

“... we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you” (Col. 1:9);  
 “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (4:2);  
 “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17);  
 “. . . we pray always for you” (2 Thess. 1:11);  
 “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (1 Tim. 2:1);  
 “I will therefore that men pray every where,

lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (v. 8);

“. . . without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day” (2 Tim. 1:3);

“I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers” (Philem. v. 4).

It is evident that Paul understood and constantly resorted to the privilege of prayer. Let us go and do likewise.

## The importance of prayer

John Nicholls

**T**HE IMPORTANCE of prayer in the first-century ecclesia is shown in Acts 1:13,14, when the apostles came together after the ascension of Christ and “continued with one accord in *prayer* and *supplication*, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren”. At this time the whole Jerusalem ecclesia, which numbered 120 (v. 15), met to replace Judas Iscariot, and, after they had *prayed*, Matthias was chosen by casting lots (vv. 24,25). Just a few days later, at Pentecost, the same Jerusalem ecclesia baptized 3,000 believers, who “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in *prayers*”. They “had all things common”, and praised God (2: 41-47).

### Prayer in the Jerusalem ecclesia

The next chapter of Acts also underlines the important part prayer played in the Jerusalem ecclesia, for we are told that Peter and John “went . . . into the temple *at the hour of prayer*, being the ninth hour” (3:1, cf. Ps. 55:17), healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and preached Christ. When they were imprisoned by the hostile priests and Sadducees, and then released, the ecclesia was moved to lift up its *voice in prayer* with one accord (4:24-31). This wonderful ecclesial prayer of thanks and praise to God for the deliverance of their beloved elder brothers Peter and John was answered by God shaking the place where they were assembled, and by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable the believers to preach the gospel with boldness.

When seven brethren were selected to organise welfare work in the ecclesia, they were dedicated to the task by *prayer* (6:6), and the apostles

said that this would enable them (the apostles) to give themselves “*continually to prayer*, and to the ministry of the Word” (v. 4).

The value placed on prayer by the first-century ecclesia is vividly illustrated in the events recorded in Acts 12, when the Apostle Peter was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa I. It was apparently Herod’s intention to put Peter to death when Passover was ended, but we are told that, during the time of Peter’s imprisonment, the ecclesia *prayed* “without ceasing” (v. 5) for their beloved apostle. It is clear from the narrative that this prayer involved an all-night ecclesial vigil, because, when the sleeping Peter was rescued from prison by the angel of the Lord at night (v. 7), many of the ecclesia were praying for his release at the same time in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark (v. 12). How many of us have participated in such intense and lengthy prayer meetings as this? Do we have a faith as strong as our early brethren and sisters must have had?

### Incense and prayer

This brief survey of the first few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, covering the time when the ecclesias were beginning to be established, confirms the important part prayer played in both ecclesial life and the lives of individual saints. These early Jewish brethren and sisters would have been familiar with the teaching of the Old Testament about prayer, particularly the instructions about the priests’ offering of incense. Although it was the role of the priest to offer incense on the altar, the nation of Israel had to supply the ingredients of the incense and support the priest. They were united with the priest in his

work. Thus we read in Luke 1:10: “the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense”. In Revelation 8:3 prayer and incense are linked: “And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne”.

Under the Law, incense would be offered in the morning and evening. David said: “Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). Elijah prayed at this very time, “the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice”, and said, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel” (1 Kgs. 18:36). Daniel records that “the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation” (9:21), and the wonderful Seventy Weeks Prophecy was then given to the aged prophet. Other prayers made at this time can be found in Acts 3:1 and Matthew 27:46. The power and effectiveness of prayer would therefore have been understood by our early brethren and sisters in the newly established ecclesia in Judea.

The incense was to be offered exclusively to God (Ex. 30:37); it was not to be used by the people of Israel. That would be tantamount to relying, not upon the strength of God, by seeking Him in prayer, but on the arm of the flesh, which is weak and erring. It had to be offered constantly, every evening and morning. It was made of equal weights of four spices: stacte, onycha, galbanum and frankincense. The likely origins of these spices is shown in the [panel](#).<sup>1</sup>

A most important fifth element was added to these four spices, blending them together; it was salt. Salt is the symbol of God’s covenant (Lev. 2:13; Num. 18:19). Faith in the life-preserving covenants of promise forms the basis of our approach to God: “he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). So faith tempers together the pure motive, the outpouring of energy of our life and the expression of our distress and trouble that make up the incense of our prayers.

The final step in the preparation of the incense was that it was to be beaten small (Ex. 30:36). David’s contrition over his sin with Bathsheba, uttered in the words of Psalm 51, is an

example of the right approach to our God. Verse 17 says: “The sacrifices of God are a *broken spirit*: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise”. The very first verse of the Beatitudes uttered by our Master was, “Blessed are the *poor in spirit*: for their’s is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3).

This incense was offered on the golden incense altar (Ex. 37:25-28) morning and evening by the priests in the holy place, speaking of acceptable prayer being offered through the sacrifice of Christ, who has reconciled us to our God. All the altars foreshadow Jesus (Heb. 13:10,15).<sup>2</sup>

So, returning to our first-century brothers and sisters, we can see that the Law of God, ministered to their forebears by Moses, taught them the principles of acceptable prayer.

### Paul’s instructions about prayer

The Apostle Paul, by both precept and example, shows us how important prayer is in public and individual worship. One of the clearest principles Paul sets out is for us to be consistent and regular in prayers:

- “praying always . . . (Eph. 6:18);
- “night and day praying exceedingly . . .” (1 Thess. 3:10);
- “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17);
- “we pray always . . .” (2 Thess. 1:11);
- “. . . my prayers night and day” (2 Tim. 1:3).

He was applying the lesson of the Law, which was that incense should be offered along with the burnt offering of the lamb every morning and evening. This was not optional; it was a commandment.<sup>3</sup>

So prayer is not optional for us, it is part of our service to God. Being disciplined and regular in prayer, by making it a habit in our lives, is something to strive for. Husbands and wives can encourage one another in this by praying regularly together. Giving thanks for our food at meal times, as Jesus did (Jno. 6:11), is another way that helps us to be regular in our prayers.

The Apostle Paul leaves us several instructions about the things we should pray for. He

- 
1. Information obtained from *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Bible Plants*, F. Nigel Hepper, 1992, IVP, chapter 14, “Fragrant incense”.
  2. For more on incense and prayer see Section 1, “The symbol of prayer”, in *Making Prayer Powerful*, H. P. Mansfield, 1972, Logos Publications.
  3. See *The Law of Moses*, R. Roberts, pp. 191-5, sixth edition, 1960, The Christadelphian.

### The ingredients of the incense

**Stacte** may be balsam from a shrub growing in Southern Arabia, or from storax trees, or from the liquidambar tree. The latter plant has its bark beaten in spring, causing the resin to accumulate for collection in the autumn. The word translated 'stacte' means 'a liquid drop', such as tears, and perhaps the fact that prayer is often poured out as a result of suffering and trouble is the idea conveyed by stacte.

**Onycha** is thought by some to be a substance called onyx obtained from a shellfish, but others think it more likely to be a fragrant plant of uncertain identity.

**Galbanum** is a green resin from the giant fennel, a member of the parsley family. The word is derived from the Hebrew for 'fat', *cheleb*. Our God expects us to use our energy in His service, and our prayers should be an outpouring of energy. Such prayer was exemplified by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when "he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Lk. 22:44).

**Frankincense** is a white resin extracted from tropical *Boswellia* trees. The Hebrew word for 'frankincense' is *lebonah*, meaning 'whiteness'. It is a symbol of purity and righteousness. In prayer our motives should be pure, and we should seek forgiveness through the mediation of Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness.

said we should pray "for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1). In this he was like his Lord and Master, who counselled us to pray even for those who "despitefully use" us. Paul also counsels us to pray "for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (v. 2). The writer well remembers an elderly brother who, when he presided on Sunday mornings, always prayed for "the Queen and her ministers".

Paul especially asked his brethren and sisters to pray for his work:

"helping together by prayer for us" (2 Cor. 1:11);

"withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance" (Col. 4:3);  
 "Brethren, pray for us" (1 Thess. 5:25; cf. Heb. 13:18).

In turn, prayer for his brethren and sisters and the ecclesias he had established and visited must have occupied a large part of Paul's devotions:

". . . in every prayer of mine for you all" (Phil. 1:4);

"we . . . do not cease to pray for you" (Col. 1:9);

"making mention of thee always in my prayers" (Philem. v. 4).

When we read the detailed greetings that Paul wrote to the ecclesia in Rome (ch. 16), we realise that Paul would not just have spoken generally of his brethren and sisters in prayer, but would

have laid each one of them by name, and their problems that he was aware of, before his God. The writer well remembers that his own father, giving thanks at supper time, would mention by name every member of his ecclesia and lay their particular problems before our God.

Paul must have spent long hours in prayer to his God on behalf of the many ecclesias he knew so well. We may not all be able to speak or preside or carry out the more prominent duties in an ecclesia, but everyone can follow Paul's example of prayer for our brethren and sisters.

#### Helps to prayer

In the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul the words 'pray', 'prayer', 'praying', etc., occur about 100 times, showing us the importance Paul placed on private and ecclesial prayer. However, it is not always easy to pray. Some young men are even held back from being baptized because they lack confidence about any praying and reading in public which they may be asked to do as brethren. How can we overcome the difficulties that are experienced about praying, both in private and in public?

Practice is surely part of the answer. There are many prayers recorded in Scripture, such as Hezekiah's, Ezra's, Nehemiah's, Daniel's and, of course, those in the wonderful book of Psalms. They are model prayers for us to base our own prayers on.

The other necessity, as we have already seen from considering the incense, is faith, the salt which tempers the incense ingredients together: "he that cometh to God [in prayer] must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). So prayer has to spring from our conviction that the living God, Whom we cannot see, hears us and responds to us in mercy and truth, and will ultimately fulfil all His great and precious promises and allow us to partake of His Divine nature. Our prayers, therefore, are a mirror of our faith, and our faith derives from the Word of God. Prayer and faith go hand in hand as we walk towards the Kingdom of God, trusting in our God.

A third help to overcome difficulties in prayer is to memorise Scripture, particularly the Psalms. The "prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears" offered up by our Lord Jesus (5:7) are surely recorded for us in the book of Psalms, and many have found that particular psalms express their own needs in prayer. In the long, wakeful hours we sometimes experience in bed at night, when we commune with our hearts and with our God, the Psalms can provide immeasurable comfort, and adequately express our prayers far better than our own words and thoughts.

A fourth help is the element of habit. Israel was instructed to offer incense morning and evening, at the beginning and the ending of the day. Surely our days should begin and end in supplication and thanks to our heavenly Father. If we are in a habit of praying, then the difficulties we may experience may be overcome. The element of habit can help to overcome our moods and our circumstances, both of which can change markedly from day to day.

Paul gives us a valuable lesson about prayer in 2 Corinthians 12. Three times he prayed for the removal of a "thorn in the flesh", but his request was not granted. It was a request undoubtedly made out of unselfish motives, perhaps so that he could preach the Word more effectively. Unlike us, Paul had a direct answer to his prayer: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). The thorn in the flesh remained, but Paul had spiritual strength to rise above his affliction. His brethren and sisters would have been able to see that God can be with a person and provide him or her with strength to overcome all difficulties, and that the gospel is indeed powerful to save. So God's strength was "made perfect in weakness". May our prayers help us to achieve the same spiritual strength.

## How should we pray?

Tony Benson

*The purpose of this article is to deal with various practical issues concerning prayer, using Scriptural guidance where this exists. It is anticipated that this article will be more helpful to those who are young in the Truth; those who have been in the Truth for some time will no doubt have formed their own pattern and practices of prayer.*

**C**HRISTADELPHIANS have never made use of set prayers; we have no prayer book, unlike the established churches or other religions. We have no rules about what language to use in our prayers. This is in accordance with Scripture, for we find no evidence of fixed forms of prayer being used by our first-century brethren, and very little even in relation to Israel un-

der the Law of Moses, though Numbers 6:23-27 is one exception.

### What form of words should we use?

In our private prayers we are free to say what we feel to be appropriate, though we must bear in mind the need to be reverent in our approach to the Father. Simple, direct language is surely the best here. God knows our thoughts anyway, and we should express our thoughts to Him in a natural way. And the same principle of using simple language should surely apply to our public prayers also. We have as a community developed a certain vocabulary of prayer which can easily wash over us without creating much impact. Praying in public is not easy, and sticking to particular wording may be necessary for some, but that wording can at least be simple; why, for