

What is 'Prayer'?

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[0 : 00] Let's turn this evening to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and chapter 5. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and the very short verse 17.

Pray without ceasing. Only a few words, but a very big verse. But what is prayer?

That's our topic for this evening. We've been looking at some topical studies for the last few weeks, such as worldliness, holiness, faith. Last week we looked at election.

What is prayer? That of course is a question, the answer to which would take a very long time to give it a comprehensive answer.

There are many definitions of prayer. There are many books written on prayer. Books are still being produced about prayer. It's impossible to fully capture what prayer is, even in all of these definitions, and all of these books, and all the sermons that have ever been preached on it.

[1 : 19] And prayer, therefore, is something which really, in a sense, escapes our ability to really define it fully. That doesn't really matter, in a sense, because the important thing is not how much we understand of what prayer is, or of the elements of prayer.

The important thing is that we pray. What is it that makes a good chef? How does a chef get a name as a top chef? Not by carrying about in his head all the recipes that he would like to see served out to people in a Michelin star restaurant.

A good chef, a top chef, is one who can cook. He doesn't just carry how to do things, and all the elements involved in these great dishes that top chefs produce.

He is able to actually do it. And for you and for me, that really is the most important thing to remember about prayer. To pray.

And that's Paul's emphasis in this verse. Pray without ceasing. In other words, he's really saying to us, prayer is something that can never be extinguished, that must never recede in the believer's lifetime, it must never go back, it must never diminish, it must never decrease.

[2 : 41] Of course, we know ourselves that we fail in this, as well as in so many other things. But this is the Bible's ideal for us. This is the Lord's own injunction to us.

To pray without ceasing. To be in a mind and habit and exercise of prayer as frequently as we possibly can. And that means praying not just when we are on our own and able to come before God and set out our prayer in his presence, or come to the prayer meeting and pray along with others, or pray when we're asked to pray in public or whatever.

It's not just of that. We have to learn to pray instinctively during the course of each and every day.

To learn to actually pray in situations that perhaps we find from day to day that we didn't plan for.

And when you come in to them, it's always the case that prayer should be the first thing we think of doing, and the first thing we do, but it's not always what we do.

And the more we train ourselves in praying without ceasing, the more it should be that in those situations as well, the first thing that we will do is pray. Even if it's just a brief few minutes, a few seconds even, to just call out to the Lord for his help.

[4 : 02] So what is prayer? Where can we get some sort of structure that defines for us what prayer is and what it's about? I'm just going to look at a number of texts really together in a sense, and look at the main elements in prayer, and then something about what we should be praying for, and also who we should be praying for, or for whom we should be praying.

And then I want to say a little bit at the end about public prayer as against private prayer, because there will be elements to that that are important to those, especially who are asked to pray in public. What are, firstly, the main parts to prayer, if you like? What are the main parts, if you think about prayer as a structured thing, what are the main parts of it?

When you range through the Bible, when you see what it has to say about prayer, when you study prayers in the Bible, such as the prayers of the Apostle Paul himself, which you find in a number of his letters, the things that he was praying for when he wrote to the Thessalonians, or to the Ephesians, or the Colossians, whatever, he tells us at times what he was busy praying for, and you can see there's some kind of a structure to that.

Now, it doesn't mean that when you come to think about prayer, that one of the really important things is that you must have your structure correct. We can be slaves to structure as much as anything else.

[5 : 29] And nevertheless, while we accept that, it is still good to think about having some sort of structure that you're able to follow mentally, not mechanically, not in a way that just kind of prays, parrot fashion or out of habit, but just so that it's to remind ourselves of what the Bible tells us the main elements of praying are.

And I've always been helped by the acrostic acts, the word acts, when you take each of the letters of that word acts. I'm not saying this is a complete definition of prayer, but it might help the younger ones especially, which is why we're looking especially at these topical studies, things which we think about or do frequently, but perhaps we don't necessarily go into enough to explain or to try and set out simply acts, A-C-T-S.

And if you take each of these, it'll give you one of the, each of them will give you a primary element in the structure of prayer so that we can try and bear that in mind.

First of all, A for adoration. Prayer is first of all, coming before God as the glorious God, as the great and majestic God.

And as we come before God in prayer, whether it's in public or in private, the element of adoration is an essential element in our prayer. And the danger for us is that sometimes when we're burdened to really pray about something for ourselves, for somebody else, for some situation that we're aware of, locally in our family or in the world, that we kind of rush into.

[7 : 15] Now God understands that. God knows that when our heart is burdened, sometimes all we can do is just blurt it out in prayer. But we should always try and just pause and think about God first.

And what we owe to God himself, irrespective of what he has done or not done in answering our prayers in our lives and the lives of others, we come to adore God.

And even before we ask God for the things that are on our hearts to ask him, we should think about giving him the adoring praise, the homage as our king that is due to him as the glorious God.

That's the first thing, adoration. Secondly, C for confession. Because when we come before God, another essential element in our prayer is that it will be a prayer involving confession.

Has there ever been a day in your life when you've not had to confess your sin, when you've had no sin to confess before God? If your answer is yes, there's something wrong with your thinking or your experience because there is no perfect life in this world for any Christian.

[8 : 38] And when we come to follow us, we'll see in a minute the model prayer that Jesus gave us as we read in Matthew 6. One of the essential elements there is that we ask to have our trespasses or our debts forgiven.

So you come with confession, confession of sin, and confession of personal sin and liability to death. In other words, as we're paying homage to the glorious God in adoration, so we're pursuing forgiveness with the merciful God in our confession.

And how often we mention that mercy is such a precious, precious thing to those who are burdened with sin. As the psalmist in Psalm 130, if you were to mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand?

Yet there is forgiveness with you. There is tender love with you so that you may be feared. There's the psalmist relieved, if you like, thankful and even praising God in the very asking of forgiveness for the fact that there is forgiveness with him and that he has himself a certain guaranteed forgiveness for all who come with a proper confession of their sin.

If we confess our sins, said John, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin. It's not depending on how good we are in asking or how good our life is previously or whatever it is we intend to do in the future.

[10 : 11] The certainty of God's forgiveness is based on his own justice and goodness. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.

Adoration, confession, thanksgiving. We never come or should never come before God in prayer, however burdened we are in prayer without thanksgiving.

Sometimes it might be near the end, sometimes we might begin the prayer with that. I'm not necessarily saying these things are in the order in which we have to have them.

But I would say that adoration comes certainly very near the top of what we want to prioritize in prayer. But in any case, thanksgiving is something that's mentioned.

Remember Paul again to the Philippians saying that don't be over-anxious about anything. don't be worried to the point of just driving yourselves to stressed out levels over anything.

[11 : 23] But in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Let your requests be made known to God. Isn't it interesting that he said let your requests be made known to God but let them be made with thanksgiving.

Let the request that the asking be accompanied by the giving, the thanksgiving, the rendering of thanks to God. We don't have to really search our lives every time we come to pray.

We don't have to search for very long before we find something for which to give thanks. There's a whole long list, isn't there? And indeed we could spend a long time in prayer doing nothing but giving thanks when we think of all we've got to give thanks for.

So there's adoration and confession and thanksgiving and the thanksgiving is praising the name of the good God. The glorious God in our adoration. The merciful God in our confession.

The good God in our thanksgiving for all the good things that he gives. And then there's supplication. That's the element of pleading in prayer.

[12 : 37] Supplicating is really coming before God earnestly and pleading in prayer. Now this is something that sometimes is misunderstood.

Because when we're supplicating God in prayer we are pleading a blessing from the willing God.

Don't go fall into the trap of thinking that when we are actually coming to pray and to supplicate and to plead before God that we're dealing with God who is not willing to bless.

That we are seeking to move the hand of God by our supplication. Our God is the willing God.

He's never reluctant. He never actually suggests to us in this word that he is other than fully willing to hear and to answer this people's prayer.

Maybe the answer won't be what you want, what you think is best, what I think is best. But God always hears it. And God always hears it willingly.

[13 : 47] And that gives you encouragement to keep praying. As Paul is saying here, continue in prayer. Pray without ceasing. Because you're praying to a willing God, a God who is constantly hearing his prayers, this people's prayers.

And that is our supplication as it addresses God to his willingness. So, Acts, that's just a very, very brief way of looking at the essential parts of prayer.

There'll be others as well we could add to that, I'm sure. But if we think of these four, then even when we're asked to pray, if we're just getting used to that matter of praying in front of others, or even on our own, between ourselves and God, it's still useful even then to think of that kind of structure so that we will, for one thing, have a calmer mind, we hope, and secondly, that we will actually have these great essential elements as part of our praying to God.

Secondly, for what should we pray? These are the main elements, the adoration, the confession, the thanksgiving, and supplication, for what should we pray?

Well, the model prayer for us, of course, is the Lord's prayer that you find in Matthew 6, where we read, and if we just go through that, it really gives you again the main things for which we should be praying, and you can expand on each of those in the way that other parts of the Bible take you into things that are attached to these.

[15 : 24] For example, firstly, that God's name be hallowed, or treated as holy. We pray that God himself and his name, in other words, his reputation in the world, and especially through his people's lives and the way that we live, will be treated with respect, and we pray that others will come who don't treat it with respect right now, that they would come through the influence of his own truth, to come to treat it with respect.

That God's name will be hallowed, will live in an age which is filled with blasphemies, with contempt for God, with comments in the public press, or on the media, social media, whatever, that absolutely outrageous, as far as respect for God is concerned, it's the grossest disrespect very often, flippantly, boldly, unashamedly, ungodly.

That's why he's given us this concern, as he's put it in this model prayer, our father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Let your name, Lord, be sanctified. Your kingdom come. You're praying before God secondly, that his kingdom will advance.

In other words, that you will see the reign of God spread throughout all kinds of human beings and all kinds of nations in the world, that his kingdom will come.

[16 : 58] It's not just a praying that Christ will come and establish his eternal kingdom. That's not absent from it, but there's also this element of praying for the advance of the gospel, for the advance of his believing people and his church, for the spreading influence of the kingdom of God to invade people's hearts.

so that they will come to bow before this king, the king of this kingdom, and that he will come to sit on the throne of their hearts too. Your kingdom come, thirdly your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We take it that that's his revealed will as it's called, the way in which God has revealed what is and isn't pleasing to him in scripture. And that more and more that will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven.

God's will is done perfectly in heaven by all the inhabitants of heaven, whether they be angels or glorified human beings, glorified in their souls, at least that's to say.

The will of God is done perfectly. And you find examples in the scripture of angels or seraphim, names given to different beings in the scripture that surround the throne of God and instantly come to do his will, to carry out his mandate, to follow out his directions.

[18 : 25] That's what we pray for, that God's will be done, so that his name be hallowed, that he be treated with respect, that his kingdom come, that his reign spread throughout the world, that his will be done as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, bread. Well, we were thinking about poverty to some extent on the Lord's day, and as we said at that time, we are so used to not having to really think very long and hard about where our daily bread is going to come from.

But it didn't used to be like that. And we should still think each day of asking for our daily bread. because God is the great provider.

And as he is the great provider, so he provides for us for each day. And I think the Lord also intended in putting it like this. Give us this day our daily bread.

Give us bread for today. We live in a world of excess. A world of so much plenty. A world of luxury, you might say, in the western world when it comes to food and other items as well.

[19 : 48] And the Lord reminds us in this, that we should be content with enough to live on and not be greedy and not be like others of a worldly disposition who are given just to increase for the sake of it.

give us this day our daily bread. Give us bread for today. Make us satisfied, O Lord, with enough to live on and a bit to spare perhaps, but no more.

Because the more we seek to add and become excessive, the more of it we will want, the more materialistic we will get. So it's a reminder against materialism too.

And forgive us our trespasses or our debts. We come as we said, with a confession, with a seeking of forgiveness. And he added to that, you remember, as we forgive those who trespass against us. We have no right to come to God and ask that he forgive our sins. If our heart is closed to the forgiving of others. That's what Jesus actually said.

[21 : 05] If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will the Lord forgive yours. That seems a very hard saying, but it's the Lord who said it.

He's the forgiver. He knows who is and isn't forgiven. And to come before God without thoughts of forgiving others or close to the idea or reluctant to do it, we have no right to ask him to forgive our own.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And then what we should pray for finally is his protection and his leading.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. You've got to take these two together. Don't lead us into temptation. It doesn't mean that the Lord would lead anybody into an avenue of sin. sin. What it means is that the prayer is that God would actually protect us so that we will stand when temptation comes. And that instead of going in that direction that he would lead us and deliver us

from evil.

[22 : 18] That he would actually daily take us away from those things that would tend to trap us and to bring us into sin. So there you have what we should pray for.

It's in the Lord's prayer, the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. For each of these, you can expand it out yourselves to the things that the Bible connects with it.

Thirdly, for whom should we pray? Who should we pray for? Well, we should give priority to praying for God's people.

Following the analogy that you find in Galatians 6, as you have opportunity, do good unto all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

In other words, he's not saying, don't do good to anyone except Christians. He is saying, as you find opportunity, as much as you can, do good to everyone, but especially to those who are of the household of faith.

[23 : 22] Give priority to your fellow believers, to your brothers and sisters in the Lord, not just locally, but wherever they are. You pray for them. So you pray for them in a specific way as well.

For some at least, you pray for the persecuted, which we seek to do from time to time. I would also say you pray for those Christians you know are in public office, because they get a lot of hassle from the world.

You pray that they will be kept, that they will be used by God for the influence of good and the influence of others. You pray for those who preach the gospel. That's not being selfish, that's not being self-promoting, that's just following out what the Bible tells us, that we are indeed to pay heed to those who proclaim the word of God that he has called to proclaim, because it's the primary means that God uses for the production of faith and the feeding of faith.

Without your prayers, where would the preaching of the gospel be? God's not dependent on our prayers, but our prayers nevertheless are a means that God himself has set up, through which he comes, to provide blessing through the gospel.

So we pray for missionaries as well, for those who carry the gospel into difficult lands and to other places, into places of danger, practical missions as well, not just those that preach the gospel, teaching others, educating others, medical clinics, so many different ways in which Christians are exposed to danger and trial, pray for them without ceasing.

[25 : 16] You pray for God's people and use the prayer notes. Notice just on the Lord's Day, there's quite a pile left over from last month. We don't get that many of them, but they're very, very good for information about all that's happening in different parts of the mission field that some of our own people especially are in, or work related to our own mission work.

so you inform your minds with what's set out there and that gives you something to feed into your prayers. There's nothing mechanical about that.

It can become mechanical just like everything else. You don't just coldly pick the prayer notes up and look at the page for the day and just there it is and you take that and you just close it.

Just think about it. Use it to actually inform your mind educatively. Reflect upon it before you come to pray. Think about what it may be like in those situations.

Try to imagine what difficulties they're going through and then pray. That's why they're there. Use the prayer not just our own missionary prayer notes that we get from our own church but prayer notes that come with the Slavic gospel or Barnabas or compassion.

[26 : 32] That's why we've got them so that we can dwell our minds upon these things and then pray more meaningfully about. So we pray for the Lord's people but actually we pray for everyone else too.

1 Timothy where the apostle was writing near the end of his life to Timothy, someone very precious to him. He begins chapter 2 of 1 Timothy this way.

First of all then I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people. then he mentions for kings and all who are in high positions that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

That was important to the apostle. That human society be dignified, ordered, peaceful, not violent, disordered, chaotic.

And to do that, to achieve that, he was concerned that we pray for kings and all in authority. It doesn't matter whether they're believers or not, many of them will not be.

[27 : 43] But we pray for them and that's, I know, something that we hear often in our own midst. Praying for those in authority, locally, nationally, government, other places in the world, especially the world leaders that have the power to influence other nations as well.

To pray for all of these individuals. But there are other two under. The Lord gave us huge challenges.

And he said to his disciples in the seven of the mount, pray for your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you and despitefully treat you.

And that's something which is very hard to do. You imagine some of our fellow Christians especially that have hardships beyond what most of us, if not all of us, will ever really experience, at least have experienced up to now.

Who knows what the future may bring. But just imagine how difficult it is to pray for a prison guard who's lashed you every day since you went into prison.

[29 : 00] Just imagine for a Christian woman how difficult it is to pray for someone who's abused her every day that she's been in prison, physically, sexually, whatever way. Yet the Lord, you see, is saying, pray for your enemies.

And when we pray for our enemies, we have to pray for those who find it difficult to pray for their enemies. The Lord will actually give them the necessary grace and strength to fulfill what is the urge and the desire of every Christian heart, difficult as it is to do it, to pray for your enemies.

Remember that our God is the God of the unlikely. Unlikely as far as we're concerned, that is.

Remember this man who wrote to the Thessalonians.

He began life as Saul of Tarsus. He ended life as Paul the Apostle. What was as unlikely in the days of Saul of Tarsus, but that he would become the great Apostle Paul.

What did it? Well, God of course did it. But God didn't do it without the prayers of his church at the time. These people were praying in the book of Acts.

[30 : 18] Prayer is such a significant element in what you read about the early church at that time. When Peter was in prison, they prayed for him. And I'm sure, they must have prayed at many times that the Lord would have mercy on Saul of Tarsus.

One day, on the way to Damascus, with further letters to carry out further havoc against the church, Jesus met him. Jesus answered the prayers of his people.

Jesus came down to stand in front of him, and he blinded his eyes with the glorious sight that was his. Jesus, and he said to a humble servant called Ananias, go to such and such a place, and there you will find a man called Saul, and I'm telling you he's praying.

What a change, a change through prayer into a man of prayer. Remember that when we're thinking of the unlikely, prayer, because that's the God we pray to, the God of the miraculous.

We should pray then for God's people, we should pray for all others too, because that's what the Bible requires of us, pray without ceasing. Just to finish with, is public prayer different to private prayer?

[31 : 42] Now, this of course will only be, it will be of significance I'm sure to everyone, but in our practice, we ask certain people to pray, and to pray publicly in meetings such as this.

Should we think of public prayer as different to private prayer? Because that is a question which is asked, but maybe not always or even often answered. Well, essentially, the answer to it is no, it's not different in its essential elements.

You still have the elements of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, you pray for these things and other related things, you pray for these people, for God's people especially and then for others as well.

None of that is different in public prayer. Yet there are differences. I'm just going to mention briefly three. Public prayers should not be long.

I'm not getting at anyone here because nobody here really prays for what you would call long. of course that's a subjective thing, isn't it? Somebody might feel ten minutes is a bit long and somebody else might feel, well, twenty minutes is a bit short.

[33 : 00] It's very subjective. At the same time, there is nevertheless a reasonable idea as to what is and isn't long prayer.

Prayer, public prayer, should never be long and certainly should never be tedious. That's what the Lord accused the Pharisees of. They were known for their long prayers.

They stood at the street corners and just kept on this habit of mumbling prayers. And the Lord said, don't be like them. It's an interesting phenomenon, but at times of revival, and as far as I'm aware, this is true really of every revival where it's been noticed.

At revival times, when you might expect through the great surge of spiritual power that comes with the Holy Spirit in revival, you might expect that people then called to pray in public would pray for much longer than usual.

Actually, it's the opposite that happens. And in revival times, it's a well known fact that those who are asked to pray publicly pray relatively short.

[34 : 10] They want to hear others pray too, of course. but it's not the work of the Spirit to drag out long prayers. The work of the Spirit is to keep the mind fresh and insightful, and therefore relatively short.

Please don't think that I'm suggesting anyone here at all what I'm saying, but it's just a general guidance that that's what we should be thinking of in public prayer. when you're on your knees before God in your own home, in the secrecy of your own prayer closet, you can pray for a week without getting up.

Nobody's going to notice that. That's up to you. But in public prayer, we should never be weary, son. Secondly, our public prayer should not be overly specific.

What I mean by that is that our public prayers, yes, mentioning people by name, by all means, that's absolutely fine. I don't see anything wrong with that.

There's nothing in the Bible that I can see to contradict that. But we always have to take care when mentioning details in people's lives. Even if there are things in people's lives that you can very easily bring before God in the privacy of your own heart, and when you pray between yourself and God with nobody else there, that doesn't mean automatically you can say all of these things in public.

[35 : 42] Be careful when you are praying about people and for people, especially if they're mentioned by name specifically, which is fine. But it's important that we don't take in details that will hurt them, or hurt their families, or cause them embarrassment, or other things like that.

So we need to be careful not to be overly specific, but at the same time, not to be overly general as well. It's not really very edifying.

And remember, prayer, in public prayer, has to be edifying to those who are listening, in the sense that they want to be able to take what's prayed with them, and say their amen at the end of it.

And if we are so unspecific that people don't really know what we're talking about, they can say their amen at the end of it meaningfully. So avoid being overly general to the extent that people aren't really assured at all who we're praying for, what we're praying for, but be careful with the detail of it as well.

Thirdly, we shouldn't expect that absolutely everyone should be able to pray publicly.

[37 : 02] Now that may be something that surprises people, but it's important to bear in mind that praying in public is something that a minority of people just cannot cope with.

And we shouldn't actually force the issue if that is genuinely the case. Now that's different from inexperience, which can actually then be developed into a more confident, if you like, type of public prayer.

I'm sure public prayer is never fully confident on the part of those who are asked to do it. What I mean is that every single one of us begins when we're asked to pray publicly with a few words that we feel is quite inadequate, and yet some old lady comes up and says, that was wonderful.

That's all we need to hear, because that's what it was. Words genuinely spoken to God, and God knows that's from the heart. And from that, people can progress, using such things as we mentioned there, the structures, looking at examples in the Bible, and progress from that to having more confidence in prayer.

But there are some for whom it is genuinely the case that public prayer is an impossibility. And that's something that every minister, every church session, every congregation should at least bear in mind.

[38 : 31] It is the case, surely, that every office mayor, certainly every elder in the church, should be able to pray publicly before they're actually ordained to the leadership of any congregation.

It's been the case, and I've seen it myself, that some elders who had been elders for years had never prayed in public, and when asked would refuse.

