life

One of the most fragrant names in the Reformed tradition is that of the Scottish Free Church minister of the last century, Andrew Alexander Bonar (1810-1892). A tireless evangelist and champion of heart religion, he is especially remembered today for his biography of his close friend Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) and for the published version of his own diary, both of which have become spiritual classics. It has been said that his diary reads like a “treatise on private prayer.” For example, on the day of his induction into the pastoral charge of Finnieston Free Church, Glasgow, when he was thirty-six, he noted in his diary that the Lord had made him feel afresh that “I must be as much with Him alone as with souls in public.” A few months after this entry he wrote these words regarding the importance of prayer:

for nearly ten days past have been much hindered in prayer, and feel my strength weakened thereby. I must at once return, through the Lord’s strength, to not less than *three* hours a day spent in prayer and meditation upon the Word.”¹

While we are certainly not bound by the details of another’s practice, yet this diary entry regarding the vital importance of time for prayer surely reveals the high priority that Bonar placed upon this aspect of the Christian life, a priority that he had undoubtedly learned from the Word of God.



BY MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

THE NATURE OF PRAYER —IT IS NOTHING LESS THAN AN ARDUOUS, STRENUOUS STRUGGLE



When the Apostles, for example, delineate in Acts 6:4 what needed to be a priority in their lives, they mention two things in particular, prayer and the ministry of the Word, and it is surely significant that prayer is mentioned first. Likewise, when the Apostle Paul comes to conclude his remarks about his future plans in Romans 15 and he asks his readers in Rome to pray for him specifically with regard to some aspects of what he has just told them, he introduces his request with an especially weighty statement:

I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company (Romans 15:30-32).

The importance that the Apostle places on prayer is found in the solemn way that he introduces this passage. He uses the word *parakalō*, translated here by the ESV as “appeal,” but which can also be rendered “beseech” or “beg.” The same word is found in Romans 12:1, where it is central to that impressive introduction to the entire section on Christian living (Romans 12–15:13), “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Paul’s repetition of this term here in Romans 15:30 indicates something of the priority that he wanted his readers to put on prayer.² Just as he had appealed to these same readers to present themselves and the entirety of their lives as living sacrifices of worship, so now he urges them to engage meaningfully and regularly in prayer for his ministry.³ Without such prayer, he intimates, he will be utterly frustrated in his desire to serve God and ultimately fruitless in his service.⁴ As the Elizabethan Puritan Richard Greenham (1540-1594) noted, in the Christian life “the Holy Ghost teacheth us that all is nothing without prayer.”⁵

As we look closely at the various elements of this call to prayer, we must note three things in particular:

- First of all, the basis upon which Paul appeals to his readers to prayer for him is “the Lord Jesus Christ” and “the love of the Spirit”;
- Second, there is the nature of prayer—it is nothing less than an arduous, strenuous struggle;
- Third, there are the specific needs for which Paul is requesting prayer, needs that centre on his ministry in Jerusalem and his eventual coming to Rome.

“BY OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST”

Adding to the solemnity of this appeal for prayer is the two-fold basis upon which the Apostle makes his request. First, the admonition that Paul gives to his readers is “by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here Paul invokes the authority of the one Lord, to whom both he and his readers are bound as servants.⁶ He says in effect that because Christ is their Lord, they ought to pray for His servant who is seeking the advance of His Master’s kingdom and the exaltation of His dear name.

Paul appears to assume two things here. First, if a person is a professing Christian, Paul reckons that he or she is a person who prays. For Paul, to claim that Christ is one’s Lord necessarily involves a commitment to prayer. Richard Baxter (1615-1691), the seventeenth-century Puritan, put it thus: “prayer is the breath of the new creature.”⁷ And as Baxter’s Puritan contemporary Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) said, “our speaking to God by prayers, and his speaking to us by answers thereunto, is one great part of our walking with God.”⁸

Second, Paul assumes that true Christian prayer is first and foremost concerned with the glorification of the triune God and the advance of His kingdom. When the Lord Jesus, for instance, gives to His disciples some broad guidelines as to what the content of their prayer should be He mentions first of all the exaltation of God and then immediately afterwards the advance of His rule in the world: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10). To be under the authority of Christ is thus to pray specifically for the advance of the gospel and the triumph of Christ.

So, when Paul urges his fellow believers in Rome “by the Lord Jesus Christ” to pray, he is reminding them of their status. They are numbered among the servants of Christ and as such should be men and women given to prayer that specifically seeks the advance of Christ’s cause.

Thus, some questions present themselves:

- Do you profess Christ as your Lord?
- If so, do you pray?
- Do you pray regularly?

- Is prayer a priority in your life?
- What kind of prayers dominate your praying? Prayers for the advance of the kingdom, or prayers that relate solely to your personal needs and wants?

May God give us a heart and a will to make prayer, prayer for the exaltation of God and the extension of the kingdom, a daily reality in our lives.

“BY THE LOVE OF THE SPIRIT”

Then, Paul also urges them “by the love of the Spirit” to pray. This is a unique phrase in the Scriptures. Elsewhere when the Scriptures speak of the love of one of the divine persons, it is the love of the Father or the love of Christ.⁹ Moreover, it is not immediately clear what Paul means by the phrase. Is it the love that believers have for the Holy Spirit? Or is it the love that the Spirit has for believers? Or should it be understood to mean the love that the Holy Spirit produces in believers for one another?

Few commentators think that the first option is a possibility here. The second has been held by, among others, John Murray (1898-1975), the Presbyterian theologian who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary for much of his life and who wrote a superb commentary on Romans.¹⁰ The interpretation of John Calvin (1509-1564), though, is the one that probably makes the best sense here. He interprets the phrase as the love “by which the saints ought to embrace one another.”¹¹

In this interpretation of the phrase, Paul is basing his appeal on the fact that his readers are indwelt by the Spirit and as such know something of the love that the Spirit produces in believers for one another. Paul thus expects that love for God’s people will in part be demonstrated by prayer for them. To paraphrase the Apostle John: the one who says he loves God’s people and never prays for them is a liar.

“PRAYER IS THE GYMNASIUM OF THE SOUL”¹²

Now, prayer is one of the most difficult aspects of the Christian life. We get a glimpse of Paul’s recognition of this fact when he goes on to ask the Roman Christians to “strive together with me in prayers to God for me.” True intercessory prayer, Paul declares here, involves strain and arduous struggle, the commitment of energy and earnestness. The word underlying the phrase “strive together with me” only occurs here in the New Testament, though the similar idea is found in Colossians 2:1-3 and 4:12.

A struggle with what, though? Well, first of all, it is a struggle with the enemy of our souls, Satan, and his demonic hordes. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 6:12: “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this

present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Satan hates God’s people at prayer, for he knows that faithful, persevering prayer is a powerful weapon in the hands of almighty God. As William Cowper (1731-1800), the eighteenth-century poet and hymnwriter, said:

Restraining pray’r, we cease to fight;
Pray’r makes the Christian’s armor bright;
And Satan trembles, when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.¹³

But there is also the struggle against the old nature. Listen to the Puritan preacher John Bunyan (1628-1688) as he describes his own struggle in prayer.

May I but speak of my own Experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of Praying to God as I ought; it is enough to make your poor, blind, carnal men, to entertain strange thoughts of me. For, as for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so loth to go to God, and when it is with him, so loth to stay with him, that many times I am forced in my Prayers; *first* to beg God that he would take mine heart, and set it on himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there (Psalm 86.11). Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am so blind, nor how to pray I am so ignorant; only (blessed be Grace) *the Spirit helps our infirmities*.

Oh the starting-holes that the heart hath in time of Prayer! none knows how many by-wayes the heart hath, and back-lains, to slip away from the presence of God.¹⁴

This passage aptly displays a couple of the most attractive features of Puritan writers like Bunyan: their transparency and their in-depth knowledge of the human heart. From personal experience Bunyan knew the allergic reaction of the sinful nature that still resides in the bosom of every believer to the presence of God. Instead of coming into God’s radiant presence to pray, it wants to run and hide, like



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Adam after he had sinned in the garden. In other words, prayer demands discipline and hard work.

Thus, prayer is a struggle. But Paul expects believers to persevere in prayer and know something of the victory of persevering, faithful prayer. Why does he expect this? Because Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. He has already used this fact as part of his appeal to the Roman Christians to engage in prayer on his behalf. And if he were pressed to give a reason as to why he expects Christians to know a good measure of victory and consistency in prayer, the Spirit and the Spirit's power would surely figure largely in his answer. Were it not for the Spirit, none would be able to persevere in prayer. "A man without the help of the Spirit," John Bunyan once declared, "cannot so much as pray once; much less, continue...in a sweet praying frame."¹⁵

It needs to be noted that for all who persevere in this struggle and discipline of prayer, there are times of exquisite delight when the struggle and duty slides over into pure joy. John Owen (1616-1683), one of John Bunyan's good friends, thus once observed with regard to Ephesians 2:18 ("Through Christ we have access by one Spirit unto the Father"):

No tongue can express, no mind can reach, the heavenly placidness and soul-satisfying delight which are intimated in these words. To come to God as a Father, through Christ, by the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit, revealing him as a Father unto us, and enabling us to go to him as a Father, how full of sweetness and satisfaction is it!¹⁶

CERTAIN SPECIFIC REQUESTS FOR PRAYER

Paul has three things that he wants the Romans to pray for on his behalf. First, that he might be kept safe from those fanatical Jews in Judea who hated the gospel and who would love to see the Apostle of Christ dead. This request in verse 31 indicates that Paul expected his time in Jerusalem to be fraught with tension and danger. While he was thoroughly

convinced that it was God's will for him to go up to Jerusalem and fully acquainted with the dangers of going there (Acts 20:22-24), he was by no means reckless and eager to throw his life away. Thus, he asked his brothers and sisters to seek his protection through prayer.

Then, Paul wanted the believers in Rome to pray that the collection of money which he had gathered from the Gentile churches for the "saints in Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26-27) would be well received by the Jerusalem church. This was a collection that he had been working on for a number of years (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9) and for Paul it had come to be a concrete display of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ.

Finally, there was the desire that he might eventually come to Rome and find rest and refreshment among them. What Paul is thinking of here is spiritual refreshment found in the context of fellowship and preparation for further ministry (see Romans 15:24,28). This third prayer request is the reason for the first two requests. In other words, what drives the first two requests is the hunger to further extend the reach of the gospel.


AN EARLIER PRAYER REQUEST

Now, five or so years before Paul had made a similar request of believers in Thessalonica. Writing from the city of Corinth he had asked the Thessalonian Christians to "pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). And as these Thessalonian believers had prayed, God had moved in the city of Corinth, bringing revival, protecting Paul from the Jewish leaders there who wanted him expelled from the city, and even causing a Roman governor, Gallio, to unwittingly befriend the church in that city (see Acts 18:12-16).

This time, though, things turned out quite differently. Paul was nearly killed in a riot in the Temple. He ended up a prisoner of the Roman state. He languished in prison in Palestine for close to two years. There was then a perilous voyage to Rome and a further two-year period of imprisonment in the Roman capital (Acts 21 - 28).

Would he have concluded God did not answer his people's prayers? No, not at all. Notice in Romans 15:32 those tremendously important words: "by the will of God." Prayer, as the Apostle thinks of it, indeed as the Scriptures depict it, is never a presumptuous demanding of God. It is always done in the recognition that God answers His people's prayers in His own ways and in His own time.

Mature spiritual prayers never leave God's sovereignty out of the picture. This deep sense of God's sovereign control over the events of his life does not issue in an attitude of fatal-

ism, in which prayer is regarded as next to useless. On the contrary, Paul knows that God's sovereign purposes are regularly accomplished through the prayers of his people. Thomas Blundel (c.1752-1824), an English Baptist and friend of William Carey (1761-1834), expresses Paul's conviction when he stated that "it is chiefly in answer to prayer that God has carried on His cause in the world: He could work without any such means; but He does not, neither will He."¹⁷ 

This article is part of a forthcoming book by Michael A.G. Haykin called The God who draws near: a primer on biblical spirituality (Evangelical Press, 2006).

1 Cited David M. MacIntyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer* (Tain, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1989), xiii.

2 Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers. The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 266.

3 Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers*, 81.

4 For similar statements, compare 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Corinthians 1:8-11; Ephesians 6:18-19; Colossians 4:2-4.

5 *A short forme of catechizing in Workes of R. Greenham* (5th ed.; London, 1612), 237-238. For an excellent study of Greenham's life and ministry, see John H. Primus, *Richard Greenham: Portrait of an Elizabethan Pastor* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998). My attention was drawn to Greenham's statement on prayer by Primus, *Richard Greenham*, 138.

6 C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1979 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), II, 776.

7 Cited MacIntyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, 20.

8 *The Return of Prayers [The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D.]* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), III, 362].

9 Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1994), 632.

10 *The Epistle to the Romans. Volume II: Chapters 9 to 16* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1965), 221.

11 *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (1960 ed.; repr. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1973), 317. See also Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 633.

12 Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), cited D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books/Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 210

13 "Exhortation to Prayer" in John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds., *The Poems of William Cowper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), I, 169.

14 *John Bunyan: The Doctrine of the Law and Grace unfolded and I will pray with the Spirit*, ed. Richard L. Greaves (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 256-257. For a modern edition of this work, see John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965). For a modernization and abridgment of it, see Louis Gifford Parkhurst, Jr. ed., *Pilgrim's Prayer Book* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986).

15 *I will pray with the Spirit*, 259.

16 *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682) [*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850-1853 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), IV, 292-293]. For a helpful study of Owen's understanding of prayer, see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 224-231.

17 *The River of Life Impeded* in his *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London: J. Burditt, 1806), 183-184.

AMONG OURSELVES

ADDING TO THE CHURCH...

We were delighted to witness four baptisms during the morning worship service on November 6, 2005 at Jarvis Street Baptist Church.



From left to right:

Dr. Glendon Thompson is the pastor of JSBC.

Ryan C. Churchill was raised in an Anglican church and came to a personal genuine faith through the reading of God's word and the testimony of a Christian friend. He moved to Toronto and now attends Jarvis Street Baptist Church.

Vaughn Blake was raised in a Christian family where he heard and sang many hymns. One of his favourites was "Trust and Obey," although he always had a hard time to stay on the obey track. He realized his need for a personal faith after hearing a message on obedience in following Jesus. He is now married to **Anthea** who was also baptized on the same day. She was raised in a Catholic church and came to the knowledge of the saving work of Christ under Dr. Thompson's preaching.

Joe Chen is a Chinese man who came to Canada a few years ago and was exposed to Christian faith through the testimony of another Christian Chinese couple. He and his wife who are now both baptized believers attend Jarvis Street Baptist Church, and host a Bible study at their home.

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