

1) **Paul’s Jewish Approach to Prayer:**

Paul was born, probably, in Tarsus (modern-day Turkey) between 2 and 5 A.D. His family were Roman citizens (by decree rather than birth). He was proud of his Jewish origins - “I was a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents; in observance of the law a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5-6). In The Acts of the Apostles we are told that the young man Paul studied in Jerusalem to become a Pharisee under Rabbi Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee of the time and a member of the Sanhedrin – the authoritative Council of the Jews (Acts 23:6; Phil 3:5).

The Pharisees were a group within Judaism, distinguished by strict, conservative observance of the Jewish/Mosaic Law and of the many interpretations/safeguards of that Law. Paul confirms this - “I was advancing beyond many Jews of my own age, I was so extremely zealous for the tradition of our fathers” (Galatians 1:14).

As a zealous Pharisaic Jew, Paul would have believed that a personal God created the world and that He intended that there would be an ongoing, personal relationship between this personal God and the individual Jew. He also believed that God had an ongoing involvement in His creation: God had acted in the world on numerous occasions in the past (e.g. the Exodus from Egypt around 1,250 B.C. was a classic example).

As a dutiful Jew, Paul would regularly – at least weekly - attend the local synagogue for Readings and Instructions in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scripture and for Communal Prayer. He would have learned that the more one read and considered the Old Testament, then the better one understood God’s Plan/Will for creation – and the better one could pray and work for its accomplishment. [It was at such a Sabbath-day meeting in the local synagogue at Nazareth that Jesus declared himself to be the saviour foretold by Isaiah – and was rejected by the people (Lk 4:16-30)].

Paul, like all Jews, would have prayed at least three set times each day. Prayers of thanksgiving, praise, joy, intercession, etc. would have been a part of his everyday life – in his private life, family life, public life, and in his liturgical or worship life.

What was Paul’s attitude to the followers of Christ?

Paul was living in Jerusalem in the period 25-35 A.D. shortly after Christ’s death and resurrection. After Christ’s resurrection, the number of Christians grew rapidly; Acts tells us that 3,000 became Christian on Pentecost Sunday alone (Acts 2:41). Paul the Pharisee would have disliked the claim that Jesus was fulfilling, or, reinterpreting (in Paul’s view changing) the Scriptures (Mt 5:43f. “But, I say to you ‘love even your enemies’”) and that he was willing to break the traditional rules by healing the infirm on the Sabbath (every form of work – including healing - was forbidden on the Sabbath). He would have been opposed to and, therefore, anxious to stamp out any breaking of the Law, or the traditional safeguarding rules. It is not surprising then that Acts tells us that Paul was a zealous persecutor of the Christian

group. In Philippians 3:6 Paul himself says that “in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless” (see Gal 1:13-14). He also participated in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54-60). “That very day the church in Jerusalem began to suffer cruel persecution.... All the believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1f). In Acts 8:3 we are told that “Paul tried to destroy the church; going from house to house, he dragged out the believers both men and woman throwing them into jail.” Later, he was anxious to go to Damascus, in the name of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, to arrest, interrogate and bring back to Jerusalem any Christians he could arrest (Acts 9:2).

His meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed his entire life.

The self-confessed Persecutor of the followers of Jesus now became the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). He travelled throughout the Roman Empire (from Jerusalem to Rome), mostly on foot, for 20-30 years setting up Christian churches across modern-day Syria, Turkey, Greece, even as far as Rome and revisiting them some years later. Another means of contact and support for his churches was his Letters. He wrote his 7 Undisputed Letters (Romans, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians and Philemon) between the late forties and the early sixties A.D. Some commentators accept that Paul’s thinking strongly influenced other Letters (e.g. Ephesians, Colossians) but that they were written by followers of Paul. He definitely didn’t write 1 and 2 Timothy or the Letter to Titus. So, Paul’s undisputed letters are earlier than the first Gospel (Mark’s), which was written after 70 A.D.

Paul’s Letters show a remarkably thorough knowledge of the Old Testament both by quotation and by allusion. In 1 Corinthians alone Paul quoted or alluded to the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Psalms, Genesis, Deuteronomy, Exodus, Job, Sirach, Jeremiah, and Hosea. He had a strong sense of the Scriptures as God’s communication/word with his people. Some commentators maintain that Paul may have known many of the Old Testament books ‘by heart.’ It is generally thought that Paul was martyred in Rome during the persecution of Christians in the mid 60’s AD.

2) Examples of Paul’s Christian Prayer Life:

Prayers of Greeting/Farewell:

All Paul’s Letters begin with a prayer of Greeting. For example: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians 1:1-2 (“Paul and Timothy, slaves/servants of Jesus Christ, to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.....grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” His First Letter to the Thessalonians opens with the prayer “Paul, Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace” (1 Thess 1:1). The greeting prayers which open his other Letters are very similar. We pray one of Paul’s greeting prayers every time we participate in the Eucharist (2 Cor 13:13): “May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Prayers of Thanksgiving:

Having greeted the church to which he is writing, Paul often continues with a prayer of Thanksgiving to God for the graces/gifts/Love God has showered liberally on the church he is addressing (sometimes quite lengthy, e.g. 1 Thessalonians 1:1- 3:13; Galatians 1:1-5; Romans 1:8-15; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 2 Corinthians 2:1-10; Philippians 1:1-10; Philemon 1:4-7). In 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4 reads: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labour of love and your endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God, how you were chosen.”

Praise/Glory/Worship:

Romans 11:33-35 is a hymn of praise of God “as the creator, sustainer, and goal of the universe” (J. A. Fitzmyer, *NJBC*, 862) - “For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36). It is an exclamation, “not in awe and fear but in wonder and gratitude, at the boundless providence of God in arranging the mutual assistance of Jews and Gentiles in attaining salvation” (J. A. Fitzmyer, *NJBC*, 862). The Letter to the Ephesians has a beautiful hymn of praise of God (Eph 1:3-6): “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the favour of his will, for the praise and glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.” This may well have been a liturgical hymn (V. Smiles, *1 Thessalonians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians*, p. 95). In Philippians 4:20 Paul prays like this: “To our God and Father, glory forever and ever. Amen.” [1 Peter 1:3-12 is similar to Ephesians 1:3-6.]

Petition/Intercession:

Many of his Letters are littered with Intercessory Prayers (e.g. Ephesians 3:16-19). Colossians 1:9-12 (“Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy giving thanks to the Father, who has gifted you a share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light”).

Prayers of Joy:

In Phillipians 1:3-4 Paul prays: “I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.” In his Letter to the Romans, Paul prays: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13).

Spontaneous/Mantra-type Prayer:

Frequently, Paul seemed to burst into spontaneous prayer (1 Cor 2:9 - “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human heart what things God has prepared for those who love Him).” He frequently called God “Our Father” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6; Gal 1:4; Phil 4:20; 1 Thess 1:3, 3:11, 3:13): ‘Maranatha/Come, Lord Jesus’ (1 Cor 16:22); ‘I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal 2:20-21); “I am Christ’s” (1 Cor 1:12).

Prayers of Anticipation/Assurance/Hope:

In many of his Letters, Paul often inserted a prayer of hope (usually towards the end of the Letter). Philippians 4:19 – “My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” In 1 Corinthians 15:56-58 he thanks “God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” Also, Phillipians 2:1-17 is noteworthy.

In summary, these prayers expressed Paul’s understanding of God as his Father-Creator, the One with whom he was in an intimate, loving, trusting relationship – based on an adult or mature understanding of his relationship with God our Father, and also on his ongoing awareness of the Father’s love for him/others.

3) Paul’s Purposeful Prayer:

1: Paul, the Jew, grew up knowing and believing that his God was a personal, living God who was in an ongoing relationship with his creation (“I will be your God and you will be my people” (Exod 6:7; Jeremiah 30:22). Paul knew that humanity had been created in God’s image and likeness, that humanity was created to **recognise** God’s love and to **return** it to God and neighbour,’ and that their destiny was to look forward to living with their God forever.

2: Throughout Old Testament times God’s prophets (e.g. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) recognised that God’s people were straying from God’s Will and they consistently called for repentance, i.e. a return to His Will – this was often at great costs to the individual prophet.

3: Christ, the long-promised and long-awaited Prophet/Messiah, came on earth to call on God’s people to return to God’s Plan. But, his message of peace, justice and love was too disturbing for those in power (both religious and political) – as foretold in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Therefore he was condemned, crucified, buried – and God exalted/raised him.

4: Paul’s meeting with Christ on the road near Damascus confirmed many of his beliefs and it also challenged what he had believed (Acts 9, 22 and 26). Now that Jesus had been raised from the dead as an embodied spirit, there was no denying

- 1) that Jesus was the Son of God, the Christ, the long-promised Messiah
- 2) that God the Father approved of Christ’s life, mission, and death
- 3) that there was/is a life beyond the grave
- 4) that the followers of Christ are united with/in Christ – living a life of loving God and our neighbour.

- 5) that God's Plan of Salvation had begun its final stage and that each Christian has a commission to build God's kingdom on earth until everyone has come to know/accept and glorify God the Father (1 Cor 6:20)
- 6) that Christ's resurrection was the 'first instalment,' the 'first fruits' (1 Cor 15) of the General Resurrection of all God's people
- 7) that our final destination was to be in the presence and love of God forever.

In his preaching, Paul highlighted faith, hope and love as the hallmarks of the Christian's life. He emphasised love as the most important virtue, saying that "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1) and "So, faith, hope and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). In the same letter, he saw this love being negated in the Corinthian Christians' attitudes and actions at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34), the Sacrament of Unity/Love – and he 'went ballistic!' God's Gospel was being denied by those who should have been preaching and practising it. He believed that that love endured forever (1 Cor 13:8).

5: Paul challenges us:

- 1) to understand Christ's – and our - mission in life ('love for God and his neighbour')
- 2) to live it to the best of our ability
- 3) to preach it with our lives.

4) Paul's Example and Our Prayer-Life:

1. Prayer is our acceptance and acknowledgement that we were created in the image and likeness of God, i.e. that we are creatures in a personal and loving relationship with God. This acceptance and acknowledgement leads to prayers of petition, intercession, praise, thanks, and adoration/worship. These prayers may be offered individually/privately and/or collectively/publicly. Like Paul, our prayer life must be based on recognising/developing our personal relationship with God – as God's Will.

Therefore, reading, considering/meditating, discussing Scripture must be a priority (e.g. reading the Sunday Readings, reading the Gospels and Paul's Letters, reading spiritual books). Relationships presuppose getting to know/being familiar with someone. Paul would have had fixed times for prayer (Jewish custom) – should we?

2. Our prayer, like Paul's, must be purposeful, that is, our prayer must be focused on the achievement/completion of God's Will – our vocation in life. Paul said: "Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding; to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing (to God); in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with every power, in accordance with his glorious might; for all endurance and patience; with joy giving thanks to the Father, who had made/created you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light." (Col 1:9-12)

3. Prayers of petition/intercession are an essential part of our prayer life. They were an essential part of Christ's own prayer life (e.g. he prayed to the Father for the power to perform his miracles, he prayed for his disciples that they might better understand God's Will) and Paul followed that example. So, our prayers of petition – once they are in accordance with God's Will - make God's Will a reality. The concluding prayer of 1 Thessalonians is: "May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you

entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it. Brothers/sisters, pray for us too” (1 Thess 5:23-25).

4.The next logical step is to put that better understanding of God’s Will into practice in one’s daily living (by loving God and others); prayer-in-action; ‘pray unceasingly’ (Paul in 1 Thess. 5:15). In doing so we are growing in love for God, becoming more Christ-like.

5.Each step leads to the next step, generally moving from petition or intercession, through the other forms of prayer (thanks, praise, hope, joy...), to worship: starting with the human and ending in the divine. For example, prayers of thanksgiving feature as we thank God for all the love showered on us through the Spirit (Rom 5:5).

6.Prayer, then, is not just something we do occasionally or even regularly. It is a disposition, an attitude – an all-consuming attitude. Paul asks us to ‘pray unceasingly’ (e.g. Ephesians 3:14-21). Prayer is not a chore – it is core or essential to our lives.

7. Over time we, like Paul, could develop a ‘resource’ of prayer-related sayings from Scripture. For example, Isaiah 43:1b-4 said: “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.....I will be with you ... For I am the Lord your God... You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you” (see also Exodus 6:7: Jeremiah 30:22). Jeremiah 31:3 “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” Other Pauline sayings may also be helpful in our prayer, e.g. Gal 2:20-21 “I live now, not I, but Christ [love incarnate] lives in me;” 1 Cor 15:58 “So, then, stand firm and steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain;” 1 Cor 2:9 “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the human mind what things God has prepared for those who love him.” [I can see Paul sitting back, speechless, giving God the thumbs up sign, or bursting into a verse of ‘How Great Thou Art.’]

Paul’s poem in praise of Christian love is often read/prayed during a wedding Mass (1 Cor 13:1-13 “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous.....”). Dia dhuit, Bail/Beannacht o Dhia ort.

8. This ‘Gospel’ must be shared with ‘all the nations.’ Humanity must continue God’s mission, therefore, so that all nations, i.e. every living person, would come to know, to love, to revere and to give God the praise, glory and thanks due to Him (1 Cor 6:20).

In short, humanity, created by a God who is Love, and created in, or gifted with, that divine love (Rom 5:5), can only achieve fulfilment through living out that love with God and with one another. Love is the language of our relationship expressed in words/prayers of praise, wonder, thanksgiving, intercession, joy and worship (1 Cor 6:20).

Prayer in Paul's Letters (Texts):

Philippians 1:9-11 “And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

Romans 12:1-2 “Think of God’s mercies, my brothers and sisters, and worship Him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering yourselves as a holy sacrifice truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and to know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do” (Romans 12:1-2).

Ephesians 1:3-6 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the favour of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.”

Ephesians 3:14-21 “Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.”

Colossians 1:9-12 states: “we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His [God’s] Will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.

1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, 23-24 “Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks [to God], for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus..... May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it. Pray for me, too.”

1 Corinthians 15:56-58 “Therefore, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.”

Books:

The New Collegeville Bible Commentaries on 1) *First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians*, 2) *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 3) *Galatians and Romans*.