

background by choosing to associate himself with the promises of God.

And so it can be for us. We live in a world of much sorrow and suffering, a world in which the curses placed upon the first man and woman because of their sin still have their outworking. But, however bad our background, we can escape from it by placing our trust in the promises of God, Who provides blessing instead of curse

upon the world through the promises to Abraham fulfilled in his seed, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, we must show our desire to be associated with the promises by calling upon the Name of the Lord. And if we have this earnest desire to be associated with the promises of God, then we can call upon Him to be with us in our lives and keep us from evil, saving us ultimately from the greatest evil of all, eternal death.

## The prayers of Paul

Stephen Green

**P**AUL'S VISION on the road to Damascus, and his conversion, began a life of ministry on behalf of the Lord Jesus in which prayer was central. His sudden realisation that he had been fighting against God, "kick[ing] against the pricks" (Acts 9:5), and his corresponding physical blindness, caused Saul to pray, as revealed to Ananias (v. 11). The personal details of this apparently long and continuing prayer are not recorded, but were probably an example of what Paul speaks of in Colossians 4:2: "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving". This event, leading to his baptism, gives the key to understanding Paul's prayerful outlook.

### Paul's example

The New Testament shows many examples of the Apostle Paul at prayer; for other apostles we find comparatively few. This is not to say that other apostles did not make frequent prayer, but it does imply that emphasis on prayer was particularly important in Paul's Gentile ministry. Perhaps this was because the Gentiles needed more instruction in prayer than the Jewish believers, who were already familiar with the Old Testament instances of prayer. The emphasis brought out in Paul's example clearly presses home the importance to us of prayer in our own lives.

### Paul at praise

Prayers of praise to God for His eternal qualities are clearly present in the writings of Paul, and are presented in a form which invites all his readers to join in each act of praise. Here are a few of the many:

- "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! . . . To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33-36, NRSV). These thoughts are to be stimulated in us all by the depth of God's remarkable workings and understanding in showing His mercy in such appropriate ways for both Jew and Gentile, as explained in the previous verses;
- "God . . . to Whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Gal. 1:4,5). Glory is given to God, Whose remarkable will it was that our Lord Jesus Christ should give himself to deliver us from this evil world;
- "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17, NRSV). Honour is due because of Christ's work in saving sinners, of whom Paul was chief, and a pattern for those who afterwards would believe to life everlasting (vv. 15,16). Our own giving of similar honour is therefore demanded by this pattern.

Most, if not all, the recorded prayers of Paul are linked to an historical context. It is obvious that prayers of thanksgiving or for help would be linked to the reason for the thanks or the need for help. But this also seems to be the pattern for praise, which is stimulated by some immediate cause or memory of the wonderful operations of God.

Praise therefore should not be a formal action for the sake of going through the motions of offering praise, but should be triggered by real reasons recognised in our heart and mind as a consequence of our appreciation of events in our

life, either past or present. Praise arises because of what God is doing or has done.

### Giving thanks

We are used to offering thanks at each meal, and the same seems to have been true of Paul (Rom. 14:6). But, during the storm on his journey to Rome, this simple act in the presence of everyone must have had a powerful preaching effect, being an example to the other prisoners, the soldiers and the sailors, who all gained encouragement from Paul's faith and took food ready for the ordeal of evacuating the ship to reach land (Acts 27:33-36). The example of Paul encourages us to use opportunities to offer prayers in a public situation when circumstances are suitable.

In his prayers we find frequent expression of thanksgiving to God, covering a wide spectrum of reasons for us to imitate:

- The visit or presence of other brethren (Acts 28:15);
- The faith shown by particular churches with whom Paul had to do (Rom. 1:8; 6:17); or the gift of God's grace to them (1 Cor. 1:4). Though we may give thanks for physical things, there is also the need to remember the more important spiritual gifts we have received;
- Personal deliverance from "the body of this death" (Rom. 7:24,25);
- God's work through Christ (1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 2:14);
- God's bringing about care of the ecclesias by others, for example, Titus (2 Cor. 8:16).

### Exercising his apostleship

After receiving his apostolic commission, and after further preparation for his work had ensued, Paul became ready to use prayer in the service of the ecclesias. One example is found in Ephesians 3, where Paul begins a prayer in verse 1, breaks off to emphasise his apostolic commission, and in verses 14-21 completes the prayer. In many respects this substantial prayer (compared with the record of his others) is typical of Paul's prayers as a whole, and most of the headings in the article find a corresponding component in this prayer or in its context of Ephesians 3.

Without going into detailed exposition of this prayer, one important aspect will be noted. This is "the dispensation of the grace of God" given to Paul (v. 2), and subsequently called "the gift of the grace of God" (v. 7). It is defined as the

riches of Christ preached among the Gentiles (v. 8), and is mentioned in the prayer itself as "Christ . . . dwell[ing] in your hearts by faith" (v. 17). Grace is mentioned in many of Paul's prayers, and leads to our next section.

### "Grace to you"

In each of Paul's letters there is a prayer for grace to the recipients of the letter, both in the greeting and in the signature at the end. An 'Amen' appears after the signature, but not after the greeting. This structure could imply that in some sense each whole letter is a prayer, and is concerned with God's provision and the reader's recognition of the grace of God. Hebrews, if it is by Paul, is almost an exception, having no formal greeting, although the grace manifest in the Lord Jesus Christ is implied by the words of 1:2,3. The frequent prayer for grace applies to the riches of Christ working their full work within us by faith, which provides strength to the inner man, and peace (Eph. 3:16,17).

### For other help

On occasions Paul offered prayer on his own behalf, although the ultimate objective often seems to have involved the blessing of others. Usually we are not told the content of such prayers, but near the end of Romans we find one of these where details are given. Here Paul implores the help of the brethren at Rome to strive with him in prayer that he would be delivered from the Jews when he arrived at Jerusalem, that his ministration of the gift he was taking from the churches would be acceptable to the saints there, and finally that he would have opportunity to reach Rome also (Rom. 15:30-32). Here Paul takes the details of his ministerial work to God, and at the same time seeks by letter and joint prayer the cooperation of those whom he hopes will be the future recipients of his ministry.

Other prayers for help are more specifically on behalf of the churches, such as that at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:9-13). This prayer has very wide intent. In it Paul offers thanks to God for the joy he received in their company. He prays that he might be able to see them again, and be able to perfect their faith. He prays that the Lord will make them to abound in love, so that their hearts will be established in holiness at the coming of Christ. Such prayers, of course, have their place in our own prayers for our ecclesias, and for the Brotherhood more widely.

### For Israel

Note that Paul had himself been both spiritually and physically blind, and so had borne both literally and in type the curse of Israel, but recovered by believing in Jesus. He appreciated the needs of Israel, both as a fellow member of this people and as a fellow sufferer, now spiritually cured. His physical blindness was also cured. There may have remained a weakness of sight—his infirmity, as some think—to remind him of his past life.

In any case, memory of this past was sufficient to stimulate a strong desire for Israel's cure, which he expresses as follows: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1), and he had "great heaviness and continual sorrow" in his heart for them (9:2). Our own desires and prayers for the salvation of Israel should be stimulated by the fact that we have been joined to Israel through Christ and been given the spiritual light of the "hope of Israel". We are able to join with Paul at the conclusion of his prayer, which blesses God for placing Christ "over all" (v. 5).

### Paul's infirmity—the lesson of refusal

Paul's prayer for release from his infirmity was refused after the third request (2 Cor. 12:7-9); "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness", was the answer of God. The grace mentioned was the message of life, and, in Paul's case, through the gift of Holy Spirit and visions, a greatly enhanced power to convey that message to others.

We, as well as he, need to maintain our faith in spite of infirmities or other problems (v. 10). What we are given is an eternal hope. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us", as Paul puts it earlier (4:7). It is right that God should not answer all prayer in the way we might prefer.

### In prison

The earliest recorded example of Paul at prayer while in prison or in bonds was at Philippi, when "at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them" (Acts 16:25). The precise content of the prayer is not recorded. It occurred at midnight, was accompanied by praises, and was audible to the other prisoners. It had great power with God, for it caused an earthquake which shook the foun-

dations, opened the doors and freed the servants of God (v. 26).

Paul asks the Colossians for *their* prayers that his imprisonment should not prevent him revealing the secret of Christ, for the preaching of which he had come to be bound in the first place (4:3). He then requests, "Remember my bonds" (v. 18), reminding us also to pray for those in prison.

Paul's prayer for the saints at Philippi was closely related in his mind to his bonds he had experienced, both during his early preaching and in his later work of defending and confirming the gospel (1:3-7). He prays again in beautiful words for the overflowing of their love (vv. 9-11).

Following Paul's first appearance before Nero, his prayer is more for others than himself, in particular for those who had forsaken him: "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge" (2 Tim. 4:16). His own confidence in the Lord is clear, and culminates in a prayer of praise: "the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (v. 18).

### Farewells

There were occasions when Paul prayed as he was about to leave disciples, not expecting to see them again. One was at Miletus after Paul had called the elders from Ephesus to warn them to watch out for coming problems, where, after speaking to them, he kneeled and prayed with them all (Acts 20:36). The other was at Tyre, where he stayed with disciples for a few days, and on departure kneeled on the seashore with their families and prayed (21:5).

On neither occasion is the content revealed, but for us the important thing is to see that Paul needed prayer as he approached imprisonment, as did those he left behind in relative isolation from his care, and to see similar needs for ourselves. The fellowship of joint prayer would have helped Paul as he approached his trials, and would have helped the believers in theirs.

It is a pity that there is no space to consider more of Paul's numerous prayers or to spend more time on those we have briefly covered, but what we have considered will, I hope, stimulate further examination. The main lesson to be derived must be the importance of continuing prayer in our lives, as it was in Paul's.