



PRAYER

Paul's Practice and Instructions



Woman praying at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Shown to the right of the ladies are *Tzetels*, which are small slips of paper with prayer requests on them. Visitors often leave these in the cracks between the stones.

Right: A Christian stele from the Coptic period. The high relief decoration shows the figure of a man in Greco-Roman dress, with his hands upraised in an attitude of prayer. He stands in a chapel whose pediment is supported by papyrus columns. Ancient Egyptian

temples often were reused as churches after the advent of Christianity in Egypt. The Greek letters at the bottom of the stele spell out APLON-ANNEKAILI. They may represent an illiterate attempt to write the name of the deceased, possibly APA(I)OANNE(S) "Father John."

By Cecil R. Taylor

PAUL HAD NEVER VISITED the Christians in Rome but urgently wanted to go. According to Romans, he prayed fervently for an opportunity to visit the Eternal City and often planned trips, but something always interfered (Rom. 1:10,13). Mention of Paul's prayer life opens questions. How did Paul pray? What did he teach about prayer? Answers come from early Christian practice, the Book of Acts, and Paul's letters.

Early Christian Practice

Faithful first-century Jews prayed in the temple, synagogue, and home.¹ Most early Christians kept up their previously practiced Jewish prayer customs. They continued to pray in temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1), synagogue (9:2), and house (10:9) at the appointed times of 9:00 AM (see 2:15, if the gathering of 2:1 was for prayer), noon (10:9), and 3:00 PM (3:1). Surely Paul did the same. Scriptures show he regularly worshiped in synagogues (13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2,10,17; 18:4,19; 19:8) and at least once sought a meeting for Sabbath prayers in a city with no synagogue (16:13).

Jewish people prayed sitting, kneeling, and prostrate, but usually standing with arms extended and hands opened upward (see 1 Tim. 2:8)², perhaps indicating dependence and expectation. At least two times Paul knelt in prayer (Acts 20:36; 21:5; with Eph. 3:14). "Laying on of hands" was connected with prayer at the times of appointment to ministry (Acts 13:3), of baptism (19:6), and of healing (28:8). Twice fasting accompanied prayer (13:2-3; 14:23). Both laying on of hands and fasting, however, appear to have been secondary features.³

Acts

The whole of Paul's conversion experience involved prayer on his part. On



the Damascus Way he spoke directly to the risen Lord (9:5). For three days, he fasted and prayed, even before God sent Ananias to him (vv. 9,11). He was baptized "calling on [Jesus'] name" (v. 18 with 22:16). Shortly thereafter Christ warned Paul of danger while he prayed in the temple (9:26-30; 22:17). The church at Antioch was praying when God ordered them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for special service (13:3). At Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch the pair prayed before appointing elders (14:23). At a prayer meeting in Philippi, Paul led Lydia to become the first convert on European soil (16:13,16). The conversion of the Philippian jailer followed a midnight session of prayer (v. 25). On his way to Jerusalem, Paul knelt to pray with believers both at Miletus (20:36) and on the beach at Tyre (21:5). He used "the language of prayer" to urge Agrippa to "believe" (26:29 with 2 Cor. 5:20)⁴ and offered table grace (Acts 27:35). The final glimpse of



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Paul's prayers in Acts shows he prayed for the healing of Publius's father and other sick citizens on Malta (28:8-9).

Paul's Letters

Paul's letters contain the apostle's directions regarding prayer, the prayers he prayed, and his general theology of prayer. Straightforward commands to pray are few. Readers in various cities (Rom. 15:30; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17,25)—and also Paul's colleague Timothy (1 Tim. 2:1-2,8)—received orders to pray. In addition Paul called believers to give thanks always and in every circumstance (Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:15-17; 1 Thess. 5:18). Prayer is not prayer without thanksgiving.

If they "imitated" Paul (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7,9), his readers had to pray the kinds of prayer Paul did. While no hard lines separated the kinds of prayer in Paul's letters, his prayers seem to fit into three general categories.⁵

One category is *thanksgiving*. Even if he quickly took readers to task, Paul usually started his letters by giving thanks for them. He thanked God for their notable faith (Rom. 1:8), their growing faith and love (Eph. 1:15-16; Col. 1:3-8; 1 Thess. 1:3; Philem. 4-5), and the grace God bestowed on them (1 Cor. 1:4). He also thanked God for how some shared in spreading the gospel (Phil. 1:3-5); for the Father's initiative in salvation; and for the faith, hope, and love believers demonstrated (1 Thess. 1:2-5; 2 Thess. 2:13).

Another category is *worship and adoration*. This category includes prayers offered to "God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3, KJV; see also Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3) and those linking Father and Son together (1 Thess. 3:11-12; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 3:5). In the front of his letters, Paul characteristically offered prayers of "grace and peace" in the name of Father and Son (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2). The "grace" benedictions that end Paul's letters,

though, Paul offered in the name of Jesus only (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2 Thess. 3:18). Included here also are two kinds of adoration prayers. "Blessed be" prayers first pronounce a blessing on God and then list reasons for it (for example 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3). Eulogies of praise to God also occur (for example Rom. 11:33-36; Gal. 1:5; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20).⁶

A third category is *petition*. Often these crop up as "prayer reports." Paul said he prayed for his readers and then told the content of those prayers. Sometimes he asked God to let him visit his readers (Rom. 1:9-10); or to give them increasing spiritual vision (Eph. 1:16-21); or to see they grow in love, knowledge, and discernment (Phil. 1:4-11); or that they please the Lord in every way (Col. 1:9-12). At other times he prayed about their faith, hope, and love in life's hard spots (1 Thess. 1:3-5); or that the name of Christ would be glorified in them (2 Thess. 1:11-12); or about his desire

Left: Overlooking ruins at the ancient city of Miletus, in modern southwest Turkey, near the ancient city of Ephesus. Paul, on his final missionary journey, visited Miletus. The leaders of the Ephesian church met him there. During their poignant, final encounter, Paul knelt and prayed with them (Acts 20:17-35).

Right: Modern-day Antakya (Antioch of Syria), which is

actually located in the Republic of Turkey. After prayer, fasting, and laying on of hands, the believers at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

Below: The Church of Lydia, which is located next to the Gaggitis River, about half a mile from the ruins at ancient Philippi. The church commemorates Lydia's conversion to Christianity.



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to see a dear friend (2 Tim. 1:3-4); or that a brother would grow into full spiritual maturity and effectiveness (Philem. 4-6). At times Paul's prayer reports turned into intercession (for example Rom. 10:1; 2 Cor. 13:9; Eph. 3:16-19). So did "wish prayers" that referred to God in the third person with a verb that writers translated "May"—for instance, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him" (Rom. 15:13a, NIV; see also vv. 5-6; 2 Cor. 13:13; 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 2 Tim. 1:16,18; 2:25; 4:16).⁷ Also in this group are the "grace and peace" benedictions that open and close his letters (for example Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; 13:13).⁸

Theological Implications

We learn much from studying Paul's words about prayer. Suggestions toward a theology of prayer include the following.

1. Usually Paul directed prayer to God (1 Cor. 1:4; Col. 1:3). At times he prayed "through Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:8) but only rarely addressed prayer directly to Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2; 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:12). Never did he pray to the Spirit.⁹
2. Paul considered prayer integral to the believer's relationship to God (Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17).
3. Effective service depended on prayer. Paul asked believers to pray that God would give him the opportunities to preach the gospel and the

boldness and freedom to preach it (Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:3-4).¹⁰

4. Paul knew God grants many prayers but denies others (2 Cor. 12:7-10).
5. Paul affirmed that God reveals His will through prayer (Rom. 1:10; 15:32).
6. Paul said the Spirit helps believers pray (8:26-27).
7. He called for believers to pray for government officials (1 Tim. 2:2).
8. He reflected the practice of table grace (Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:30; 11:24; 1 Tim. 4:4-5).

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1. W. Bingham Hunter, "Prayer" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 725-34.

2. Grant R. Osborne, "Moving Forward on Our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52.2 (June 2010): 246.

3. E. R. Bernard, "Prayer" in *A Dictionary of the Bible Dealing with Language, Literature and Contents including the Biblical Theology*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 44.

4. Joel B. Green, "Persevering Together in Prayer: The Significance of Prayer in the Acts of the Apostles" in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 195.

5. Richard N. Longenecker, "Prayer in the Pauline Letters" in *Into God's Presence*, 203-27, esp. 212-23.

6. *Ibid.*, 215-17.

7. *Ibid.*, 220-23.

8. Hunter, 727-28.

9. *Ibid.*, 731.

10. *Ibid.*

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