

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018  
Paul on Prayer

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament Epistles shows that Paul has a lot to say about prayer. He began his Christian life in prayer Acts 9 verse 11. When Paul was converted of the Damascus Road, he was left blind. Ananias, an ordinary Christian was instructed by God to go and pray for Paul to receive his sight. When Ananias expressed concern about going to Paul, or Saul, as he was a known hater of Christians, he was given this absolute assurance that Saul was now a changed man. The evidence, 'behold, he is praying.' Paul began his Christian life in prayer, and he continued in like manner through his life and ministry. If there is any 'secret' to the usefulness of Paul, it is firstly God's choosing him, and then his response to that choice, he prayed.

Paul was born in prayer, fashioned by prayer and tempered by prayer. Such was the importance of prayer to him and his experience of it that in his Epistles he makes many astonishing statements which are so different to how we think today.

People in our generation, and even in the Church, have a self confidence that is alien even to our parent's generation and certainly so to the Scriptures. It seems to be one of Mr. Trump's favourite sayings that he can 'fix it.' A bit like Bob the Builder, but not so funny. Our own politicians are not much different. Every crisis brings out the promises that we will learn the lessons from this or that. However we generally don't and another crisis arises. Troubles in the Health Service, or in Education brings the experts out with more plans and philosophies. Did you see on the news some odd stuff a week or two ago? I looked in my diary and it wasn't the 1<sup>st</sup> of April.

A school somewhere in the UK has banned boys from wearing shorts in hot weather, saying that they should wear skirts! Another expert is telling parents that children should not be made to say 'sorry.' For all the strategies and new plans and systems, we do not actually see personal happiness or safety increasing, but we are now rather used to there being epidemic shop lifting, levels of violence that keep on increasing despite the ban on giving a smack, more accounts of needless violence than ever and on and on, despite all the stuff the experts are saying.

It is the same in the Church. There have never been so many resources, schemes, philosophies and new expressions, yet a better mouse trap is nowhere to be seen. It is a sobering thought that despite all the innovations, inventions, and technology that have come our way, the Church of Scotland membership has declined from 1.3 million 50 years ago to 330,000 today. Nothing has slowed or averted the decline. In other parts of the world, South America and China for example, the Church is growing rapidly. This is happening despite the fact that most of the Church is resource poor, and in China, is still largely underground because of the Communist rule.

There are parallels between the early Church and the Church in China. Poor in resources and freedom, but rich in faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. With all our

resources and technology, you would expect that the Church would be growing in the West beyond measurement, but is not.

Why is this? There are many reasons, but the main reason is our self-confidence which is based on a supposed ability to do things ourselves and an ignorance of the spiritual realities as expressed in the teaching and practice of Paul as regards prayer.

Let me give a sample of Paul's astonishing statements about prayer.

1 Corinthians 14 verses 14 and 18.

Paul says that he prays more than all the Corinthians. Don't be put off by the reference to praying in tongues, for that is just one piece of equipment that Christ has given the Church to help us pray. The fact is that Paul says that he prays more than them. He is not saying that the Corinthian's don't pray and hence it would not be hard to pray more than them. The statement is a statement of surpassing devotion to prayer. Other Scriptures back this up.

Ephesian's 1 verse 6.

Paul says that he has not stopped thanking God for them and praying for them. This is quite astonishing because Paul's ministry in Ephesus was very difficult, and very effective. In many ways the Church planted in Ephesus was a model Church and a powerful Church. I think our tendency would be that when things were going well, we would sit back a bit in triumph and satisfaction. Not Paul. When things are going well, he prays all the more!

1 Thessalonians 1 verse 3.

Paul says that he is continually praying for them. Is he exaggerating or what? There is an old pop song where the end of the chorus goes,

'You were ever on my mind, you were ever on my mind.'

What Paul means here is that whenever he was not praying or preaching in other places, his mind would return to think and pray for the Thessalonians and the other Churches he founded. Some of you may remember the Circus act of the person who spun plates. They got so many spinning they were stretched between spinning new plates, and keeping the old ones turning – that is a poor picture of Paul at prayer. No Church was forgotten, he worked to spin them all in prayer.

Philippians 4 verse 6.

Paul tells the believers to pray about everything, because God cares. I do not think that Paul has in mind what often happens today, as also in past times, where we decide on something we decide to do, and then pray that God would bless our plans. Clearly that has not worked too well. For Paul, there was nothing that could be done before there was serious prayer, and much to be done after prayer. I wonder what would happen if I announced that every second Session and Board meeting would be devoted to prayer. I think after we got over the shock, we would get more done and done with more effect.

Ephesian's 6 verse 18.

Paul says to pray on all occasions with all types of prayer. What types do we know? I am a bit nervous about introducing types of prayer into a Sunday Service because I get enough comments about very average things. An example of a type of prayer – When the leader says 'lets pray,' everyone in the congregation prays out loud at the same time. In English, Doric, Tongues, or whatever your national language is. How would you feel about that? Don't say that that sort of thing only happens in foreign countries, It has been done many times in Scotland. For example at a Presbytery meeting in the North, in the month of May in 2018, not in 1802!

There are all types of prayer and praying, and Paul encourages it all, real prayer, not a show or some excuse for it.

1 Timothy 2 verse 1.

This should be a very uncomfortable text for today's Church. Our Church services tend to be more song services than prayer services. Paul is giving council to Timothy. He tells him that of first importance is the place of prayer, and who to pray for and why. These verses in Timothy link prayer to peace, and peace to mission and evangelism. Do we desire peace, do we desire there to be mission and evangelism? Then the starting place for both is prayer.

Romans 15 verse 30.

Paul urges most strongly that the Church in Rome pray for him as a vital means of empowering his ministry and the advancement of God's plans on the earth. At times it seems as if Paul is telling us that everything depends on us praying, at other times he expresses his confidence in God's working alone as Sovereign. How do we resolve this apparent dilemma? Well, we don't, we hold them in tension. To turn to another line of a hymn in the Wesley's Hymn Book,

'Pray as if ion that alone hung the issue of the day,  
Pray that help may be sent down,  
Watch, and pray.'

We are to pray as if everything depended on our prayers, and trust as if everything depended on God. Back to the analogy of the relay race. We are sure to fail if we rely only on the speed of the fastest runner on the last leg. Each runner is to run as if his leg was the only leg, even though the best runner is still to do his bit. We are to pray as if all depended on our prayer, and believe as if it all depended on God!

There are many other things Paul says about prayer directly as well as by implication, but I hope you would agree with me that Paul presents a high and pressing view of the place of prayer in individual and corporate Christian life.

The history of the Church in the world testifies to the same. Google Praying Hyde and see what you make of that. Look at the book, 'The Scots Worthies' by John Howie and

you will read of one of our forebears who considered a day wasted if he did not pray for 8 hours. Read about the Prayer Mountains, the historic Prayer Concerts, the 24/7 prayer of the Moravian Brethren and many others over the generations and the devotions of Hudson Taylor, Brainerd, McCheyne and Bradford. We need to consider the outcomes of these lives and ours and do as Paul said, follow him as he follows the Lord, imitate his faith. I challenge myself.

Paul prays big because he knows God to be big. We will never pray big if our experimental knowledge of God is small. If we ignore Sunday service and the week by week preaching, we will not flourish. If we do not struggle and fight for daily duties of devotion, we will not and cannot flourish as Christians.

Paul in many places records the core of his praying and this is to help us see how to do it, what heights and depths we can reach in prayer.

As in the Lord's Prayer, we should take time to consider who God is – to Hallow His Name. We can do much worse that read through one of the creeds, these can be found in the Hymn books of the Church of Scotland. Read and seek to comprehend what they say – 'We believe...' It is sobering to consider what we believe, and how we would respond if our faith is true. Try reading one of the creeds and after a few attempts as we get more familiar with the old language, if we feel our hearts stirred and gratitude, thanks and praise rising up from within, we are getting to the place of prayer. Take time to, 'be still and know that I am God.' This will give wings to our praying!

Let me surprise you. If we hallow God's Name in this way, and we never get round to asking for anything, don't be alarmed. God will honour those who honour Him. God knows our situation, and no one who waits for God alone will be put to shame. Many have got answers to prayers they wanted to pray but never got round to verbalising because they were caught up in offering praise to God.

Let's look at the report of Paul's prayer as found in Ephesians 1 verses 15-23.

The Ephesian Church is a good Church. It had a reputation for faith in God and love for the saints. That would be Jesus description of the true Christian - Love God and your neighbor. You would think that Paul would be quite pleased with this and say that he had no worries about them. Wrong! It is because they are doing well that he prays all the more for them. When things go well, we get complacent and we let things slip. We become enamored with the world and things in it, and pay more attention to things about our comfort than about godly things. Prosperity in a Church is more dangerous than poverty or persecution. Paul prays for the Church in the good as much, or more so, than in the bad.

Sadly for us, people say they are just too busy to pray. I am glad that Jesus was not too busy to come to earth and die for us!

Read the report Paul gives of the content of his praying. This is much more than asking God for a nice day for a wedding, or that our kids will do well at school. Paul's praying is at a heavenly, cosmic level. He is praying that God will transform the Christians more and more, to be the sorts of people who live to the praise of God's glory. To live to the praise of God's glory means ever increasing Christ-likeness in us, and that we bring credit to God. Do you remember what people said of the early Christians as reported in Acts? They looked at the way these new Christians lived and said, 'see how these Christians love one another!' Does that not explain why they did not need to do evangelism courses and strategies, because they themselves were living messages? In the ages when Christians have been different from the world, the Church has grown by people becoming Christians. That is how it should be, but in those eras, people prayed.

Think about the words Paul uses in this report of his prayer. Wisdom, revelation, enlightened hearts, experiential Knowledge of God by faith and fellowship with God. Other ideas include being called to belong to God, inheritance, power and resurrection. Do we have any experience of these things? They come in the times of prayer where we see them by faith, and by the Holy Spirit, God infuses them into us.

None of us need feel overwhelmed by the difference in our experience and that of Paul in prayer. The disciples of Jesus asked Him to teach them to pray as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray. Prayer is learned, everyone needs to learn. Private praying is where we learn, and the public prayer meeting is where we get our homework checked! We need both.

Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verses 8-11.

Look at verse 11. Can it be that Paul is indicating that there are blessings that are only to be found through the prayers of others? If we think about the description of the Church as the Body of Christ, as a body, then this makes sense. The point of the body metaphor is to show that Christians have different abilities and gifts. The eye is not the ear, and the foot is not a hand, but all need to function within their calling and contribute to the life of the body. Just as the eye cannot digest lunch, but depends upon the energy released by our innards, so Paul depends on other parts of the body to supply what he cannot do himself.

In this way of thinking we can conclude that the Corinthians could contribute a blessing to Paul that could only come through their prayers. It is the same in every generation. I am glad that many Churches in South America, Africa and Asia are praying for the decayed Church in Scotland. In previous generations, Scotland prayed for them and sent workers to them who founded their Churches. Now they are repaying the debt by praying for us. This also gives me hope for the Church in Scotland and the Church of Scotland.

Paul is well worth a serious examination on prayer. The prayers and praying events of the Old Testament are worthy of examination as well, but I will leave you to do that yourselves.

Prayer was the first thing in Jesus life, in Paul's life. It is the first thing in the lives of the Churches around the world which are growing. The sidelining of prayer is the first step to decline in any Church or congregation. That does not mean that congregations are not busy, but we have to be ruthlessly honest about the effect of our prayer less work.

We are only a short time after this year's General Assembly, and despite the concerns about the denominations ability to survive beyond the next ten years, there was no prayer, only schemes and strategies that we could do. God was not asked. An attempt was made to put serious prayer on the agenda, but it was gently patted on the head and we were told to sit down because we had to discuss and plan. Basically the attitude was that we can sort this out ourselves if we get the right plan, and prayer would be a waste of time at the moment! The terrible thing is that the Old Testament is full of that sort of thinking, and see where it got them.

Prayer is learned, let's learn and see what God wants to do with us.