

Discovering Prayer

(Draft)

Discovering Prayer

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Introduction

Introduction

Welcome to *Discovering Prayer*.

Prayer is a wonderful gift, and a vital part of what it is to be a Christian, but I believe that a lot of Christians – including me – have never fully discovered just how wonderful it is and how important it is. Sometimes, I think, we get a bit frustrated or disappointed with our prayers. Prayer holds out such a lot of promise, but we do not always seem to get it quite right, and often it seems to leave us with some unanswered questions.

I am not the expert who has found all the answers to those questions, but I believe I have discovered a few things that have enabled me to glimpse something of how wonderful prayer can be and enjoy prayer more as part of my Christian life. I believe they have helped me experience a closer relationship with God and understand better when problems and questions arise – though that does not mean I now always find prayer “easy”.

I hope what I have discovered can be of help to others and maybe lead them to discover more for themselves. “Discovered” is perhaps an overstatement. I do not claim that what I have “discovered” is new or original, only that some of the insights have been new to me. I suspect some of them at least will be new to at least some others.

At the end of each chapter is a summary of its main points. There are also some things you may like to think about or do, which may help with the “discovering”. They should provide material for individual reflection, study and action and some may be suitable for group discussion or activity as well or instead. The summaries and suggestions have been printed on a new page each time to simplify copying for group use.

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Although *Discovering Prayer* may answer some questions for some people, it will almost certainly raise others. I hope that, overall, it will help people to move on in their praying and their understanding of prayer. It is not, however, intended to be a comprehensive guide or manual for prayer, nor is it a beginners' introduction. There are some practical points made but they are generally incidental to the main purpose, which is to share ideas and (hopefully) stimulate more thought. Chapter 1, "Why Pray?", mentions some basic issues, but its main purpose is to set the scene for the later chapters and to show where I am "coming from".

Discovering Prayer is primarily for people who pray, or who have tried to pray, and who recognise there are issues with prayer. Its aim is to help them explore prayer and the many issues it raises further and, hopefully, to discover more – more about prayer and more of the riches of prayer. It may also help someone who does not pray, or who has "given up" on prayer, by suggesting some different approaches.

Discovering Prayer is not intended as a theological study of prayer. Although very little of it is autobiographical or anecdotal, it is more of a personal testimony. Most of what I say comes out of a combination of personal experience and personal vision. It comes from experience of what I believe God has shown me, in the Bible and elsewhere, through personal study, reflection and teaching from others. It also comes from what I can best describe as vision of what I believe God is drawing me towards. I say "drawing me towards" because I have not got there yet. Some of what I say is a goal I have not yet reached, or a vision of what I believe is yet to come. Other people may have a different experience and a different vision. That's fine – I do not claim to have said the last word, but I hope what I say will stimulate others to reflect on what I have said and maybe share what they have discovered themselves.

Although I have used chapters and headings to organise the material it is difficult – and probably pointless – to segregate topics completely. Writing about one aspect of prayer inevitably involves mentioning others and there is a measure of overlap in some of the chapters, often because an idea is introduced in one chapter and then developed in a later one. Hopefully the effect will be to emphasise and clarify rather than confuse.

I must acknowledge my debt to Chris Chapman and other members of the Southwark Diocesan Spiritual Formation Group. Their ideas and teaching have been the source or inspiration of much of what I have said here. Without them, *Discovering Prayer* would probably never have been written. Indeed, *Discovering Prayer* began as an

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attempt to present some of the things I had learnt from them in a form suitable for a parish context, perhaps for a house group or a Lent course, and may yet reappear in that form. However, they are in no way responsible for how I have developed the material. I am particularly grateful to Chris for the insights into God's will introduced in chapter 3 and then developed at the start of chapter 4¹, as well as for his general encouragement and suggestions.

I am also grateful to my wife, Dr. Marion Gray, for a number of insights, most particularly for pointing out the "cross-shaped relationship" illustration introduced in chapter 3 and then mentioned in a number of other places. I must also express my thanks to my spiritual director, Revd Christine Spurway, for her encouragement and support.

There are several references to the Bible. Although there are some direct quotations in the text, most Bible references are in the form of footnotes. Where actual quotations appear they are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise stated. Biblical references are given in the form Book X:Y, where Book is the book of the Bible, X is the chapter or psalm and Y is the verse or verses.

¹ For a brief outline in Chris Chapman's own words see chapter 1 (p 9) of "Seeing in the Dark – Pastoral perspectives on suffering from the Christian spiritual tradition" by Christopher Chapman, Canterbury Press 2013

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Chapter 1 – Why pray?

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Why do people pray?

Why do people pray? Why should they pray? Why do they feel they need to pray?

Perhaps they pray because they need help, and they believe God will help them if they pray. Perhaps they know others who need help and decide to pray for them. Perhaps they have turned to prayer as a last resort in a crisis. On the other hand, perhaps it is because something good has happened and they want to say “Thank you” to God, or shout “Hallelujah!”

Perhaps prayer is just a habit, or something they were always taught to do, maybe without fully knowing why. Perhaps they pray because Jesus clearly expected people to pray, or because there are commands to pray in the Bible. Perhaps they pray because they believe that it brings them nearer to God.

None of these reasons is wrong, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive. There are probably many other good reasons. They illustrate the enormous scope of prayer and its importance to a wide range of people in a wide range of situations.

There is something fundamentally important about prayer, as some of those reasons imply. Prayer goes to the very heart of what it is to be a Christian, and understanding how and why is key to making the best of prayer, and indeed to making the best of the Christian life, as well as avoiding some of the mistakes and disappointments.

Many of us, I am sure, do have disappointments in prayer, perhaps if we pray about something and the result is not what we expected or hoped for. We may wonder if we are making a mistake in our praying. I suspect that if there is a mistake it is not so much in how we pray or what we pray about as in our understanding of prayer itself. I believe we have to look more closely at the things the Bible tells us about prayer, and also discover why we pray, what we are doing when we pray and what God is doing when we pray. This is not just to avoid mistakes and disappointments but to discover the real joy and importance of prayer, which is what this book is about. The

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Bible will be our main guide, but another guide will be our own experience of life as human beings including, of course, the way God acts in our lives.

For me, prayer is essential – it is the Christian’s most fundamental activity. I would go so far as to say that, in practice, you cannot be a Christian without it. It is not a condition of being a Christian so much as a practical necessity. Prayer transforms the Christian life and faith from being a set of ideas or beliefs into a real experience. It may not be the only thing that does that, but it is almost bound to be the first. It is usually where we have to start. I believe prayer, properly understood, makes the Christian life a glorious and joyful reality!

The heart of being a Christian

Being a Christian is more than just having a set of beliefs and keeping a set of rules, important though beliefs and rules are. If prayer transforms the Christian life from just a set of beliefs into a real experience, what is that experience? What does it mean to be a Christian? What lies at the centre of the Christian life?

The understanding that I believe is most helpful – and which has a lot of support in the Bible – is that the Christian life is a relationship. To be a Christian is to have a relationship with God. It is a relationship made possible through the life and work of Jesus, and it has wide implications for worship, for service, for relationships with others and indeed for the whole of life. That relationship with God is at the heart of the Christian life. It is what the Christian life is all about. Relationships are, after all, central to our Christian life and faith; the Bible tells us “God is love”².

This chapter begins by exploring some of the things the Bible has to say about our relationship with God, and then looks briefly at how human relationships can help us understand that relationship, particularly with reference to prayer.

The Bible and our relationship with God

The Bible often describes the relationship in terms of a family – we are God’s children and God is our Father. “Children of God” is a description of us used by both John³ and

² | John 4:8, 16. All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

³ John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1. John also uses the picture of being “born of God” (John 1:13) or “born from above” (John 3:3)

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Paul⁴. Jesus himself called God “Father”⁵ and encouraged his disciples to do the same⁶. He sometimes spoke of God as “your Father” or “your heavenly Father” when talking to the disciples⁷.

The picture of a family with God as Father and us as his children is very common in the Bible as a description or model of the relationship. It is a picture that is very difficult to get away from as we read the pages of Scripture. Unfortunately, it is not an entirely helpful picture today when many are aware of, and may have personally experienced, families where relationships, particularly that between father and children, are to a greater or lesser degree dysfunctional. We have to remember that the Bible was written in times when perceptions, if not the reality, were perhaps rather different.

The important thing to understand is that what is being depicted is a close, loving relationship – all that the relationship between a father and his children should be. It is worth reflecting that Jesus’ concept of himself as Son of God, and hence of God as his and our Father, must have arisen from or at least been influenced by his baptism, when God said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”⁸ This is a loving Father, pleased with his Child. It is perhaps Jesus’ relationship as Son of God to his heavenly Father that provides the better model for our relationship to God as his daughters and sons, rather than any ordinary human family. We, too, are beloved.

The Bible gives us other pictures as well. Because the relationship is with God, it is unlike any other, and neither a family picture nor any other will describe it completely – and not only because human fathers and the relationships between them and their children are sometimes less than ideal. A composite picture is better, though still not perfect.

Jesus also used the word “friends”⁹ to describe his relationship with his disciples, and some may find this a more helpful picture if the family image does not work for them. The word “disciple” itself is another way; Jesus’ disciples stayed with him, learned from him and with him formed a close-knit group, and we, in turn, are also

⁴ Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 3:26, 4:4-7

⁵ eg Matthew 11:25ff; Luke 2:49; John 17:1

⁶ Luke 11:2

⁷ eg Matthew 6:1ff; 7:12; 10:29; Luke 11:13

⁸ Mark 1:11

⁹ John 15:13ff

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disciples¹⁰. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, simply expresses his desire to “know Christ”¹¹.

Another picture is Peter’s “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”¹² – people God has chosen and set aside for himself. Peter’s phraseology (race, nation, people) reminds us that God’s relationship is not just with individuals but with a people – the church. Yet another picture sometimes recognised is the Song of Songs in the Old Testament – a poem celebrating the wonder of sexual love. A beautiful if in many places erotic piece of writing, the Song of Songs’ presence in Scripture reminds us that sex, love and intimate relationships were created by God and are part of his plan for us. It may be read during Passover in some Jewish households and is sometimes regarded as a parable or picture of the relationship between God and his people – for them, the Israelite nation, for us, the church, the Christian community¹³. Despite the very individual nature of the relationship portrayed in the Song of Songs, it is the wider, corporate aspect of our relationship with God that is recalled.

One of the most important ways the Bible describes the relationship is with the phrase “eternal life”. John 3:16 tells us that God sent Jesus “so that everyone who believes in him...may have eternal life”¹⁴, something that is central to our understanding of Christian faith and teaching. However, Jesus described eternal life not just as life going on for ever but as a relationship – knowing himself and the Father. He said, “This is eternal life, that they should **know you**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”¹⁵ Jesus came to bring us, not a creed or a rule book, but a loving relationship, a relationship that is possible and that God himself desires because “God so loved the world”¹⁶. What God has done in sending Jesus was driven by his great love for us and all the world, from which Paul tells us nothing can separate us¹⁷.

The relationship is an eternal relationship, one that goes on forever. We are forever with God and enfolded in his love, we are forever the friends of Jesus, we are forever

¹⁰ Matthew 28:16

¹¹ Philippians 3:8-10

¹² 1 Peter 2:9. See also Colossians 3:12

¹³ There are echoes of this in the letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 5:25ff) and the description of the new Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:2, 9-10)

¹⁴ John 3:16. See also John 3:35-36; 5:24; 6:20; 10:10; 17:2; Matthew 25:46; Romans 6:23

¹⁵ John 17:3. This is part of a prayer addressed by Jesus to his Father. See also John 17:26; 10:14-15; Matthew 11:27; 28:20.

¹⁶ John 3:16

¹⁷ Romans 8:38-39

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part of God’s family as his beloved children. But this relationship is not just something for the future. The words “have” and “know” are in the present tense. It is a relationship that has already begun, that we enjoy now, that is part of our life today. As John reminds us, children of God is what we **are**¹⁸.

It is not only eternal; it is life. Eternal life, knowing God, is not just a relationship like any other. No ordinary picture, let alone any single picture, can describe it adequately. It is more than just being children of God, or friends, or disciples. It is more than just knowing God, however intimately. When we have eternal life we live in God and God lives within us. Shortly before Jesus said, “This is eternal life, that they should know you...”¹⁹, he had promised the disciples that they would receive the Spirit. He said “[the Spirit] abides with you and he will be in you”²⁰. A little later he told them, “Abide in me as I abide in you”²¹. He described himself as a vine, and the disciples as the branches²²; the branches “abide in” the vine – the source of their life.

Later again he prayed that he would be “in” the disciples as the Father is “in” him²³. Eternal life is a union, a “being one”, described by words like “abiding in” and “dwelling in” and indeed just by the word “in”. The theme is taken up by Paul with words like “if anyone is **in** Christ, there is a new creation”²⁴ and “Christ **in** you, the hope of glory”²⁵.

Eternal life is something closer even than the relationship between the most intimate of lovers. It is the life of God in us. God lives in us and we in him. It is a mystery how God whom “heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain”²⁶, or how Jesus, whom God “seated at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”²⁷, can live in us. It is beyond our full understanding. But it is a great privilege and a great joy.

It is impossible to describe the relationship fully. However, we need at least to grasp that to be a Christian is to have an intimate, loving relationship with God – with God

¹⁸ 1 John 3:1

¹⁹ John 17:3

²⁰ John 14:17b

²¹ John 15:4 “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

²² John 15:5 “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (Also John 15:1)

²³ John 17:23 “...I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one...” At this point, of course, “them” refers, not to the twelve disciples but to those who will become disciples as a result of their work – that’s us!

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17

²⁵ Colossians 1:27

²⁶ 1 Kings 8:27

²⁷ Ephesians 1:20b-21a

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who is “enthroned in heaven”²⁸ but who, amazingly, loves us more than we can imagine²⁹, and with God who desires to welcome us as friends, embrace us as his children and indeed dwell within us. God rejoices when we enter that relationship with him. Jesus tells us of the rejoicing that there is in heaven over the sinner who repents, the sheep who is bought home from the wilderness, the coin that is found and the prodigal son who returns³⁰.

It is also a relationship we choose to enter into. John in his gospel says, “To all who received him, who believed on his name, he gave power to become children of God”³¹. The relationship is open to those who receive Jesus – those of us who choose to welcome him. In that respect the picture of friends – or even the lovers of the Song of Songs – is a closer parallel than the family, because it is a relationship we enter into freely from choice, not one that is a simple and unalterable fact of biology that we can neither reject nor change. As John points out, our entry into the relationship is not a birth of the flesh – a natural event. He calls it a birth of God, of water and Spirit³².

Living the Relationship

So that is a brief look at what the Bible has to say about the relationship. However, it is one thing to read about a relationship – in the Bible or anywhere else – or talk about it, but quite another to experience it. What makes a relationship real, an actual experience?

We do not have to understand our relationship with God fully to experience it – any more than, say, we have to understand fully how the engine works before we can drive a car. The relationship is a mystery, but by God’s grace we have the privilege of being able to enjoy it. Human relationships, though only a partial reflection of our relationship with God, can help us to see how.

What follows may seem to some a rather laboured statement of the obvious about human relationships. It is perhaps obvious and elementary, but my point is that it

²⁸ Psalm 2:6 (New International Version)

²⁹ See Romans 8: 38-39; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 3:14-20; John 3:16; John 4:19; John 15:12-13; 1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:7-21

³⁰ Luke 15:7, 6, 9, 20-24

³¹ John 1:12

³² See John 1:13; John 3:5

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may be so obvious we probably never think about it – and so may fail to notice just how important it is in our understanding of our relationship with God.

Having a relationship with another person, particularly one we have entered into freely, will make a difference to life. People who are good friends – and, even more, people who are in love – do not just put each other's names in their address books and then forget about each other. They go and enjoy each other's company – and maybe do much more than that! Relationships, if they are ones we want to have and to keep, need to be built and maintained – and enjoyed!

So what do friends, lovers and other people in a relationship do? They:

- Spend time together.
- Talk to each other – and that includes listening as well as speaking!.
- Sometimes are just silent together.
- Think about each other even when they are apart, and
- Do things together.

These things are what they do to enjoy each other's company and – for lovers – to express their love. They might do even more, like giving each other gifts or doing each other favours, and obviously there will be physical and sexual activities in the most intimate relationships. You can certainly add to the list, but even those few things seem to me to represent, in a simple way, one of the best gifts of all – the gift to each other of themselves, a gift that will help the relationship to grow stronger and closer.

Unless circumstances such as distance or sickness intervene, you could not really imagine people in any serious relationship not doing those things. They are the ways a relationship is first explored from the moment people first encounter each other. They are the ways a relationship is built and maintained and the ways it is enjoyed. They are the expression of what having a relationship is. They might be done deliberately, by people who want to build a relationship, or they might just “happen” when people meet – and a relationship grows. They are the expression of the feelings, emotions and desires that are – or that grow – within.

Even if they are not the only way the feelings, emotions and desires are expressed they are likely to be the first. Generally speaking, the more people do them, the stronger the relationship and those feelings, emotions and desires become. They make the relationship something more than just an entry in people's address books

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or wishful thinking; they make it a real experience and a growing one. They are the way the relationship is lived.

It seems to me that if we are to have a relationship with God we have to do the same. So, in the same way, as friends and lovers of God, we need to:

- Spend time together with God.
- Talk together with God – listening to God as well as speaking to him.
- Be silent together with God.
- Think about God, even when we are not having a special time of worship, and
- Do things together with God.

These things are what we need to do to enjoy God's presence, express our love and respond to his love for us. Of course we might well do more but, as with any human relationship, doing those few things represents a giving of ourselves to God – and receiving his gift of himself in return.

Most of that, of course, is prayer. Generally people will recognise talking with God as prayer – it is usually how we start – but prayer can take many other forms. It certainly does not have to be spoken words, or even just words formed inwardly in our hearts and minds. Many will be used to times of silent prayer – thinking about God, or just spending time with him. There is opportunity for that in some church services. If we are silent, then it gives God more chance to speak to us!

Jesus said, "Come to me.....and I will give you rest"³³, and commended Mary for sitting at his feet and listening rather than bustling about³⁴. The psalmists wrote, "For God alone my soul waits in silence,"³⁵ and "I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother"³⁶. Benignus O'Rourke,³⁷ a Catholic priest and Augustinian friar, quotes Augustine as saying, "When we pray we have no need of spoken word. Sometimes the tongue is silent and the soul is sighing. That means that God is being prayed to inside, in the room of your heart." We do not have to be talking or busy all the time! We need to rest in God and with God – and let him enfold us in his peace and love, and maybe even let the Spirit do the praying. We will

³³ Matthew 11:28

³⁴ Luke 10:38-42

³⁵ Psalm 62:1

³⁶ Psalm 131:2

³⁷ Benignus O'Rourke OSA, "Finding your hidden treasure – The Way of Silent Prayer" (Liguori Publications/Darton, Longman and Todd 2010) chapter 9 p 36

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look at this more closely in chapter 3. To rest in God's goodness and love, as a child in a parent's arms, or as lovers in an embrace, is prayer.

So, just as people could not claim to have a serious relationship without spending time together, talking together, being silent together, thinking about each other and doing things together, we could not really claim to have a relationship with God without prayer. Prayer, in all its possible forms, is the way our relationship with God is explored, built, maintained and enjoyed. It is the expression of what having a relationship with God is, of the feelings, emotions and desires that are within. Even if prayer is not the only way the feelings, emotions and desires are expressed it is likely to be the first. Generally, the more we pray, the stronger the relationship and those feelings, emotions and desires become. Prayer starts to make our relationship with God more than just an entry on the baptism register or putting "C of E" on a form in answer to the "religion" question. It makes being a Christian a real experience, something that is actually part of our lives. Prayer is the way our relationship with God is lived.

That little list of activities – spending time with God, talking with him, being silent with him, thinking about him, sometimes even doing things together with him – is not intended to be a "definition" of prayer. We shall find prayer actually involves much more than that. With the possible exception of doing things together with God, however, these activities are prayer, even if only part of it, and they are essential if we are going to have a relationship with God. Prayer does lie at the very heart of what it is to be a Christian because it expresses the relationship that is at its heart. It makes the relationship a real experience. It is how we enjoy God's company and find that company a glorious and joyful reality, even if it is not the only way we do that. Prayer is encounter with the beloved! Prayer is spending time with someone who loves you – and doing some of the things lovers do!

Even doing things with God can be prayer – going on a prayer walk, for example, or walking a labyrinth – or, of course, holding a prayer meeting! Obviously, many things we do together with God, such as various acts of service, are not what we think of as prayer, even though they are clearly expressions of our love and our response to his. However, it is unlikely anyone would embark on some piece of service without prayer, however brief. Even if you realise God is calling you to do something and then just get on with it, God has spoken to you even if you have not spoken to God! Talking with God can take place in both directions! Prayer is almost bound to be an expression of our relationship even if it is not the only one. Besides, doing things together with God is part of the time we spend together with him. He is always

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beside us and indeed within us by his Spirit, and it would be a strange indeed if we did not speak, listen, or at least take strength from his presence as we get on with the task.

It is important to remember that prayer is not only the expression of a “one to one” relationship, like friends or lovers. We have already noted that the relationship with God is corporate as well as individual and prayer is likewise often a corporate activity involving the whole Christian community, the church. Prayer is not always or only a meeting of two friends or lovers but equally a family gathering when God’s children come to their Father, or a get-together when Jesus’ friends join him. The whole community can spend time with God, talk with him and be silent in his presence.

Indeed, it is usually with the corporate activity that we begin. Our relationship with God and the prayer that expresses it is not something that just happens; it arises out of a context, a meeting.

After all, human relationships do not just happen; you have to meet. That meeting may be a chance encounter or even a virtual meeting via the internet, although it is probably most likely to arise within a wider social context, such as the family, work, school, college, a party, or a club. In the same way, prayer, or the desire to pray, usually begins when we meet with others who pray. We recognise that there is something in their prayer that we want for ourselves, or at least that there is something about it of which we want to know more.

It does not have to be in a church service; it can be any encounter with praying people, people who have a relationship with God. It may be with just one person; it may be indirect, by reading a book (indeed the Bible!) or contact via the internet. Wherever it is and however it is, it is an encounter with members or a member of the church, that body of people, past and present, who are God’s children, God’s friends.

Of course there will be exceptions. We might want to cite Abram (Abraham)³⁸ and Samuel³⁹ in the Bible, to whom God spoke direct. We cannot know their exact circumstances, or what if anything they knew of God before he spoke to them, though of Samuel it was certainly said he “did not yet know the Lord”⁴⁰. So, yes, there are going to be exceptions, but most of us discover prayer, and learn to pray, from

³⁸ Genesis 12:1

³⁹ 1 Samuel 3:4ff

⁴⁰ 1 Samuel 3:7

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others who pray – often as we find ourselves in company with them as they pray and are drawn to desire to know for ourselves the God whom they know.

The Bible and Prayer – and some practical points

If prayer is such an important part of our Christian lives we would expect the Bible to have plenty to say about it, which it does. There are places in the Bible where people are told to pray⁴¹, often for specific outcomes or individuals⁴². We could even say that prayer is implicit in the greatest commandment of all – to “Love the Lord your God”⁴³. Love has to be expressed, and as we have seen prayer is usually the first and probably the most important form of expression.

The Bible does not only tell us to pray. Prayer was often something people realised they needed and wanted to do. They did not always need to be told to do it. As early as Genesis chapter 4 we read that “At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord.”⁴⁴ That suggests calling on God – praying and worshipping – was something people realised was a good idea very early on!

So the Bible seems to expect that prayer is something we will want to do, and is concerned not just to tell us to pray but teach us about prayer and how to do it. Most often, it shows us by example. It contains a remarkably rich and diverse collection of prayers in the psalms, which we can use either as prayers as they are or to inspire and guide us in making our own prayers. The psalms can remind us that prayer is at times individual and intimate, a “one to one” with God (such as “O Lord, you have searched me and known me”⁴⁵) and at others an activity of the whole community (“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion we were like those who dream”⁴⁶).

The Bible tells us about people who prayed and some of the prayers they offered, such as Abraham⁴⁷, Hannah⁴⁸, Peter⁴⁹ and, of course, Jesus himself⁵⁰ – people who were not commanded to pray but who just knew they wanted to pray and needed to

⁴¹ eg Colossians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:17

⁴² eg Matthew 26:41, Colossians 4:3, James 5:14

⁴³ Matt 22:37

⁴⁴ Genesis 4:26

⁴⁵ Psalm 139:1

⁴⁶ Psalm 126:1

⁴⁷ Genesis 18:23

⁴⁸ 1 Samuel 1:10

⁴⁹ Acts 10:9

⁵⁰ eg Matthew 11:25ff; Matthew 26:39ff; Mark 1:35; John 17

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pray. An instruction like Paul's "Pray without ceasing"⁵¹ is not so much a command to pray as teaching that prayer should pervade the whole of life, as can be expected for something that expresses a deep, life-changing relationship. We shall be looking at some of Paul's teaching about prayer, as well as some of the psalms, in later chapters.

Jesus' teaching of the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father..") was also about how to pray rather than a command to pray. In Matthew's gospel it comes as part of Jesus' teaching for "When you pray..."⁵² – it seems Jesus took it for granted that the disciples would pray! According to Luke's gospel, when Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer they had actually asked him to teach them to pray⁵³. They wanted to do it, and just needed a bit of help.

Like the disciples, like Hannah, Abraham and those back in prehistory who chose to invoke the name of the Lord, we have to want to pray. Only if we want to pray will we find prayer worthwhile, let alone to be an experience of joyful and glorious reality. We have to really desire that relationship with God of which prayer is the expression. Do we actually want to know and love him, and know and love him better, indeed intimately? Do we really want to know and enjoy God's great love for us? Do we really see the Christian life as a relationship, and one we desire above all else? If we do not, prayer may never be much more than a chore. If we do not, have we missed something in our understanding of the Christian faith and the Bible?

The other thing we have to do is actually pray. Reading about prayer, studying prayer and learning about prayer are no substitute for doing it. Doing it may well seem the hardest bit, but only by praying will we begin to find out how worthwhile prayer is! It will not happen all at once – like any relationship, it takes time to work on it and build it up. Even the most wonderful relationships need effort. Discovering that prayer is about building a relationship with God, and that it is spending time with someone who loves us, does not somehow make prayer easy. We can expect, however, that, as we continue to pray and build the relationship, it will get a little easier and, as we will see in chapter 3, we are not building on our own! In the meantime we need to glimpse the vision of the joyful and glorious reality that we are building! Prayer may not be easy, but it is supremely worthwhile!

⁵¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

⁵² Matthew 6:5-15

⁵³ Luke 11:1

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God is not just someone we believe things about. God is someone who is encountered, who meets us, who gets involved with our lives. Prayer is one of the ways that this encounter happens, perhaps the simplest and most obvious way. Prayer is spending time with someone who loves you! I believe I have done no more than glimpse a little of that truth. I hope in these pages to share some of my glimpses.

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Chapter 1 – Why pray?

Summary – Chapter 1 – Why pray?

- Prayer goes to the very heart of what it is to be a Christian. It is the Christian's most fundamental activity; you cannot in practice be a Christian without it. Prayer transforms the Christian life from a set of ideas and beliefs into a real experience. We pray because it is in prayer that the Christian life and faith begin to move from theory to glorious and joyful reality!
- At the heart of the Christian life is a close, loving relationship with God, described in many ways in the Bible but perhaps most wonderfully as Jesus living in us and we in him.
- Prayer is the principal way we express that relationship – spending time with God, talking with God, being silent with God, thinking about God, doing things with God. Someone could not really claim to have a relationship with God without doing these things; prayer is the way our relationship with God is built, maintained and enjoyed and becomes the glorious and joyful reality it should be!
- Prayer is spending time with someone who loves you!
- Prayer is not just the expression of a “one-to-one” relationship – it is also a corporate activity involving the whole Christian community. It is often through being drawn into this corporate activity that we begin to pray ourselves; prayer usually begins when we encounter others who pray.
- The Bible not only tells us to pray. It teaches us how to pray and gives us examples of prayer to use or to inspire our own prayers.
- We have to want to pray if prayer is going to be a joyful and glorious experience – and then we have to get on and do it. Discovering that prayer is spending time with someone who loves us does not somehow make it easy, but what it does do is make it supremely worthwhile!

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 1.

- Why do you think people pray? Why do you pray (assuming you do)?
- What lies at the heart of the Christian life and faith for you? Is it a relationship with God – or something else?
- How do you see prayer? Is it a time spent with someone you love? If you pray, do you find it chore, or a duty – or a joy?

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- How do you pray (if you do)? Do you do all the talking? Or do you spend time in silence, or listening, or thinking, or just resting in God's love?
- If you pray, how did you come to start? Were you drawn into it by meeting others who pray? Or was it some other way?
- Do you really want to pray? Do you want to have, and to develop, a loving, intimate relationship with God?
- Do you actually pray? When? How often? How does the time you spend in prayer compare with the time you spend with your closest friend or relative – both in quantity and quality?
- If the idea of **silent prayer** – prayer as silently resting in God enfolded in his peace and love – is new to you, or something you have never experienced, perhaps now is a good time to try it. Have a time of prayer **without actually saying anything to God**, either out loud or inwardly - your mind and heart need to be quiet as well as your lips and tongue. Simply spend the time with God in silence, enjoying his company. At this stage you may just like to try it for 2 or 3 minutes. You are his beloved. Rest in him and with him, and enjoy the fact that God really loves you deeply. If you feel you need to know more, wait until you have read chapter 3. If you feel instead that you want to try it but need more help, turn to Appendix 1.

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Chapter 2 – A misconception of prayer

Chapter 2 – A misconception of prayer

A time to look forward to – but perhaps not always?

In the previous chapter I suggested that what we are doing when we pray could be described as spending time with someone who loves us. Our prayer time is a time for enjoying God's presence, knowing that he longs for ours. Prayer should be something to look forward to, even if it is not always easy.

There may be, however, times when we find prayer particularly difficult, puzzling, frustrating, disappointing and frankly unrewarding. It is not always a joy to pray. This may happen when we pass through periods of difficulty – perhaps times of personal loss or suffering, times when we have to deal with painful issues or times of spiritual dryness. Prayer can be a great help in such circumstances – but not always! Sometimes God seems absent and prayer, if we can pray at all, feels like calling into emptiness; we wonder what has happened to the loving God who dwelt within us and who welcomed us as his friends or his children.

Such times are testing times for our prayers and our spiritual lives – indeed, for our whole relationship with God. We shall come back to them⁵⁴, and my reason for mentioning them here is that I do not want to leave the impression that this chapter is all there is to say about prayer in difficult times!

However, this chapter looks at a different reason why prayer sometimes seems difficult, disappointing and unrewarding – maybe, as was suggested above, even a bit of a chore. I believe this may happen because we have a misconception of prayer, and we make mistakes as a result. The purpose of this chapter is to point out the misconception and some of the mistakes it leads to so that we can bear them in mind as we move on. Clearing away the misconception is also one of the things I think we need to do in order to face some of the more serious issues.

⁵⁴ See chapter 5

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Chapter 2 – A misconception of prayer

A supermarket, a slot machine, or a magic lamp?

The misconception we may have is that prayer is primarily something we do to get things, or to get God to do things. Although that may not be what we say we believe or understand about prayer, in practice it may be how we treat prayer. Whenever we say the word “pray” it seems it is almost always followed by the word “for”.

What can happen is that we come to a time of prayer with what amounts to a “list” of things to pray for, or ask for, or that we want God to do, that is rather like a shopping list, a list of things we want, even if it is not actually written down. If we come with a something like a shopping list, prayer becomes more like a visit to the supermarket than a time of intimacy with someone who loves us. It seems more like a chore than a major delight of our lives. We ask for this, we ask for that, we ask for something else; they may be all very good things to ask for, not selfish or materialistic, but just reeling off a list of requests, however worthy, is not what prayer should be. There is certainly a time in prayer when it is right to ask God for things – and lists can sometimes be helpful in this – but prayer is not something we do just to get things as if we were going to the supermarket.

A similar mistake we can make when we pray is to treat God rather like a slot machine. We may well have buried the idea well down in our subconscious minds, but effectively we imagine that, with God, we can just put in a prayer request and out should come an answer, rather like we might put a coin into a vending machine and out should come a can of drink or a ticket for the car park. We get upset if we get no answer to our prayer, or we get what we think is the wrong answer, just as we get upset if the vending machine fails to work or gives us the wrong item. The problem really is that we have the wrong idea of what we are doing in prayer. God does indeed answer prayer, but prayer is not something we only do when we want answers.

We may even find ourselves interpreting the promises about prayer in the New Testament as if they were God saying, like the genie from a magic lamp, “Your wish is my command!”. A moment’s thought should make us realise that, if anyone should be issuing commands, it is God who is entitled to command us and not the other way round. Jesus taught us to pray “Your will be done”⁵⁵ – not our will! We need to look again at the promises and understand what Jesus and the New Testament writers were really saying.

⁵⁵ Matthew 6:10

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The idea that prayer is something we do to get things, or get God to do things, may be an idea we have grown up with. It may be something we have learned almost subconsciously, perhaps because we are often asked or expected to “pray for” someone or something, or because we want or need to do so, and so we think of that as the main reason to pray. It is certainly a very popular misconception; in times of crisis people who seem to have little interest in religion and rarely if ever darken a church door will speak about “praying for” the person or situation concerned. They may try to encourage others to do so as well as claiming to be praying themselves. People – all kinds of people – turn to prayer when they want something or are worried about something.

We can also gain this misconception because we have learned to pray by hearing others pray, particularly by hearing them lead public prayer. Praying for things and asking for things is often the main substance of what they say. If listening to others praying is the only way we learn to pray (sadly, that is often the case) it is not difficult to get the impression that prayer is mainly about asking. It seems to be a widespread view that prayer always has to be “for” something. It has probably come about because of inadequate teaching about prayer!

I am not trying to suggest we should not ask for things when we pray. Praying for things, or for people, or for situations, and asking for things is a very important part of prayer – something we are invited if not commanded to do in the Bible, indeed by Jesus himself⁵⁶. We shall be looking at these commands and the promises that go with them later.

I would rather people prayed “for” things, or only turned to prayer in a crisis, than not pray at all, but if “praying for” and “asking for” becomes all that there is to their prayers, or the main emphasis of them, then they are rather missing the point of prayer. We have to get the “praying for” and “asking for” parts of prayer into perspective if we are to discover the true value – and joy – of prayer.

A boring duty?

These mistakes not only misunderstand what prayer is – they can turn it from a rich and intimate encounter with God to a boring duty and even lead to disappointment

⁵⁶ eg Luke 11:9-11; Matthew 7:7-11; John 16:24

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and disillusionment with prayer. We can end up thinking we “must” pray for everything and everybody – the church, the clergy, other church leaders, mission societies and partners working at home and abroad, the government, the nations of the world, world peace, the local community, schools, hospitals, the sick, the poor, the oppressed, the bereaved, the unemployed, the victims of this disaster and that conflict, the neighbour down the road who is housebound and old Uncle Tom Copley’s arthritis and all – and feel we have not done our duty unless everything has been mentioned.

Praying like that is still prayer. God will hear it and can use it and answer it. It is certainly not wrong to pray for these people and these things, and sometimes it is absolutely the right thing to do. If we are not careful, however, praying for a long list like that can rob prayer of its joy, making it a chore, or it can become a tiresome, even boring repetition of the same requests which, worthy though they may be, do not really come from our hearts even though they may have done so once. We can try to do too much in prayer! We are acting almost as if God might have forgotten these things and we need to remind him!

That is not to denigrate those who pray faithfully and regularly for things – maybe many things – that are close to their hearts. Prayer can sometimes be a lengthy and even desperate battle with what Paul calls the powers of darkness⁵⁷. However, the dividing line between faithful prayer and boring repetition can at times be a fine one. Do we pray regularly, even passionately, for matters that deeply concern us, or do we trot out a list from habit or because we feel duty bound? Are our prayers of concern the sum total of our praying, or do they form part – a fairly small part – of a larger response to God’s love?

Correcting the misconception – getting the perspective right

We need to remember that, in prayer, we are having a time with someone we love deeply and who loves us even more. Of course asking for things can be part of a good relationship, as can sharing of things that concern us deeply, but friends and lovers are unlikely to stay together long if all they ever do is make a string of demands of each other, however graciously phrased – particularly if they then, like frustrated users of a faulty slot machine, complain if they do not get them! We must get away from the idea that prayer is something we do just to get God to do things for us, give

⁵⁷ Ephesians 6:12

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us things, or sort out our problems. If that is our idea of prayer we have got it wrong, and it is no surprise if it disappoints us, does not always seem to “work” and leaves us with difficulties and questions.

After all, conventional teaching on prayer is that our prayer life (though not necessarily each and every individual prayer) should consist of several kinds of prayer – for example, following the pattern of the “ACTS” acronym – Adoration, Confession (or Contrition), Thanksgiving and Supplication. The prayers of “asking” – supplication – are only one part out of four – and they are the last in the list! Just remembering this and adopting this kind of pattern would greatly help to make our prayers balanced and keep our “asking” prayers in perspective, although ACTS still leaves out important parts of prayer like listening and silent prayer.

It is not my intention to discuss in any detail patterns of prayer such as ACTS or the types of prayer they involve – there are many books on the subject.⁵⁸ I would warn of one danger with a pattern such as ACTS, which is that we can think of adoration, confession and thanksgiving as a mere introduction – almost as a “sweetener” to persuade God to be favourably disposed to us before we get down to the “real business” of supplication! That is definitely not the way it should be!

Adoration, confession and thanksgiving are very much the “real business” of prayer – of building and enjoying our relationship with God. Lovers, after all, may want to do no more at times than just adore each other – and they may even do it silently, without saying anything! Few relationships will survive without the ability to say “sorry” – and knowing that there will be forgiveness. In any relationship we will often want (not just need!) to say “thank you”. Adoring, forgiving and thanking (and we should perhaps add “listening”) probably do more for a relationship than any amount of asking, giving and receiving – and that will be true for our relationship with God as well as for our relationships with people. Paul reminds us in several places of the importance of thanksgiving.⁵⁹

The freedom we have to approach God and ask for things is a great privilege and joy, but it comes about because God loves us, because we have a relationship with him – he is our Friend, our Father. Prayer is the way we build that relationship. It may well start with asking, as a young child may keep asking her or his parents – “Gimme....gimme...!” If a relationship is to grow and mature, however, it does so not

⁵⁸ For a guide to prayer adopting a similar but more developed pattern see “Prayer – a beginner’s guide” by Jane Holloway. (Revised and updated edition published 2009 by the Bible Reading Fellowship.)

⁵⁹ eg. Ephesians 5:20, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 3:17 and 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:18

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by our asking “Gimme...gimme...!” but by our being together and enjoying each other’s company. No more does God forever make demands of us – he, too, wants our presence, not just our service. He invites us to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”⁶⁰ He wants us just to sit at his feet, like Mary.⁶¹ We will begin to look at how we might do this in the next chapter.

⁶⁰ Mark 6:34

⁶¹ Luke 10:38-42

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Summary – Chapter 2 – A misconception of prayer

- We must get away from the idea that prayer is something we do just to get God to do things for us or to get him to give us what we want or need. God is not like a supermarket – somewhere we go to get things – and he is certainly not like the genie of the magic lamp who says, “Your wish is my command”!
- It is perfectly in order to pray for things or ask God for things, but prayer is more than that. We have to get the “praying for” and the “asking for” of prayer into perspective. The privilege of asking arises from our relationship with God – and prayer is the way we build that relationship. Prayer is enjoying the company of someone who loves us, not forever asking for things.
- When we do pray for things or ask for things we need to avoid feeling we “must” pray for everyone and everything, as if we have a duty to make sure everything is covered. That can turn prayer into a chore, a job to do – when it should be a joy! We can try to do too much!

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 2.

- What is prayer for you? Is it something you only do, or usually do, because you want God to do something, or want him to give you something, or do something for someone else? Do you only pray in a crisis – yours or someone else’s?
- We thought at the end of chapter 1 about prayer being a chore rather than a joy. If it tends to be a chore for you, is it because you feel you have to pray for a long list of people and situations? Does it seem like a duty to have to pray for everyone and everything? Are you actually trying to do too much in prayer?
- Is “praying for” and “asking for” the sum total of your praying, or nearly so? Do you find time to praise, thank, adore, rejoice – and just rest in the goodness and love of God? If you do find time for these, have you got the balance right? What should the right balance be?
- We thought about how we start to pray in chapter 1 – often as a result of meeting others who pray. But were you actually taught to pray – or were you left to just “pick it up somehow”, perhaps by listening to others? If so, do you feel you ended up with a good understanding of prayer, or one that was in some way limited or incomplete? If you were taught, who taught you and what did they tell you? Do you think that what they said was helpful? Has the way you pray changed over time? If so, how?

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- If you find prayer always or often seems to be just about asking God for things, try having a time of prayer **without actually asking God for anything**. You could thank him, praise him, confess to him (OK, you can ask for forgiveness!), and adore him, but not actually **ask**. This is not the way to pray every time, but it is something to try to get away from the idea that we so often seem to pray to get things or get God to do things. If you find it difficult to think of suitable words to say it is probably easiest to start with thanking God. You can always thank him for his love, his presence with you and for Jesus and all that he has done.

Discovering Prayer

Chapter 3 – What is happening when we pray?

Chapter 3 – What is happening when we pray?

What God is doing when we pray

I suggested in chapter 1 that when we pray we are spending time with someone we love and who loves us. Our prayer, whether it is conversation, silence or something else, is part of our expression of our love for God and a way of helping that love to grow. As with any good relationship, the more time we devote to each other, the more we talk together or communicate and the more we do together, the stronger our relationship will get and the deeper our love will become. Of course it takes time and effort and sometimes it is not easy.

But we do not do it all on our own! Prayer is a lot more than just our expression of our love for God. It takes (at least) two to make a relationship; our relationship with God is two-way and prayer is two-way. In prayer we not only express our love for God but he reveals his love for us. God wants to build that relationship even more – we could say, far, far more – than we do! The more we pray, the more we come to understand the great love God has for us.

Just as he spoke to people in the Bible⁶², God speaks to us and works in us as we pray, opening up our understanding of his love and showing us where it leads. Moreover, God's love is not one-dimensional. It is not that he just loves you or that he just loves me. He loves the world – indeed, all of his creation. As we are drawn into a deeper understanding of his love and he works in us, we begin to see not only our lives but also the lives of others and the whole of creation through the eyes of God's love.

Although we say God speaks to us, we are unlikely to hear in any literal physical sense, let alone find God's voice coming from a burning bush or get a visit from the angel Gabriel. Some people may have experiences like that and we must not discount them, but most of us use the word "speaks" figuratively and what happens is that we receive new insights, ideas, joys and challenges as we pray, as God works in our

⁶² eg Genesis 12:1; Exodus 3:4; Job 38:1; Luke 1:26; Acts 10:13

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hearts and minds. They may not seem any more than just our own thoughts, but they are God at work. Prayer is at least as much an activity of God working in us by his Spirit as it is an action of ours. We noted in chapter 1 that the Spirit abides with us and is in us⁶³. He is not merely going to sit there doing nothing! When we pray, it is not just that **we** are doing something – it is very much that **God** is doing something in and through us.

So it is not only because of what we do but also because God works in us that, when we pray, our love for God grows. Again, it is because he is working in us that we become more aware of God's great love for us – and not only his love for us, but also his love for others, for the whole of his creation. As our love for him grows and he continues to work in us, we are drawn to love what he loves. We become lovers of God's whole creation and, insofar as he inspires us and it lies within us, desire to be channels of his love towards that creation – other people, and the whole of the natural order. "We love because he first loved us."⁶⁴

Our relationship with God becomes "cross-shaped" – a "vertical" part which represents our growing relationship with God, which, as it grows, develops a "horizontal" cross-piece representing our growing love for others and the whole of his creation. Like a cross – or the branches of a tree⁶⁵ – the "horizontal" grows out of and is at all times supported and sustained by the "vertical" – our relationship with God – his love for us and his work in us inspiring and growing our love for him.

If this sounds a bit far-fetched, maybe wishful thinking, not quite our experience or understanding of prayer, we need to reflect on two things. First, at a human level, this is no more and no less than we would expect as a human relationship develops. As friends or lovers think about each other and spend time together, whether silently, in conversation or in some activity, not only does their relationship, their love, get stronger but their wishes and desires grow closer. They begin to share aims and purposes, and to support each other even where their individual aims and activities differ.

Of course it does not all happen at once. It certainly is not true for the first few times they meet. It takes time – maybe years. It never reaches perfection and there will be setbacks, for in most relationships there are problems from time to time.

⁶³ John 14:17

⁶⁴ 1 John 4:19

⁶⁵ Or, of course, a vine – see John 15:4-5. Jesus' illustration of the vine is similar, though not exactly parallel.

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It does not happen all at once in prayer. Growing a relationship with God takes time – indeed, a lifetime. There will be difficult times in our relationship with God too, perhaps as we suffer in some way or experience personal loss. Our relationship with God will never reach perfection – at least, not in this life. I could not claim that what I have just described is my regular experience of prayer or of my relationship with God, although I do believe I am getting there – slowly! For me, this is more a vision that God is drawing me towards than it is a present daily experience, but I want to catch the vision, get closer to it as time goes on and share it with others.

The second point to reflect on is that this is exactly what Paul teaches happens when we pray. It is certainly true to the Bible! Prayer is not just a human activity; God is working in us by his Spirit. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “When we cry, ‘Abba Father’, it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,”⁶⁶. God, by his Spirit, makes us aware of our relationship with him as his children.

Describing our relationship with God in terms of a family – God our Father and we his children – which we noted in chapter 1 was not always helpful to us, obviously resonated with Paul. He uses this word “Abba”, which appears only three times in the New Testament – apart from this occasion it is once spoken by Jesus, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane⁶⁷, and then comes in one other place in the writings of Paul⁶⁸. It is a very intimate word for “Father”, rather like “Daddy”, and Paul must have used it in his prayers and expected others to do so as well. It is not the title a Jew would normally have used to address God, but it was clearly something Jesus felt he was close enough to God to do, and Paul presumably picked the idea up from Jesus’ disciples who would have heard it from Jesus himself. Evidently Paul’s understanding and indeed experience of the relationship was that it was an intimate one.

What was even more important about it was that it was a relationship of love. Paul moves on to utter some of the most effusive passages in the New Testament which tell of God’s love and his blessing for those who love him. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.....If God is for us, who is against us?.... Who will separate us from the love of Christ?....I am convinced that neither death, nor life,....nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Romans 8:15b-16.

⁶⁷ Mark 14:36

⁶⁸ Galatians 4:4-7

⁶⁹ Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 38-39

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“Abba, Father” is not a phrase most of us would use to address God today. Some will be happy just with the word “Father” but, however it is that we address God who loves us and whom we love, what Paul is telling us is that as we call on God it is the Spirit who moves us to speak the words and the Spirit who brings us into an ever closer relationship with God. It is, after all, the Spirit who reveals God to us and enables us to believe in him and know him in the first place, and this is how he continues his work. Our love for God grows – and we become more aware of his love.

Paul suggests it is the Spirit who initiates the action rather than we. In the previous verse he says, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.”⁷⁰ The Spirit **leads** us and **adopts** us; Paul’s point is that it is the Spirit who is the active partner. After all, an adoptive parent is the one who initiates the adoption – not the child! Prayer, as the activity which expresses the relationship, is not so much our attempt to reach out to God as God reaching out to us. If we do anything it is to respond to the Spirit’s action. Our action – our response – is essential, but while it may seem that it is we who are seeking God, in fact it is God who is seeking us.

Paul’s picture of us becoming God’s children includes the idea that we also become part of the family – of believers. Exactly how that is expressed will depend on our circumstances, but in principle our love for our sisters and brothers in that family relationship – our fellow Christians, fellow members of the church – will also grow, as will theirs for us as the Spirit works in them. Each of us will enjoy not only her or his individual relationship with God but also a corporate relationship, usually expressed in worship, fellowship and service together, and in a love that reaches out beyond the community to the rest of creation. It will take time for all this to happen, of course, as with the growth of all relationships. The Spirit does not rush us, let alone force anything on us, but gently embraces us and leads us in love.

The work of the Spirit goes further. Paul goes on to say, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”⁷¹ Our prayers, Paul admits, are at best inadequate, or would be if it were just we who were praying, but his point is that we do not pray alone. The

⁷⁰ Romans 8:14-15a

⁷¹ Romans 8:26-7

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Spirit prays for us in a way that is beyond words. The Spirit knows what is on our hearts and prays with “sighs too deep for words” when either our words are inadequate or when words fail us completely.

It is wonderful to know that when we do not even have the will or the energy to pray, or when words fail us, perhaps in times of difficulty or pain, the Spirit prays on our behalf. Even more wonderfully, the Spirit does not merely put our unspoken desires into suitable words – or suitable sighs – to put before God. He intercedes – prays – for us himself “according to the will of God”.

What is God’s will? There are probably many misconceptions as to what God’s will is; it is easy to think of it in a negative way, as some kind of fate – which is a mistake. It is as well to remember that God’s will is what God wants, and whatever that may be we can be sure that it is an expression of his immense love for us and for the world.

We have already noted Paul’s effusive statement about God’s love⁷². Some of the most powerful and beautiful statements about God’s love outside the Bible are in the writings of Julian of Norwich, her “Showings” (also known as “Revelations of Divine Love”) which are the accounts of visions she was given when suffering a serious illness. For example:

“It was at this time that our Lord showed me spiritually how intimately he loves us. I saw that he is everything that we know to be good and helpful. In his love he clothes us, enfolds and embraces us: that tender love surrounds us, never to leave us. As I saw it he is everything that is good.

“And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, ‘What is this?’ And the answer came, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, ‘It exists, both now and for ever, because God loves it.’ In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.

“In this ‘little thing’ I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it.”⁷³

⁷² See above – reference to Romans 8:28, 31, 35, 38-39

⁷³ From Julian of Norwich, “Revelations of Divine Love” Chapter 5, translated by Clifton Wolters (Penguin Classics 1966) pages 67f

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When the Spirit prays for us it will be that we will get an outpouring of God's creative and sustaining love, enfolding us, embracing us and blessing us beyond measure and filling us so that we overflow with joy as we grow closer to God – and are moved to embrace our neighbour and the world – to love them with his love and be channels of that love towards them. That may not be quite what we asked for, or that lay unspoken on our hearts. The chances are it will be a great deal more!

We shall look more at God's will in the next chapter. What we learn from Paul in these verses from Romans is that our prayers are something in which God by his Spirit is deeply involved, not just to respond to them, not even just to inspire them, but to make our prayers for us and make them his own. The Spirit of God prays ***in*** us, assuring us of his love for us and taking our whole situation, including anything of which we cannot speak and or hardly know ourselves, and bringing it unspoken to God. The Spirit of God prays ***through*** us, filling our hearts with love for him and with his love for the world and so inspiring our words and transforming our desires.

Let go – and let God!

In chapter 1 we looked briefly at the idea of silent prayer as simply resting in God's love. Paul's teaching that the Spirit prays in us, assuring us of his love and bringing our situation unspoken to God, is one of the truths that lies behind this. In silent or still prayer we can just come into God's presence, saying nothing and thinking only of his love for us, letting him be God for us, letting him be our loving Friend or Father, holding us in his love as if we were enfolded in his arms. To be held in his love is to rest in him and to let the Spirit pray for us "according to the will of God" as Paul describes⁷⁴. The psalmist puts it, "For God alone my soul waits in silence"⁷⁵. It is to come to Jesus and find rest⁷⁶.

It is worth reflecting that if the Spirit of God makes our prayers for us he probably does it a lot better than we do ourselves! The Spirit will pray "according to the will of God", and if that means an outpouring of God's love blessing us beyond measure we can hardly imagine a better prayer! In chapter 2 I suggested we can try to do too much in prayer and, even if it never reaches the stage of becoming a chore and a bore, perhaps we can benefit by letting God take some of the strain. We might feel we are being lazy but surely it is a recognition that we are actually not very good at

⁷⁴ Romans 8:26-7

⁷⁵ Psalm 62:1

⁷⁶ Matthew 11:28

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prayer and the Spirit is better at it than we are! As can probably be said about other parts of the Christian life, we should be prepared to take a back seat and let God do the driving!

I believe we need to learn the discipline of silent or still prayer, if we have not already done so. Benignus O'Rourke⁷⁷ relates the story of a friend who says:

'I was trying to do all the "right" things to reach God and to come into his presence – formal rosaries and litanies, and daily Mass – plus going through stages of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication. It all depended on *me*, and my efforts and my concentration. I was exhausted, felt isolated and cut off from the Church, resentment possessing me, faith draining away.

'The first time I tried still prayer, after hearing a talk explaining it, I could not believe the relief as that tension began to melt away. Gradually, as I moved into stillness and relaxation I forgot all about myself, aware only of God's presence...

'I have now become increasingly aware of the presence of God in the centre of my being... But it is not just a presence. I am aware of a deeply personal relationship, a very intimate and loving relationship with this great God.'

Of course there is a place, a very important place, for spoken prayer, or prayer that uses words. Most of us, after all, find the spoken prayers of our liturgy, not to mention the psalms, the Lord's Prayer and other scriptural prayers, are invaluable. There are also times when we need to speak our own words, and indeed times when we want and need not just to speak but to pour out our hearts, our souls, our ideas, our feelings and our desires before God, even pounding the gates of heaven in our anguish if that is how we feel. We shall come back to this in chapter 5.

We must remember, however, that building our relationship with God does not depend only on our efforts or on what we do or say. In fact, the best thing we can do is **not** to rely just on our efforts but rely on God. It is not laziness but a proper humility and honesty to let God do most of the work – admitting our weakness and drawing on his strength. Let go – and let God!

The practice of silent or still prayer – contemplative prayer as it is often known – is for me something of a vision that draws me on rather than something of which I have

⁷⁷ Benignus O'Rourke OSA, "Finding your hidden treasure – The Way of Silent Prayer" (Liguori Publications/Darton, Longman and Todd 2010) chapter 16 p 47.

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a lot of experience, let alone in which I am an expert. There are many books that can help, including the one from which I have just quoted⁷⁸. I believe we must be more open to prayer being something God does – not just something we do. We must give him the time to do it and not forever batter his ear with requests, praise, contrition or whatever – sincere though we may be. We must recall what he says through the psalmist, “Be still, and know that I am God”⁷⁹ and trust him to draw us closer to himself.

There is no “technique” for getting or guaranteeing any particular outcome, or indeed any outcome at all, in silent prayer. We just wait, and what we receive is what God chooses to give us. There are things we can do, such as concentrating on our breathing, or quietly repeating a word or phrase such as “God”, “Love”, or “Come, Lord Jesus”. Another is to repeat the “Jesus Prayer” – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”⁸⁰ These things may help to quieten our minds and direct our desires towards God, but doing them guarantees nothing.

The only things that are guaranteed are that God is there with us and that he loves us – and these are primarily matters of faith and trust. Whatever else comes, if anything, is God’s gift. For him our souls wait in silence⁸¹. Much of the time we may be unaware of anything; sometimes we may believe we glimpse something of God. Perhaps occasionally we may be almost overwhelmed. It is all gift from God, and we need to remember that we are not doing it to have a particular feeling, vision or experience. We are doing it out of love for God. We love him – even when he is not giving us a nice warm hug! – and as we wait in silence we trust the Spirit to pray for us.

It seems to me that there are two “strands” to silent or contemplative prayer. One picks up the ideas that the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words” and “intercedes ... according to God’s will” from Paul⁸². We come to God with something, perhaps many things, filling our minds and hearts, but we do not try to pray about it or them ourselves. Instead, we leave all our concerns in the Spirit’s care, trusting that

⁷⁸ As well as O’Rourke’s “Finding your hidden treasure” (see previous footnote) there is, for example, “Rhythms of Grace” by Tony Horsfall (Bible Reading Fellowship 2012) which approaches the issue from an evangelical rather than a catholic perspective.

⁷⁹ Psalm 46:10

⁸⁰ The Jesus Prayer is based on the prayer of the tax-collector in Luke 18:9-15, and also the words of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:47) and the 10 lepers (Luke 17:13). It has many variations, but the version given here is the “full” version. It forms an important part of the worship of the Orthodox Church. See the books by Simon Barrington-Ward listed in the Bibliography for further details and guidance.

⁸¹ Psalm 62:1

⁸² Romans 8:26-7

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he will intercede for us, which he will do in accordance with God's will. We stay silent and let him do the praying, which he does so much better than we do! Our part is just to trust, and to rest in the love of God, knowing that we and our concerns are safe in his care.

The other strand takes up the theme of resting, for example, from the psalms – “For God alone my soul waits in silence”⁸³ – or indeed from Jesus himself – “Come to me ...and I will give you rest”⁸⁴. We come before God emptying our minds and hearts as far as we can of all thoughts and concerns and with no ulterior motive save that we seek God and his presence, and desire to rest in his love. Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, is our model⁸⁵.

These two strands entwine as one; to leave our concerns in the Spirit's care will bring us to the point where we rest in God's love whereas if we begin by resting in God's love, the Spirit will take ourselves and our concerns, unspoken and even unrecognised, and lay them before the Father. The two strands can be thought of as different ways to start, different ways to enter into silent prayer, but they lead to the same place of rest, safe in the care of God, just being there with him enfolded in his love, held in his arms.

Another way to think of silent prayer is to see it as adoration. In chapter 2⁸⁶ we noted that adoring, forgiving and thanking probably do more to build and maintain a relationship than any amount of asking, giving and receiving.

Adoration is a state of mind rather than an activity or a conversation. An adoring couple may well hold hands, embrace, kiss, or gaze into each other's eyes, and they may well be silent as they do it or say things like “I love you”, but there is more to adoration than doing any of those things. Adoration is certainly not limited to times when they are physically together. It is something deep down within their hearts and minds. In silent prayer, as we rest in God's love and allow his Spirit within us to work as he desires deep in our hearts and minds, without seeking any particular outcome other than God himself and what he desires, we are adoring him.

Prayer is a time we spend with God whom we love and who loves us. That is itself a wonderful thought, but we have now seen that prayer is far more even than that. It is

⁸³ Psalm 62:1

⁸⁴ Matthew 11:28

⁸⁵ Luke 10:38-42

⁸⁶ See page 29

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a time when God speaks to us and works in us by his Spirit. He surrounds us with his love and makes us more and more aware of the depth of that love. As we become more aware of his immense love for us he fills our hearts with his love for the world – love which is expressed as his will, his desires for us and for his whole creation. He makes our prayers for us. Particularly when we find prayer difficult – when we do not know what to pray or find we cannot pray – the Spirit prays for us.

The work of the Spirit goes further still; it is not just that he will take over when we cannot cope. We need to let the Spirit do the praying – and be the way God does the relationship-building. We need to spend some time in silence and just rest in God's presence while he pours out his blessing and embraces us in his love. Let him fill us with the joy of knowing we are deeply loved and with that love itself that desires to reach out to the world, to all whom God loves. It may also be that, for some of us, silent prayer becomes the best or the only prayer we can offer in times of pain, loss, or spiritual dryness – as it proved to be for Benignus O'Rourke's friend in the quotation above.

A little picture of prayer

This little picture will not tell you everything about prayer – but it may give you some ideas for making silent or contemplative prayer part of your prayer life.

Suppose you have a friend, or a relative, even a lover, partner, or spouse, with whom you spend a lot of time. Perhaps you regularly sit together, or go for a walk together, or eat together.

You do not speak all the time you are together. You just enjoy each other's company. When you do speak it is as likely to be about something relatively inconsequential, like the weather or the scenery, as it is to be about something deeper, though you do speak about the deeper things as well.

You do not expect anything unusual or special to happen every time you are together. Sometimes, of course, you try a new activity or place to go – but most of the time you are just enjoying each other's company and enjoying the usual things you do.

Your mind may not be entirely on the other every time you are together. You might have all sorts of thoughts, problems, dreams and distractions buzzing around in your

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mind as you meet. That does not mean you are not enjoying the other's company. You are there, present with the other, distractions and all. You may even tell the other about it – "I can't get so-and-so out of my head!" You might even find the other replies, "Me, too!"

Prayer is like that. You meet with God regularly, often doing the same things in the same places. You do not spend all the time talking. You just enjoy each other's company, for God is always there. Of course, when God is around, he may do anything. Anything may happen – but usually it does not. God did not create the world to keep interfering with it.

You do not have to clear your mind of every other thought except God to enjoy his company, even if it is a good thing if you can at least sometimes. When you cannot, you may even find God is thinking about the same things as you. When you talk, it can be about the weather or the scenery as well as about deeper things. You often do talk about deeper things, particularly if they are what is on your mind.

Try it. You could go for a walk. God will be with you. Sit on a park bench and tell God the flowers are nice. (After all, he did make them!)

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Summary – chapter 3 – What is happening when we pray?

- Prayer is spending time with someone we love and who loves us – God – but it is much more than just that.
- The more time we spend with God, the deeper our relationship with him will get. Prayer helps our love for God to grow.
- In prayer, we receive insights, ideas, joys and challenges as God works in our hearts and minds.
- Prayer is not just something **we** do – it is something **God** does.
- When we pray, it is as God's Spirit works in us that:
 - Our love for God grows as the Spirit bears witness within us that we are deeply loved by him.
 - As we become more aware of God's great love for us we become more aware also of his great love for the whole of his creation.
 - As our love for him grows we are drawn to love what he loves – and so we become lovers of God's whole creation and so desire to become channels of his love towards creation. Our relationship with God becomes "cross-shaped".
- When we cannot or do not know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us.
- When we pray, the Spirit prays for us according to God's will – which will at very least be that we enjoy an outpouring of God's love, joy and blessing – and are inspired to love others!
- The Spirit does not just bring us into a relationship with God as individuals, but as part of a community – the church. Prayer is corporate as well as personal.
- We need to develop the practice of silent (still or contemplative) prayer – admitting our weakness, relying on the Spirit to do the praying and ourselves just resting in his love – letting go and letting God!

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 3.

- Do you feel you grow spiritually as a result of prayer? Does your relationship with God get deeper, or change in any other way that you can tell? Do you find you are increasingly drawn to love and care about others and/or the whole of creation? Even just a little bit?
- Can you think of insights, ideas, joys or challenges that have come to you, or you think may have come to you, in the course of prayer or as a result of it?

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- Do you believe God speaks to you or communicates with you in some particular way, or has done, if only once? Could you describe it to others, or is it too “private”? Have you ever had what you could call an “angel Gabriel” or “burning bush” experience – or do you know anyone who has?
- Do you think of yourself as a child of God, or a friend of Jesus, or have some similar picture of your relationship with God, as one deeply loved? If not, how does that idea “feel” for you? What picture do you feel is best for you, as one deeply loved?
- How do you react to the idea that the Spirit prays for us when we find we cannot pray or prayer is difficult? Is this reassuring? Or puzzling? Or even worrying? Do you have any experience where you think it has happened?
- Do you have any experience of silent or still (contemplative) prayer that you could usefully share with others? If you practice silent prayer, do you find it helpful to think of it as “letting the Spirit do the praying” or as “resting in God’s love”? Or something else? Perhaps neither of those ideas are helpful to you, but maybe something else is.
- If you already practise silent prayer – carry on! But, if not, or you just tried it after reading chapter 1, maybe now is the time to engage with it with more understanding. As suggested at the end of chapter 1, Appendix 1 may give you some helpful guidance if you feel you need it. Whatever you do, rest in God’s love, relax and enjoy!

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Chapter 4 – “Your Will be done”

Chapter 4 – “Your will be done”

Not an inevitable fate!

Jesus told his disciples to pray, “Your will be done”⁸⁷, and Paul tells us that the Spirit prays for us according to God’s will⁸⁸. But what is God’s will – and what does it mean to pray for God’s will to be done? We looked at that question briefly in chapter 3 – and I suggested that, whatever God’s will may be, it must at least be an expression, an outpouring, of his immense love for us, seeking to bless us beyond measure and fill us with joy as we grow closer to him.

Certainly, we can and should think of God’s will as something positive. Praying “your will be done” is to place our situation, our lives and indeed the whole world into the hands of God who not only desires to bless but also knows and understands and cares more about any situation than we can, and who can be trusted to do whatever is for the best.

It is so easy, however, to think of God’s will in a more negative, fatalistic way – and this is something we need to avoid. It can happen, for example, if we pray and do not get the answer we want or even expect. If we pray for a sick person to recover and instead she or he gets worse or even dies we may well be tempted to say that the sickness or death must have been God’s will. God’s will tends to get blamed when things seem to go wrong, when we do not get what we want, when we pray for something and do not get it, and perhaps even the opposite of what we asked for happens. It is as if we think of God deciding what is going to happen for reasons best known to himself – indeed, probably only known to himself – regardless of our prayers, our wishes, or what we may think would be for the best. God, we believe, can overrule in any and every situation – and we assume he does; his will seems like some kind of inevitable fate, even a predetermined plan. God’s will is what God wants, and we assume he will do it despite everything, come what may.

⁸⁷ Matthew 6:10

⁸⁸ Romans 8:26-27

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If that is the case, then it is worth reflecting that, logically, what we prayed for cannot have been God’s will. We prayed for someone to recover and all the time it was God’s will for her or him to get worse or die. What we have done is disobey Jesus’ command to pray “Your will be done”. At best, we can say we tried to guess what God’s will was and got it wrong!

I do not believe that God plays games with us like that. If he seriously wants us to pray that his will is done, he will not just expect us to guess what it is before we pray. After all, we are bound to get it wrong a lot of the time! Moreover, Jesus told us to ask for things in prayer⁸⁹ – and there would be no point in that if everything were predetermined!

There is another reason not to think of God’s will as something predetermined. It is not something that God will “do” or “make happen” come what may, and the Bible is the clearest statement of this. For the problem the Bible brings to us is that God’s will, very often, is not done. Much of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is a sorry tale of God not getting what God wants – of him not getting his will. It starts in the Garden of Eden when the fruit is eaten despite God saying “you shall not eat”⁹⁰ and continues with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain⁹¹. As we read through the books of the Bible we find story after story of failures by the great and not so great, tales of kings who did evil in God’s sight and warnings by the prophets for people to mend their ways⁹². One could say that there would have been no need for Jesus to tell us to pray, “Your will be done”, if it always was!

We may want to argue that, yes, human beings have the freedom to disobey God’s will – but what if we are praying for healing, or for the victims of natural disaster? Disease and natural disaster are not due to human disobedience but are the outcome of the laws of nature ordained by God. Are they not therefore God’s will?

I am not so sure. God made the laws of nature as part of his creation and so we can assume they are part of his will, but is there no freedom within them? Human beings have freedom to obey or disobey, but has God locked everything else into some predetermined plan? Are we the only exceptions, the only beings, the only things in the created order, that can frustrate his will? We cannot attribute choice to inanimate things or perhaps even to animals, but does that necessarily mean that

⁸⁹ Luke 11:9-11; Matthew 7:7-11. See also Chapter 5

⁹⁰ Genesis 2:17, 3:1-13

⁹¹ Genesis 4:8-12

⁹² See, for example, 2 Samuel 11:1 - 12:15; 1 Kings 16:25, 30; Isaiah 5:8-13 and Isaiah 10:1-4

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they always do what God would wish? Even science speaks at times of probability and chance, rather than certainty. This is not an issue to go into here, but it is worth remembering that the Bible does tell us to look forward to a time when the wolf shall live with the lamb and the child shall play on the hole of the asp⁹³. Although that is a picture that raises many questions it does at least imply that the whole of creation, not just human beings, in some way needs to be drawn into God’s kingdom, where God’s will is done⁹⁴.

Leaving that issue aside, there are still many ways that God’s will can be frustrated – if only because of the freedom he has given to human beings. So it would be a mistake to think of God’s will as some predetermined plan, an inevitable fate over which we have no control or influence, covering every detail of our lives and everything that happens. There are far too many ways that we – or other people – can frustrate what God would desire. There is all the more reason to pray for God’s will to be done!

God’s will: an outpouring of his immense love – a love that longs for love in response

There are much more positive ways of understanding God’s will, which will help us to pray, “Father...your will be done”. God’s will is what God wants – his desire – for us and indeed for the whole of creation. That desire, whatever it may be (and we shall never know it fully), I have already suggested must be at very least an expression of his great love.

There are two sides to God’s will – what he wills, or wants, **for** us – the blessing – and what he wants **of** us – our response. The Bible often speaks of what God wants of us⁹⁵ – the response – and we shall be thinking of that a little later, but it does not say much about what is God’s will for us in so many words. What it does do is speak in many places of his amazing love for us⁹⁶ – “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”⁹⁷ – and we are usually left to work it out that if he loves us he must surely want to bless us. However, Paul does speak of God’s “good, pleasing and

⁹³ Isaiah 11:6-9 “Asp” is another name for the viper.

⁹⁴ See also Matthew 6:10, Romans 8:19-23

⁹⁵ Eg Ephesians 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 4:3

⁹⁶ Eg Romans 8:38-39; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 3:14-20; John 3:16; John 4:19; John 15:12-13; 1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:7-21

⁹⁷ Ephesians 3:18 ((New International Version)

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perfect will”⁹⁸, and the words “good, pleasing” imply something like a blessing. He tells the Thessalonians to “Rejoice always...give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”⁹⁹, and we might expect that there will be a blessing to rejoice or give thanks for.

One place where the Bible does suggest a little more explicitly that blessing is God’s will is in the letter to the Ephesians, where the writer says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us...with every spiritual blessing...he chose us..to be holy and blameless in his sight...predestined us for adoption...in accordance with his pleasure and will...”¹⁰⁰. Another is in 1 Timothy, where we read that “God our Saviour ... desires everyone to be saved”¹⁰¹. A similar sentiment is expressed in 2 Peter, where we read that “The Lord ... is patient ... not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance”¹⁰². God’s will is that none should perish, that all are saved and all are blessed with every spiritual blessing – blessing indeed!

Perhaps the will of God to bless us was so clearly evident to the biblical writers that they usually thought it unnecessary to mention it – and tended instead to concentrate on the response his blessing would elicit! Certainly, the fact that God does bless is well attested in the Bible, for example, in the psalms¹⁰³, which remind us that we must “not forget all his benefits”¹⁰⁴.

Indeed, the biblical narrative is very much an account of the way God loves, blesses and cares for his creation. Genesis tells us that the first thing God did, when he had completed his work of creation, was to bless the creatures, and humankind in particular, that he had just created¹⁰⁵. His care and blessing continues in his work of redeeming creation, shown from the moment he cared for Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the garden¹⁰⁶ right through to the redemption brought by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and beyond as he continues to care for each of us. It is expressed in his being incarnate – being God with us, beside us, sharing our life, our suffering, our joy and our pain – in the person of Jesus and as he abides in each of us by his Spirit.

⁹⁸ Romans 12:2 (New International Version)

⁹⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹⁰⁰ Ephesians 1:3-5 (New International Version)

¹⁰¹ 1 Timothy 2:3-4

¹⁰² 2 Peter 3:9

¹⁰³ See, for example, Psalms 8, 19, 23, 34, 103, 104, 111 and 134

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 103:2

¹⁰⁵ Genesis 1:22, 28

¹⁰⁶ Genesis 3:21

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We can reasonably expect that what God does reflects his will – in other words, that what he does is what he desires to do! So we can see that his will is to bless us. It is to redeem us – not merely free us from sin and injustice, but bring us to wholeness and fullness and care for us in our need and weakness. It is his will to be alongside us, sharing our lives, our joys and our pains and embracing us in his love.

If it is God’s will to bless us in such a way it is hardly likely that he will want to thwart our every earnest prayer, but blessing us like that is not the same as granting our every wish. Indeed, we must be careful not to assume being blessed beyond measure is going to be synonymous with having an easy time. Paul testifies to enduring trials and tribulations in the course of his ministry¹⁰⁷ and the greatest example in the Bible of praying “Your will be done” is Jesus himself praying in Gethsemane. Jesus was well aware of the ordeal before him and prayed that he could avoid it, asking, “Father...remove this cup from me”. Yet he accepted “not what I want, but what you want”¹⁰⁸. God’s will for him meant the joy and glory of resurrection and eternal life for humankind, but the route lead through the agony of the cross. God’s will for us may not be easy. Even though blessing is the eventual outcome, for some God’s will may lead through suffering, difficulty and even death.

However, Jesus’ prayer also shows that, to pray “Your will be done” does not mean we have to suppress our own desires – or our fears. These can be offered to God as part of the prayer. God may use our desires, transform them – or indeed grant them – in order to fulfil his will and bring blessing. He took Jesus’ fears and desires in Gethsemane and transformed them into a willingness to go through with the trial and suffering that followed – and blessing beyond measure was the result! Bringing our earnest desires to God is something we will look at further in the next chapter.

Jesus’ experience in Gethsemane reminds us that there is another side to God’s will, and that is that he desires things of us – to respond to his love. Blessing is what God desires **for** us; the response is what he desires **of** us or **from** us.

What God desires of us is our love – love for him, love for our fellow Christians and love for our neighbours – the two great commandments, to love God and love our neighbour,¹⁰⁹ supplemented by Jesus’ new commandment to love one another¹¹⁰. There are other places in the Bible where we are told what God wants – for example,

¹⁰⁷ Eg 2 Corinthians 6:3-10

¹⁰⁸ Mark 14:36

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 22:36-40

¹¹⁰ John 13:34f, 15:12ff

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the Sermon on the Mount¹¹¹, or Micah 6:8¹¹², or even the whole corpus of the Law in the Old Testament – but love is the basis of them all. They tell us what love involves. As Jesus said of the two great commandments, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets”¹¹³. God’s desire – his will – is that we respond to his love with our love.

But love, if it is to be love, must be given freely. Love that we are somehow “forced to give” just is not love. Love comes from within, a free response to the beloved. It is a choice that the lover desires to make. Perhaps it comes about as the result of a deep stirring of emotion or longing, but, however it comes, the lover *really wants* the beloved, *really wants* good things for the beloved as a conscious choice freely made. Love is a gift, freely given.

Love *is* before love *does*; what love *does* arises from what love *is*. No one can make you love somebody. You could be asked, implored, told, commanded, obliged, forced by circumstances or even physically forced to behave in a certain way that may seem like love, but if the desire from within, the personal choice, the *really wanting*, is not there, such behaviour is not love whatever else it may be.

Love is also creative. Loving someone is not just a matter of doing what the beloved asks for, however gladly and willingly we may do it. Much of the time, if not most of the time, showing love is finding ways to please and care for the beloved that are over and above what may be asked. It may be a surprise gift, an extra caring act, an extra call or visit to spend time together, simply being there for and with the beloved – or any of a number of other things. If we love someone we look for ways to express our love. We do not wait to be asked. Love is proactive, not just reactive. Love takes the initiative.

It is no different when we love God. Loving God is something we choose to do. It is something that comes from within; a free response to God. It is most certainly the result of to the stirrings of the Spirit as the Spirit bears witness that we are loved by God¹¹⁴, but the response is *our* response – our response to the amazing truth revealed to us by the Spirit that we are loved, welcomed and indwelt. We *really want* God – we *really want* that love, we *really want* him to dwell, to abide, in us¹¹⁵. God’s

¹¹¹ Matthew chapters 5-7

¹¹² “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?” See also Isaiah 58:6-14

¹¹³ Matthew 22:40

¹¹⁴ Romans 8:15b-16. See chapter 3

¹¹⁵ John 15:4

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command for us to love him is an expression of his will, his deep desire for our love, but he cannot *make* us love him, not because of any limitation of his divine power but because of what love is – what the word “love” means. If he “made” us love him, or if we put on a “show” of love, what he got would not be love. All God can do is to desire us, to really want us, to really want us to really want him and so to work in us by his Spirit that we realise how much loves us.

Neither is loving God just a matter of obeying rules, however important rules may be. When we love God we creatively seek ways to please him and show our love, often over and above the rules, over and above whatever may be asked for, and we do it, not out of some sense of duty, but because that is what we want to do. Think of Zacchaeus¹¹⁶; Jesus never asked Zacchaeus to do anything more than show him hospitality, but Zacchaeus volunteered to give half his possessions to the poor and recompense those he had defrauded fourfold. A more modest response would probably have been sufficient to show the true repentance of a sinner, but Zacchaeus suddenly discovered the immense love of Jesus, even for a prince among sinners such as he was, and found that love beginning to grow in himself. His heart was turned and he wanted to do so much more. He realised he *really wanted* Jesus.

Think also of the woman who anointed Jesus¹¹⁷. Nobody, let alone Jesus, asked her to do what she did. It was a creative outpouring of love. It was extravagant. It was over and above anything that anyone thought might be required. But it was obviously something she could do and felt she wanted to do, and Jesus received and welcomed it.

Of course, there may be particular things God challenges us to do, perhaps to take specific actions, do certain tasks or even follow a particular vocation. Jesus faced the challenge of the cross in Gethsemane. Most of us will face some kind of challenge from God, probably more than once in our Christian lives, though perhaps not as demanding as the one Jesus faced! It does not follow, however, that God always and only desires us to respond to his love in some specific way or ways, or that responding in some particular way is all he desires – or that he is disappointed if our response is creative and loving but in some way different. He leaves us free to make our response, not only to love him or not, but to be creative ourselves in how we express that love. He wants our love, freely given and creatively expressed, like that of Zacchaeus and the woman, not just our obedience or conformity to a particular

¹¹⁶ Luke 19:1-10

¹¹⁷ Matthew 26:6-13

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plan. He will accept and welcome our choices made as a loving and creative response.

This is something we may learn from Matthew’s version of the parable of the talents¹¹⁸, where the slaves were given the talents but were not told what to do with them. They were left to respond to the master’s trust and generosity. The only slave who was not rewarded was the one who made no response – or rather, whose response was the result of fear rather than love. Had they been told exactly what to do he would probably have done it out of fear.

The slaves who were rewarded were not rewarded for doing what they were told, as they were not actually told what to do. They were rewarded for being creative and acting as they believed would please their master.

We may be told what it is God’s desire or will for us to do, or believe we are being called or challenged to do something – do this, say that, take on this job, follow that vocation – but not always. What God always does want, whether or not he tells us anything more specific, is a creative response of love – and “creative” gives us a measure of freedom to choose what to do.

God’s will – blessing, creativity, freedom – and frustration!

God’s will, therefore, is not a simple concept – a single statement of what God desires in any situation. We can say there are not just two sides to God’s will, but three; he desires to bless us, he desires that we respond in creative love and he desires us to exercise freedom in our response, for without freedom there can be no love. In that freedom there may be more than one way that we can respond that is loving and creative, and so in accordance with his will – and what he then desires may depend on how we have exercised that freedom. All this takes place within the laws of nature – and any freedoms there may be within them. To put it simply, there may often be more than one way that God’s will can be done.

As the Bible record reminds us, there will be times when our responses are not loving and creative. In his love, he gives freedom even for that – to us, and to all creation. As we saw above, it is this freedom which so often frustrated God’s will in the Bible.

¹¹⁸ Matthew 25:14-30. The following story (the sheep and the goats, Matthew 25:31-46) can be read as implying a similar message. The “sheep” were not rewarded for obeying a command but for recognising opportunities to show creative love – and the “goats” were punished for failing to recognise the opportunities.

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Even so, his will is that we exercise that freedom – which may mean that other things he desires, other things that are part of his will, are not done. God’s will includes giving freedom to his creation. There is therefore a paradox; because it is God’s will that we act in freedom, and we have the freedom not to do his will, it can at times be his will to let his will not be done. We must remember, too, that the freedom he gives is to all creation, and insofar as the rest of creation has freedom of action the possibility that there may be times when his will is not done is not restricted to the realm of human activity.

So sometimes, perhaps often, it is God’s will not to intervene in the way creation uses the freedom he has given it – and that may mean that bad things happen – things that are not themselves according to his will. But that is not the same as saying the bad things actually are his will! We can put it this way: nothing that happens is outside his will, but that does not mean that everything that happens is according to his will. That may sometimes help us to understand why, when we pray for what we are sure is good and in accordance with God’s will, something very different happens. God’s will to bless is frustrated by his will to grant his creation freedom.

We will be looking at this further in chapter 6, but for now we need to understand that to pray “Your will be done” is to pray as much for people to exercise their God-given freedom as it is to pray that God will bless. His will is not just that this or that should happen. His will is that we – and all creation – act in freedom and that from our freedom the blessing will come. To pray “Your will be done” is not to ask for a prescribed set of actions. It is to say, “Be free” – and to desire that blessing will be the outcome.

Praying “Your will be done” also acknowledges that the freedom may sometimes frustrate the blessing. Blessing will not always be the outcome of freedom. However, that is not the end of the story. Praying “your will be done” is also to pray that people will come to exercise their freedom in a creative and loving way and that God’s blessing will result.

We will look at the way our wills and the way we exercise our freedom are transformed in the next section, but it is of course not only people who need to be transformed. It is the whole of creation that needs to be brought into the kingdom. It is not just that we human beings need to beat our spears into pruning hooks¹¹⁹ but

¹¹⁹ Isaiah 2:4

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also that the wolf needs to lie down with the lamb¹²⁰. Our prayer is that God’s will is done – both that freedom is exercised and that blessing will come – in all creation.

Praying “Your will be done”

To pray is not just to express wishful thinking. As we saw in chapter 3, when we pray God’s Spirit works in us and through us, drawing us closer to him, loving him more and drawing us into his love. As we are drawn into his great love we are drawn into sharing in his desires for one another and the world he loves. As the Spirit works in us and our love for God grows, the more we find ourselves wanting to be channels of his love through which he can work in the world, loving and caring for us and all creation and bringing fullness of life and wholeness. As we saw in chapter 3, our relationship with God becomes “cross-shaped”, with a “horizontal cross-piece” – representing our love for others and our desire to be channels of God’s love to them – which grows out of and is supported and sustained by a “vertical upright” – our love for God and, more importantly, his love for us and his working in us by his Spirit.

The “horizontal”, our love for others, is likely to be expressed at least in part as a prayer for God’s will to be done. Even though we may well share our personal desires with God, ultimately, when we do ask for anything in prayer, it will not be to ask for some desire of our own, however much it may be a desire for good things and the good of others, but to ask that what will happen will be a work of his love – that God’s desires, God’s will, will prevail. Whatever our desires may be, whatever we may think is right, we know that God loves us, and loves the world, far more than we can imagine and that his desires, his will, are going to be by far the best for us and for the rest of creation. As we draw closer to him in prayer, as our love for him gets greater, so our desire becomes, not that our wishes, our solution to the problem, may come about, but that his will is done.

As our desires become one with God’s desires, those desires may well move us to act – to fulfil those desires, insofar as we have the ability and opportunity. As it is often said, sometimes we are the answer to our own prayers! Again, the Spirit will be with us empowering the action. We not only share God’s love, desires and will for the world but become channels through which his love is shown, his desires are carried out and his will is done. More than that, with his Spirit working in us and through us

¹²⁰ Isaiah 11:6

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his power is released into the world; lives may be transformed and even miracles may happen!¹²¹

Transformed lives and miracles may not be, or may not yet be, our present and everyday experience of prayer; it takes time to be drawn into God’s great love, and it will never be complete in this life. Nevertheless, drawing us into his love and the joys that flow from it are the work that the Spirit does and continues to do within us. As Paul tells us, the Spirit draws us into his love by “bearing witness ... that we are children of God”¹²², “helps us in our weakness”¹²³ when we do not have the will or the strength of our own to be channels of that love and prays “according to the will of God”¹²⁴ when we cannot do so ourselves.

So, when we pray, “Your will be done” we are not expected to work out or guess what God’s will is and pray for it. After all, even when God’s will seems to us to be fairly obvious, in our limited perspective we can still be hopelessly wrong, for many reasons, not least because we do not know how God’s will to give freedom might frustrate God’s will to bless. We can bring our desires and our understanding – even our opinions and our ideas as to the solution to the problem – to God, but then we need to surrender them to him for him to use – or not – as he in his overwhelming love knows is best. That is what it means to pray “Your will be done.”

We could say that he wants our prayers, not because they tell him the problem or how to solve it (as if he needed help with that!) but for the intensity of love they embody, through which his Spirit can work. A fervent prayer offered in love is a vehicle for God’s action. As we pray he may transform us and our desires. As we pray he may inspire us and empower us to do his will – and that may mean we are moved to make a considerable commitment to some piece of work he wants us to do. We may get our hands dirty! Alternatively, as we pray, our prayer and our love may act like a kind of “lightning rod” for his love and power to enter the situation without us having to do much at all, if anything. Other people may be changed; those who formerly exercised their freedom in a way that frustrated God’s blessing may come to choose to act instead in creative love. Situations may be changed and miracles may happen; other parts of creation, not just people, may be brought within the kingdom where God’s will is done! Jesus promised, “The one who believes in me will also do

¹²¹ See John 14:12

¹²² Romans 8:16

¹²³ Romans 8:26. See Chapter 3.

¹²⁴ Romans 8:27

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the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works...”¹²⁵. James tells us, “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”¹²⁶.

There is potential here for the silent or still prayer mentioned in chapter 3. In silent prayer we leave it all to God – we do not use any words to ask for anything, let alone tell him what to do to sort the problem! We are simply being there for him; he may use us, or speak to us, or nothing may happen that we are aware of. But by being in his presence we have entrusted ourselves and anything we are concerned for to him. We are there to be the channel if God wants to use it; we leave it to him to act as in his wisdom he chooses.

To pray that God’s will is done is a kind of ultimate end of our prayer. In prayer we can certainly express our personal desires to God, but as we pray the Spirit may well end up transforming those desires into something close to what is God’s desire in the matter – his will – and then acting through us to fulfil it. Could it be that God needs our prayers that his will is done so that there is a channel through which his power can be released?

Praying in Jesus’ name

Praying that his will is done is what I think Jesus means by praying or asking “in my name” and by gathering “in my name”¹²⁷. In the Bible, a person’s name was more than just something they were known by; it referred to the entire person, his or her nature and power – particularly when used of God. Those gathered in Jesus’ name, or asking in Jesus’ name, are doing so from the perspective of the love that is at the heart of God’s nature and, by the power of his Spirit working in them, are seeking to be channels of his grace and love into their own lives and into the world. To ask in Jesus’ name is not to ask for anything we fancy, however worthy. In other words, it is to ask that his will may be done. It is to ask for what Jesus would ask.

So asking in Jesus’ name is not just a matter of adding “in Jesus’ name” or “for Jesus’ sake” at the end of a string of requests. That would be rather like believing all we have to do is use Jesus’ credit card in the slot machine or supermarket and we can

¹²⁵ John 14:12. Note how this connects with the work of the Spirit – Jesus says it happens because he is going to the Father (John 14 12b) which is necessary if the Spirit (Advocate) is to come (John 16:7)

¹²⁶ James 5:16b

¹²⁷ Matthew 18:19-20, John 14:13-14, 16:23-26. Note also John 15:7 where the promise to do as the disciples wish is given “If you abide in me and my words abide in you” – implying a close relationship and unity of mind and heart. See also Colossians 3:17

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have whatever we want!¹²⁸ We can see this more clearly, perhaps, if we think how we use the idea of doing something in the name of someone else in ordinary life – for example, in casting a proxy vote at an election. If we are given power to vote in the name of a friend or relative we are expected – and, indeed, trusted – to vote as the friend or relative would wish, not in accordance with our own wishes. In the same way we cannot and should not try to use Jesus’ name to “rubber stamp” our own desires and expect God to grant them unquestioningly. To ask in Jesus’ name is to pray “Your will be done”.

When he taught the disciples the Lord’s Prayer Jesus told them to use those words “Your will be done”¹²⁹, and in essence those words sum up all that we can desire and all that God desires for ourselves and for the world. To pray “Your will be done” is not to resign ourselves to a predetermined fate. Nor is it merely to entrust ourselves and the world to God’s greater wisdom, love and care, though it is certainly that. It is to open ourselves and the world to God’s glorious love, overwhelming joy and creative power, and invite him to exercise that love and power in and through us. Those four words – along with the three that precede them, “Your kingdom come” – are the most exciting and liberating prayer ever!

¹²⁸ See Chapter 2

¹²⁹ Matthew 6:10

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Chapter 4 – “Your Will be done”

Summary – chapter 4 – “Your will be done”

- God’s will is the expression of his wishes, his desire – and his desire is the outcome of his immense love for us and the whole of creation. His will is to bless us beyond measure, seeking to fill us with joy and draw us nearer to him.
- God’s will is not some inevitable fate that God will bring about come what may.
- We do not have to guess what God’s will is before we can pray for it to be done!
- God’s will is so often not done – as the Bible tells us. The freedom God gives to humankind allows us to frustrate his will – and we do! Much of the Bible is a sorry tale of people doing evil in the sight of the Lord. We need to pray, “Your will be done”!
- There are two sides to God’s will – what he desires or wills for us – blessing – and what he desires of us – a response to the blessing. The Bible does not often speak of God’s will to bless in so many words; what it does speak of is his immense love – “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” – and of the fact that God does bless us, caring for us, redeeming us and becoming one with us in incarnation. What God does for us must surely reflect his will for us.
- For God to bless us beyond measure does not mean we will always have an easy time – as Jesus found in the garden of Gethsemane.
- God’s will is that we respond to his love freely and creatively. He wants our love – and love is not love unless it is freely given. He may challenge us to do certain things – but the most important thing is that we respond freely and creatively in love rather than that we follow some particular course of action. There may be more than one way that God’s will can be done.
- God’s will, therefore, is threefold in nature: he loves his creation and desires to bless it, he desires his creation respond creatively in love and he desires that that response be made freely.
- The freedom includes the possibility that the response may be neither creative nor loving, so we have the paradox that because it is his will that we have the freedom not to do his will, it may at times be his will to let his will not be done.
- There is need to pray “Your will be done”, but praying for God’s will to be done is to pray as much that people will exercise their God-given freedom as it is to pray that God will bless. However, praying for God’s will to be done is also to pray that people will come to exercise that freedom in a creative and loving way.

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- It may take time, but as we pray, the Spirit works in us and through us so that our desires become closer to those of God, and again he can work in us and through us to fulfil those desires and do his will. Our will becomes his will. We can bring our ideas, our understanding, even our passionate desires to God – but then we need to surrender them to him for him to use as he knows best in his overwhelming love. Silent prayer, where we are simply there for God but say or ask nothing, has potential here.
- Praying in Jesus’ name is to pray “Your will be done”. We cannot claim any prayer or request other than one that is in accordance with his will is made in his name.

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 4.

- How do you think of “God’s will”? Is it something you think of as predetermined, a kind of fate – or is it an expression of his love?
- When you pray “Father...your will be done” (assuming you do), do you do so with resignation or with hope and joy – or with some other reaction or feeling?
- Do you feel you want to respond to God’s love? If so, how? What would be a loving, creative response for you to make in your situation? Do you feel it is his will, his desire, for you to do something specific? Or is there a response you want to make, something you feel would be an appropriate way to express your love to him or his love to others, or both? Either way, does this excite you or is it something that leads to anxiety or fear? Is there someone – a pastor, or a Christian friend, perhaps – with whom you could discuss this?
- Does the paradox that arises from the threefold nature of God’s will help you to understand when prayer seems “unanswered”, even when we ask for things that we are sure are God’s will?
- Do you find that the things you pray for, the concerns you bring to God, change, or have changed, over time – perhaps over a long period? Does this seem to you a work of God’s Spirit transforming them into something closer to his will? Has anything happened as a result – inspiration, action (by you or others), changes in other people or situations, or anything else? Even miracles?
- Do you think of your prayers made “in Jesus’ name” as an attempt to let his will be done and guide your praying, or is adding “in Jesus’ name” or a similar phrase to your prayers just a matter of habit for you?
- Have a time of prayer during which you say the Lord’s Prayer (the “Our Father”). (You may do that regularly anyway.) When you get to the words “Your will be done on earth as in heaven” (“Thy will be done...” if you use the

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traditional words), stop – and think about what they mean in the light of this chapter. They are not just a formal acknowledgement of God’s rule – a bit like doffing your cap to the boss. They are not just a committing of the world to God’s care – though they certainly are that. They are words of power. If they are sincere words offered in love and concern they are a vehicle through which God’s Spirit can work. True, they are not specific to any particular situation, but that does not rob them of their effectiveness. Rather, they may be more flexible and powerful as a result. We may not see what happens, but somewhere – maybe a long way from us – God’s will may get done or his power released because of our prayer. Remember, too, that it may be in small things as well as great that God’s will is done. There may not be a sudden healing – but somebody might start getting better!

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Chapter 5 – “Ask, Seek, Knock”

Chapter 5 – “Ask, Seek, Knock”

Asking – only a part of prayer – but an important part!

In chapter 2, I cautioned against letting “asking” and “praying for” become the main content and purpose of our praying. Prayer is not something we only do when we want something or when we are in trouble, and we need to get away from any idea that prayer is all about (or even mainly about) asking God to do things for us or solve our problems. Prayer is spending time with someone who loves us, not visiting the “spiritual supermarket” – or calling the helpdesk. We have to get our “asking” prayers in perspective. Possibly the best way we can get “asking” prayers in perspective is to discover what we are really doing when we ask.

Asking is a very important part of prayer. Jesus told his disciples to do it. He says, “Ask, and it will be given to you, search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”¹³⁰ . In his final discourse in John’s Gospel he says to them, “If you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Ask, and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”¹³¹ When teaching the disciples the Lord’s Prayer he told them to pray, “Father...your will be done”¹³² – that’s an “asking” prayer if ever there was one, as much of the Lord’s Prayer is.

Jesus not only tells us to ask God. He promises that we will receive – but the promise is qualified. Our asking or gathering together has to be in his name¹³³ and in faith¹³⁴. In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus makes the promise, “Ask and it will be given”, what he says God gives are “good gifts”¹³⁵; it seems God vets the request and gives only what is good! In Luke’s version, it is the Holy Spirit¹³⁶ that we will receive if we ask – the promise is that, if we ask, God will dwell in us by his Spirit. (There is a further discussion of Luke’s account in Appendix 3.) On one occasion the promise is made “if

¹³⁰ Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9

¹³¹ John 16:23-24

¹³² Matthew 6:9-10

¹³³ eg Matthew 18:19-20; John 14:13-14; also John 16:23-24 quoted above

¹³⁴ Mark 11:23-24

¹³⁵ Matthew 7:11

¹³⁶ Luke 11:13.

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you abide in me, and my words abide in you”¹³⁷ – a degree of unity between Jesus, his teaching and the disciple which implies a oneness of heart, mind, will and purpose.

When Jesus promises that when we ask we will receive, he is not the genie of the lamp saying “Your wish is my command!”. His instruction is to pray “Your will be done” – or to ask in his name which, as we saw in chapter 4, is really another way of saying the same thing. As we also saw in chapter 4, to pray for God’s will to be done is to pray for an expression of his overwhelming love for us. It is to pray for an outpouring of his love, blessing us and the whole of creation beyond measure and filling us with overflowing joy as our love for him grows stronger and we draw nearer to him. It is to pray for him to come alongside us in love and compassion, to lead us into lives that are fuller and more rewarding, and to involve us in his creative and redeeming work in the world.

Love, blessing, joy, compassion, fuller and more rewarding lives – these are the “good gifts” that the Father longs to give us and that he promises we will receive. You could say we would be mad to pray for anything else or anything less! They are what will make our joy complete, as Jesus promises in John’s Gospel.

If we pray in Jesus’ name – when we ask in prayer for God’s will to be done – we are not trying to manipulate God into doing “our will” rather than his. Neither, when we ask for things in prayer, are we seeking special favours or trying to change God’s mind over what he is going to do in a situation. Nor are we trying, when we ask, to remind God of a situation we think he might have overlooked – after all, he knows our very thoughts and everything we say or do¹³⁸; he knows what we need before we ask¹³⁹ and no incident, however trivial, escapes his attention¹⁴⁰. When we ask for things in prayer we are trying to work with God – not against him or despite him!

What we are really doing when we ask for things in prayer is seeking to help release the blessing that is God’s will and, if appropriate, be channels by which that blessing is given. God wants to release the blessing – the love, joy, compassion, fuller and more rewarding lives and much more that he has to give – so we are to ask, not least in order that we are available for him to use! We are told to ask for things in prayer because that is how we co-operate with God in the doing of his will. It is not an

¹³⁷ John 15:7

¹³⁸ Psalm 139:2-4

¹³⁹ Matthew 6:8

¹⁴⁰ Matthew 10:29

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invitation to bludgeon God into doing something different and, when we realise what his will is, we are hardly likely to want to!

Being told to ask is to be given the privilege of co-operating with God in his creative, redeeming and loving work – in bringing the blessing!

Prayer and passion!

That does not mean we cannot or should not ask God for what we want. It does not mean we cannot or should not share our deepest concerns with God or cry out to him in despair or anguish, or even anger. After all, it was in anguish that Jesus cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, with the words “let this cup pass from me”¹⁴¹ and “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁴².

Those last words are a quotation from Psalm 22¹⁴³, and the psalms help us here; they are great examples of prayer, and many of them are cries from the heart! Often, the cries from the heart are for things that, we might judge, are not really worthy, like, “O that you would kill the wicked, O God!”¹⁴⁴ or “Happy shall they be who take your [Babylon’s] little ones and dash them against the rock!”¹⁴⁵. These may not be sentiments we admire or identify with, and we are hardly likely to believe they are or were the will of God, even if the psalmists thought they were. At the time, however, they were the psalmists’ heartfelt cry, and the psalmists were right to share them with God. After all, God is not going to be fooled by our trying to “say the right things”. He knows what is on our hearts, as Psalm 139 reminds us¹⁴⁶.

We can share with our beloved and loving God our heart’s true desires and feelings. He will not love us any the less just because they are not in line with his desires and plans. What he will do is begin to share with us *his* desires as we bring ours to him and let him hold us and our desires in his love. Our desires – and ourselves – may well end up being transformed. Look at how Psalm 139 ends up; after those words “O that you would kill the wicked, O God!” (see above), the psalmist ends up saying, “Search me, O God...see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way

¹⁴¹ Matthew 26:39

¹⁴² Matthew 27:46

¹⁴³ Psalm 22:1

¹⁴⁴ Psalm 139:19

¹⁴⁵ Psalm 137:9

¹⁴⁶ Psalm 139:2

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everlasting”¹⁴⁷. Perhaps the psalmist found himself thinking that, if God killed the wicked, he might just start with the psalmist! He came to see that what he needed to ask, for himself and maybe for the (other) wicked as well, was not death but redemption and transformation!

Even if our desires are not in accordance with his love, God can use them and if need be transform them. He can use our passion even if what we are passionate about is not quite what he desires! Ask with passion, and ask in honesty – and God will do the rest!

So, yes, let us ask God for whatever we want. Let it be what we really want – our true heart’s desires, not a string of “politically correct” requests. Like the psalmists, let us ask with passion! Storm the gates of heaven! Bang on the altar table! Are you feeling angry with God? Are you fed up not getting an answer to your prayer? Let him know!

Then let us place those desires, those passions, those concerns, and whoever and whatever it is that we pray for – ourselves, other people, situations – in God’s loving arms and entrust them to his immense love. Let him transform them – or affirm them, and even use us to achieve them, perhaps using our passion to stir us to action. Let him search them...and lead us and them in the way everlasting.

God can use our passion – even if he has to redirect it a bit! Think of Paul – passionate opponent of the Gospel, who became its passionate advocate!¹⁴⁸

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As we think about prayers of passion, despair and anguish it is appropriate to look at this most poignant one, uttered by Jesus on the cross, and at others like it, as well as the circumstances that may cause us to make such prayers. It should almost shock us that the Son of God himself had such a sense of dereliction, a sense of being abandoned by God, that he spoke those words, quoting from Psalm 22¹⁴⁹. It is, however, far from being a unique experience to feel that God has become remote or has abandoned us. The psalmist who wrote them, and no doubt many of those for whom he originally wrote, must have had experiences that were similar, and the

¹⁴⁷ Psalm 139:23-24

¹⁴⁸ Acts chapter 9 – compare verses 1 and 20! (Paul was formerly called Saul)

¹⁴⁹ Psalm 22:1

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same feeling of being abandoned, of dereliction, hits most of us at some time or other as well.

Those words of Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁵⁰ are an “asking” prayer, for they ask a question. They are a “seeking” prayer, too, because the speaker is seeking God. So, although they are not what we think of when we recall Jesus’ promises like “Ask, and you will receive”¹⁵¹, or what Jesus probably had in mind when he made those promises, this is perhaps the place to look at those times when we feel God is remote, or has abandoned us. If at such times we find we can pray at all it will very likely be in anguish, pain, confusion, passion or even anger – prayers we have just thought about. They may be prayers asking for things – for help or relief – or they may just be questions – perhaps “Why is this happening?” or “God, where are you?”. They may even be just cries of pain.

At times when God seems remote or even absent prayer, if we feel able to pray at all, seems like calling into empty space. The loving God who, we always believed, dwells within and longs to embrace us seems to have gone away – perhaps, as Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal, to be asleep, to be meditating, to have wandered off, or to have gone on a journey¹⁵². It is perhaps as if there is no answer when we call, as if God has left the phone off the hook, or cannot be bothered to pick it up – or, maybe, we seem to have no phone ourselves to call him from. We are, or we feel, cut off. God is silent. Descriptions of prayer I have used in earlier chapters, such as “encounter with the beloved” or “spending time with someone who loves you” seem like a mockery.

We have touched on such experiences in earlier chapters¹⁵³. We may use all kinds of phrases to describe them, such as spiritual dryness, isolation, abandonment, the silence of God, desolation, dereliction or just pain. They often come when we are already down for some more tangible reason – sickness, a broken relationship, the loss of a loved one, losing our job or home – any of a hundred or more problems ranging from the inconvenient to the tragic that can and for most of us at some time do affect us as we go through life. Some of us suffer more than others, but whether we are enduring a minor frustration or are trying to cope with a major tragedy we are all inclined to ask, “Why has this happened to me?” and, often, “Why doesn’t God do something to help?”

¹⁵⁰ Mark 15:34

¹⁵¹ John 16:24

¹⁵² 1 Kings 18:27

¹⁵³ See chapter 2 (page 25); chapter 3 (page 35 and 37)

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It is not my purpose to try to deal with these questions and the other major issues around suffering – although we shall touch on them again, in Chapter 6, when we look at what Job can teach us. My less ambitious aim is to say a little about how we may respond – or not respond – in prayer. We may begin our response to suffering by praying, asking God for help or relief, but if that help or relief does not come – as we have seen¹⁵⁴, there are reasons why it may not – a sense of abandonment, of desolation, of dereliction, may set in. Sometimes we may even feel unable to pray – I certainly recall not wanting to pray in the midst of even relatively minor problems.

A sense of abandonment or dereliction may not always have an external cause like sickness or tragedy. Sometimes we have periods – perhaps extended ones – when God just seems remote or absent. Father Gregory Fruewirth, recalling talks he gave as superior to members of his monastic community, writes, “If we talked with our fellow Christians about their inner lives, we might be shocked to learn just how many of us live, day in and day out, with a pervasive sense of divine absence, or at least a longing for a God who seems not fully here, fully with us.”¹⁵⁵ If we feel we are suffering, it is not from some external cause; it is just the seeming absence of the God whom we love, and whose love for us we treasure, that gives us pain.

One comment I have heard which seems to me to be unhelpful is along the lines of, “If God seems absent or far away, who do you think moved?” The implication is that times when we feel far from God are our fault – that it is we who have “wandered off”, perhaps by neglecting our prayer life or something else that keeps us near to him. Of course that may be the case – it may do no harm to examine our lives to check – but it seems to me not to be the most likely answer. If Jesus himself had a sense of dereliction on the cross – at a time when he was actually most wonderfully fulfilling God’s purpose and had earlier prayed “Abba Father.....not what I want, but what you want”¹⁵⁶ – it ill behoves anyone to suggest dereliction is always the fault of the person who experiences it, and members of Gregory Fruewirth’s community or others he may have spoken to were unlikely all to be failing in their monastic or spiritual discipline! The reason for God’s seeming absence must lie elsewhere.

I do not have a simple answer to how we cope with the times God seems remote or silent – indeed, I do not really have any answer of my own at all. I can only offer one or two ideas I hope will be helpful and refer to the experience or insights of others.

¹⁵⁴ Chapter 4, pages 52-53

¹⁵⁵ Fr Gregory Fruewirth, OJN, “Words for Silence” (SPCK 2008) page 23

¹⁵⁶ Mark 14:36

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One point that does seem worth bearing in mind is that, just as God is not like the genie in the lamp, ready to do our every command, neither is he always at our beck and call. We cannot just “call God up” whenever we think we need him. Another is that most human relationships go through times of separation, often for obvious practical reasons, but that does not mean that they are ended. True lovers remain faithful to each other even if they are separated, even if that time of separation is painful, and there is usually a time when they are united once again. Our relationship with God may also go through such times, even if we cannot always see why, and cannot be sure when or if we will be united with him again.

Perhaps a helpful approach is to note that, just as Jesus himself experienced this abandonment or dereliction, so have countless Christians down the ages. Many of them have left us a record of their experience which can help. Christopher Chapman, writing of the times we have to cope with suffering, says, “No one has just our experience and ultimately no one else has to face the challenge of making some sense of it. We do not need some universal and definitive explanation; it will not fit our very particular reality. But we do need some companions willing to share their understanding with us: witnesses whose testimony rhymes in some way with our own. They provide us with a map that, though not exact, gives us confidence to begin to judge where we have come from and where we might go.”¹⁵⁷ He goes on to give accounts of how people like John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, George Herbert, Ignatius of Loyola and Ety Hillesum dealt with times of desolation, conflict, pain and confusion in their relationship with God, and we can do worse than to look at what such people wrote and maybe discover some clues as to how we may respond. It is best, perhaps, to become familiar with what they said when we are in happier times, and then their thoughts may come to mind to encourage and strengthen us when desolation strikes us.

It does seem to me worth remembering, however, that, if God exists then he is never absent. He has not gone away; what has happened when we have a time of desolation is that our perception of God’s presence or activity has changed. Martin Buber wrote of “The Eclipse of God”; he explains, “An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself”¹⁵⁸. God has not changed or gone just because he is hidden or we cannot see or hear him. When Jesus cried out from the cross, “Why have you forsaken me?” he had not been forsaken in

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Chapman, “Seeing in the Dark – Pastoral perspectives on suffering from the Christian spiritual tradition” (Canterbury Press 2013) – Introduction page xv

¹⁵⁸ Martin Buber, “The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy” (Humanities Press International Inc 1988), quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in “When God is Silent” (Canterbury Press 2013) page 73.

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the sense that God was going to have nothing more to do with him. Whatever we might understand to have been happening in the moments of Jesus’ crucifixion and death (if, indeed, we can have any real understanding), something was going on that even Jesus, it seems, could not see, or could no longer see. For God was not gone; he was waiting to raise Jesus from the dead. Similarly, when we have times of desolation when God seems absent, we cannot see and do not understand what is happening. It may be that God has for some reason hidden himself from us, or it may be that some other circumstance has intervened, but God has not actually gone. He has not abandoned us any more than he ever abandons any other part of his creation. He is not far away and he loves us still; it is just that something is preventing us from seeing that. If we were able to “step outside” our desolation we would see that God is waiting and ready, even if we could not see what for. Of course we cannot “step outside” our desolation when we are in the midst of it; if we could it would not be desolation. Maybe, however, we can remember how we saw things in better times, or at least recall that, when Jesus himself was at his lowest point on the cross, God was actually preparing to act.

Barbara Brown Taylor, writing of Jesus’ death on the cross and his cry of desolation says, “Finally, in the most profound silence of his life, [Jesus] died, believing himself forsaken by God. Will anyone suggest he simply was not listening? I do not think so. In the silence surrounding his death, Jesus became the best possible companion for those whose prayers are not answered, who would give anything just to hear God call them by name. Him too. He wanted that too, and he did not get it. What he got, instead, was a fathomless silence in which to cry out.”¹⁵⁹ Jesus has been there.

How do we reconcile these times of desolation with the idea that prayer is a time spent with God who loves us? It is important to recall that relationships do not always go smoothly and it can be external and unseen forces that cause upsets as well as those within the relationship. A human relationship can be put under strain if one of the parties is seriously ill or loses her or his job, for example. Although the parallel is not exact, things can strain our relationship with God – and they are not necessarily our fault – or of course God’s fault! We have already noted that building the relationship takes time – and it will never be perfect in this life. In a sense, we must be prepared for problems; perhaps they are a sign that the relationship is genuine and – perhaps most important of all – is valued. If nothing else, we can try to remember that times of dryness, of abandonment, of desolation, are normal – not a sign that God no longer cares or does not exist. Difficult though it may be to believe it

¹⁵⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “When God is Silent – Divine language beyond words” (2nd edition Canterbury Press 2013) page 78.

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when we are in the midst of such times, they usually come to an end, often leaving the relationship strengthened as a result.

In times of desolation we are asking, seeking and knocking, not so much for relief or help (though maybe that as well) but for God himself – for him to speak, to call our name, or just to be present. At such times, we may find silent prayer helps, or at least is possible – as did Benignus O’Rourke’s friend quoted in chapter 3¹⁶⁰. If prayer of any kind eludes us, the Spirit will be praying for us, as Paul reminds us¹⁶¹ – even though we will find it hard to believe, or even think of, at the time.

Prayer “lists”

Our prayers can be passionate, they may at times be uttered in anguish, despair, desolation, pain or anger, but we will not be passionate or anguished about everything for which we want to pray. Prayer does, however, need to arise from a real concern, not just a feeling we “ought” to be concerned. As I suggested in chapter 2¹⁶², we need to forget that great long list of things we feel we “must” pray for to fulfil our “duty” – unless they really are all things we are concerned about. If there is something we know is important but do not feel concerned about it, maybe we should bring to God our lack of concern. Perhaps he has something to say to us – and something about us he needs to transform!

To avoid any misunderstanding, however, I need to explain that my dismissal of the long list that we somehow feel we “must” pray for as a kind of duty is not intended as a denigration of what are often called “prayer lists” as such. Lists of topics for prayer can be valuable; it is the way we use them that matters.

The value of a prayer list is that it reminds us of things that God is concerned about. It may also help by reminding us of issues about which we are concerned but which have been temporarily driven from our minds by the distractions of the moment. Not everyone will find a prayer list helpful, but the danger for those of us who do is that we will find ourselves reading it though almost mechanically in its entirety every time we pray, and thinking that that is prayer.

¹⁶⁰ See pages 39 and 42

¹⁶¹ Roman 8:26-27. See chapter 3 pages 31-32

¹⁶² Page 28

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There is certainly no need to “read it to God” – he already knows what is on it! A quick look at it, or perhaps at a part of it each day, may, however, stimulate us to recognise an issue about which we should be concerned. Something may “leap out” of the list for us as God reveals an issue he wants us to concentrate on, or we may be reminded of a person or situation we have been concerned about in the past but have since forgotten. We might want to have just a short list of things that particularly concern us or that we believe God has laid on our hearts. There are all sorts of ways we might use lists, but they are an aide-memoire for us – not for God! Neither are they the agenda for a meeting with him.

A list may even be a way of bringing our concerns to God and leaving them in his hands. Making the list can be an act of prayer in itself. We can write down our concerns on the list as an act of committing them to God, or we can lay the list before us, and before God, without necessarily reading it through each time, perhaps as we begin a time of silent prayer.

Indeed, this may be the way to cope with the demands of being a person of prayer. We may want to avoid feeling we have to mention “everything and everybody” in our prayers, as discussed in chapter 2, yet people do ask us to pray for all manner of things, and we are bound to become aware of a huge number of needs and concerns ourselves as we go about our lives. It is not difficult to build up a very substantial “list”, daunting in its length, even if it is not actually written down. Rather than attempting to mention everything, and realising it is not always obvious what we should pray “for”, let alone what is God’s will, in every situation, we can lay such a list before God during a time of silent prayer. Let him take each concern and let the Spirit pray “according to the will of God”¹⁶³ Let him decide what is best. Let him take the burden. The list may be a way of letting go and letting God.

What role does faith play in our prayers?

It is often implied that faith, or belief, is needed if we are to receive what we ask for from God. James is explicit about this in relation to prayer. He tells his readers to “Ask in faith, never doubting....for the doubter...must not expect to receive anything from the Lord”¹⁶⁴. Later, he says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick”¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶³ Romans 8:27

¹⁶⁴ James 1:6-8. This could be read as a tautology – lack of faith and not expecting anything are the same thing – but it seems unlikely James intended this interpretation.

¹⁶⁵ James 5:15

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Probably the boldest statement on the issue comes from Jesus himself. “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea’, and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”¹⁶⁶

Jesus also encouraged or commended faith in those who asked him for healing (eg Jairus, and the woman in the crowd¹⁶⁷, the Canaanite woman¹⁶⁸ and the centurion¹⁶⁹). We also come across occasions where lack of faith prevented healings or other miracles, for example, when Jesus visited Nazareth¹⁷⁰ and the healing of the boy with a spirit after the transfiguration¹⁷¹. Although not prayers in the normal sense, these events are often regarded as illustrations or explanations of why we fail to get the answers to our prayers that we hope for, particularly prayers for healing. It is suggested we did not get what we wanted because we lacked faith.

What does it mean to have faith? It certainly does not mean to believe that whatever we ask, God will do. The promises of God in the Bible, as we have seen, are not “your wish is my command” but rather, “If you ask anything of the Father in my name he will give it to you.”¹⁷² We have no business to believe God will grant our every whim. We are only on sure ground if we ask in Jesus’ name, according to his will.

To put it simply, if we have faith, we can move mountains. The faith we need to have, however, is not just faith that God can and will move the mountain if we ask. We need to have faith that God actually wants the mountain moved! It is not a matter of believing God will do it. It is a matter of believing it is his will that it is done.

We have seen that God’s will is not a simple matter. To ask in faith is not just to know what God’s will is and then ask for it. We really have no business, as a rule, to claim we know for sure whether or not God wants a mountain moved, or that anything else is or is not the will of God. God’s will is beyond our full understanding. We can – and should – ask for what we want, even for what we passionately desire, and indeed for what we think God’s will is, but in the end we need just to say that, whatever we ask

¹⁶⁶ Mark 11:23-24

¹⁶⁷ Mark 5:34, 36 and Luke 8:48, 50

¹⁶⁸ Matthew 15:28

¹⁶⁹ Matthew 8:10

¹⁷⁰ Mark 6:5-6

¹⁷¹ Mark 9:14-29

¹⁷² John 16:23

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for, it is not our desires or our best guesses that matter but, “Your will be done”. That is all we have any reason to believe God will do – and sometimes that is all we will be able to say.

That is not to give up or despair. God’s will is to bless – not assign us or the situation about which we are praying to some arbitrary and possibly unpleasant fate. What we have to remember is that the blessing does not always come easily or without cost or pain, and that our prayers – sincere and at times passionate – may be the way, or part of the way, the blessing comes. The test of our faith is to believe that. It is not to believe that God will do what we ask. It is to believe that he will do his will, that his will is to bless, however discouraging the immediate picture might appear, and that our prayers will help bring about the blessing. God moves in a mysterious way...

...The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and will break
In blessings on your head.¹⁷³

Faith, even faith that God’s will will be done, also needs to grow. It cannot just be “switched on” like an electric light. It begins with our decision – our decision to put our trust in God – but that decision is often a reaching out – a testing of the waters – when we start. “Reaching out in faith” may well start off as more of a reaching out in doubt! Something has got to convince us, not to give us “proof” in the scientific sense but to give us an inner conviction – the “conviction of things not seen”¹⁷⁴. That inner conviction usually starts small and grows – and does not reach certainty in this life.

It grows in many ways, including through prayer, through reading the Bible, and, perhaps most of all, through the action of the Holy Spirit working in us. Paul teaches us that faith, that inner conviction, is a gift of the Spirit¹⁷⁵. Faith is not merely believing that something is true or believing that something will happen, but trust – trust that we have a loving God who seeks to bless and who has given us promises. Trust grows as our relationship with God grows – but it usually takes time.

Faith does not come through will power. It is a gift from God. Until we receive that gift, all we can say, with the father of the boy with a spirit, is “I believe, help my

¹⁷³ William Cowper 1731-1800; hymn “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.”

¹⁷⁴ Hebrews 11:1

¹⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:9

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unbelief!”¹⁷⁶ – and, sometimes, we will not even be able to say that. Like the father, we need God to give us faith – to “help our unbelief”.

So it is misguided to blame someone or berate them for having no faith, or too little faith, when they feel their prayers are not answered. If they have not got the faith, they have not. God has not given it to them – at least, not yet! Telling them to “have more faith” just will not help. Having more faith is just something they cannot do for themselves.

Yet the father of the boy with a spirit had the right idea when he asked, “Help my unbelief!”. The story ends with Jesus saying, “This kind can only come out through prayer”¹⁷⁷. It is not so much that prayer needs faith in order to work – faith needs prayer in order to grow! We reach out in our doubts, praying that God will take our doubts and turn them into faith. It is as we are drawn nearer to God and into his love that we grow in faith. But it is not faith that anything we ask for, good or not so good, will be given. It is faith that God loves and cares for us and others for whom we pray and wants us to be channels of that love. It is faith that God will enfold this situation, this person, this need, within his love, and it is that love that will determine what he does.

So what we want to happen – and what we ask for – will change. What we ask for is not our solution to the problem but God’s solution. What we ask for is that we become channels of his love, whether simply by asking, or by becoming part of God’s action. What we ask for is that the outcome is what God desires. To ask in faith is not to expect or ask for a particular outcome, but to be open to God’s freedom to give it to us, and to ask earnestly desiring that he will do so if that is what love would mean. To ask in faith is not to believe a miracle will happen, but to believe God in his love may give us one. We do not believe we know what is best; what we do believe is that God loves us, and whoever else and whatever else we pray for, and we ask accordingly.

¹⁷⁶ Mark 9:24

¹⁷⁷ Mark 9:29

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Summary – chapter 5 – “Ask, Seek, Knock”

- Jesus commanded us to ask in prayer, and asking is a very important part of prayer, though we need to keep the “asking” parts of our prayers in perspective.
- Jesus also promised that, when we ask, we will receive, but our asking has to be in his name, according to God’s will, and what we will receive are “good gifts”.
- God’s will is primarily to bless us – to pour upon us love, joy and compassion and give us fuller and more rewarding lives. These are the “good gifts” God gives, and to ask in Jesus’ name and pray for God’s will to be done is to seek to co-operate with God in releasing that blessing.
- Asking according to God’s will does not mean we should not ask God for what we want or share our own deep personal concerns with him. We must be open and honest with God and tell him what is really on our hearts. We can be passionate about it! Then let us place those passionate desires and real concerns in his loving arms and entrust each situation to him. He can then use and if need be transform our deep desires and heartfelt cries to achieve, not necessarily what we at first desire, but what is best.
- Passionate prayers include those uttered in anguish, pain, anger and confusion. None is perhaps more poignant than Jesus’ prayer from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Feeling forsaken is not unique; we all face times of spiritual dryness and desolation, when we feel God has somehow abandoned us. Often these are caused by the tragedies and difficulties of life, but not always; sometimes it just seems that God is remote or even absent. Prayer in such circumstances is not always possible. A helpful approach may be to recall that Christians down the ages have had similar experiences and to see what they have said may help us. Silent prayer may be the only prayer we can manage at such times; if even that eludes us, the Spirit is still praying for us – even though we find it difficult to believe or even remember that it is happening at the time. But God, after all, has not abandoned us – it only seems like that to us. He is still there, and he loves us.
- Prayer lists – lists of topics for prayer – can be useful as an aide-memoire to us, but we must not let a prayer list rule our prayer or turn prayer into a burdensome duty. We do not have to pray for everything on the list every time we pray – or read the list every day to God!
- Making a list may itself be an act of prayer, committing our concerns to God, perhaps before a time of silent prayer.

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- We need to ask in faith if we are to receive. But faith does not come through will power; you cannot just “switch faith on”. The ground of our faith is God’s promises – promises that we will receive if we ask in Jesus’ name and in accordance with God’s will. Then faith grows as we pray and as our relationship with God grows. We do not pray believing that God will do what we ask just because we ask for it. We pray believing that God loves us and will do what is best.

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 5.

- What is your attitude when you ask for things in prayer? Do you think of yourself as co-operating with God in bringing blessing, or trying to persuade him to do what you want?
- Are your “asking” prayers a passionate cry or, at least, an expression of deep concern? Or are they just things you ask for out of habit or duty? Or something in between?
- Can you recall times of “spiritual dryness”, desolation, times when you felt abandoned by God or something similar? How did you cope – if you feel you did. Did what other Christians had to say about their own similar experiences – either people from the past or your contemporaries – help, or would they have done? Can you offer any ideas that might help others in similar situations?
- Do you use a “prayer list”? If so, does it inspire and help your praying, or make it a chore? If you don’t use one, might it help?
- Do you find faith seems to “grow” as you pray?
- Go back and look again at the questions “To think about” at the ends of chapters 2 and 4. Would you want to think about any of them afresh, or make any different or additional responses to them?

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Chapter 6 – “Answers” to prayer – the big question

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The big question

“God always answers prayer – isn’t ‘no’ an answer?”

Such is the advice sometimes given if we pray for somebody or something and nothing seems to happen, or certainly not that for which we asked. The advice is usually well-meant, but it simply will not do as a way of disposing of what is probably for many people an extremely perplexing problem. Jesus did not merely say that God would answer prayer – he promised that if we asked we would receive. “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete”¹⁷⁸ he says, and that promise is repeated in different ways in many other places¹⁷⁹. The answer was always going to be “yes!”

So “no” may well be an answer, but it is not the one people are interested in or even believe they should get. When people say that a prayer has been answered, they are talking about a prayer, a request made to God, that has been granted. A prayer that is answered with a “no” has, as far as they are concerned, just not been answered. Words such as “answer”, “answered” and “unanswered” are perhaps being used inaccurately, but it is such a common way of using them that I have stuck with it in much of this chapter, usually putting them in quotes where it seems to clarify the sense the words are used.

Prayers often do seem to get the answer “no”. In the previous chapters we have seen something of the reasons why, but my guess is that the issue of “unanswered” prayer is still one of the biggest problems people have with prayer, even if they do not always admit it. Why is it that, despite the promises made in the Bible, we do not always get what we pray for? Is prayer just a big con? Does prayer really work? Questions like these remain, so it will be useful to probe a little further, and in this chapter I will try to draw together what has been said so far and move on from there.

¹⁷⁸ John 16:24

¹⁷⁹ eg John 14:13-14, 16:23. See also Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9

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A pastoral as well as a teaching issue

“My Mum was ill. I prayed for her to get better. She got worse and died. Please explain!”

Perhaps it is unlikely that anyone would put their problem so bluntly, but that is probably the way people think when facing the issue of “unanswered” prayer. It is obvious that dealing with situations where the answer seems to have been “no” are not just a matter of Bible study or theology – they are more often than not pastoral issues as well. I am not an expert there, and I am not going to try to tell pastors how to do their job. If I have anything to offer it is to say that the church needs to give teaching on prayer that will help people to know what they are doing when they pray and have the right expectations of what prayer is for and what God will do when they pray. That teaching needs to be given as they learn to pray and if possible before they face too many crises and start needing pastoral support! It is part of the church’s teaching ministry to do that, not something to leave until it becomes a pastoral matter to pick up the pieces. I hope what follows (as well as my earlier chapters) will help a little with that.

Getting the answer “no” can of course be a prelude to a time of desolation, of a feeling of abandonment by God, something we have looked at previously, particularly in chapter 5¹⁸⁰. The (imaginary) person whose mother died and who said the words above may well end up feeling prayer is a waste of effort and wondering if God really does love her or him. The teaching she or he has received previously will be crucial, not just the pastoral support she or he receives at the time.

Prayer is about a relationship, not about getting answers

Although it will not deal with the problem of “unanswered” prayer directly, we do need to bear in mind that, as we saw in chapter 2, prayer is not primarily about “answers”. In chapter 1 we saw that prayer is an expression, probably the most important expression, of our relationship with God – the relationship that lies at the heart of our Christian lives. We pray because that is how we build up that

¹⁸⁰ See pages 64ff

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relationship, enjoy it, make it a real experience and help it grow and develop. It is the way, or part of the way, we *live* the relationship. Prayer is not something we do just to get things or solve our problems. It is not like visiting the supermarket or summoning the genie from the magic lamp. If we phrase the question, not as “Does God answer prayer?” but as “Does prayer work?”, the criterion for deciding whether prayer works is whether or not we build up and enjoy a relationship with God through it. Does it make, or at least help to make, a relationship with God a real experience for us – and for God?

The issue of “answers” to prayer is a part of this wider issue of whether prayer builds up and makes real that relationship. Getting “answers” is certainly part of that, because a relationship normally involves asking and receiving or, more broadly, communicating and getting a response. Indeed, an answer to prayer may be a response such as guidance, inspiration, or peace of mind, rather than a more tangible benefit such as healing or something material. Answers to prayer are often unspectacular and unremarkable, and we may get more of them than we realise.

For example, a prayer for guidance or inspiration is rarely answered by a visit from the angel Gabriel bearing a dossier of instructions. More likely, we will get a thought or even a flash of inspiration that we believe is God speaking directly to our minds and hearts. Sometimes, though, we will not even get that, probably because the answer is that God wants us to use the gifts we have – skills, experiences, perhaps just plain common sense – the bodies, minds and hearts he has given each of us – and act creatively in love. We saw in chapter 4 that what God desires from us is our own creative, loving action – not necessarily a prescribed response. A prayer for guidance or inspiration is a prayer offering the situation to God, inviting him to intervene as he wishes and, above all, expressing our love for him and our desire to please him. It is a piece of relationship-building, not an attempt to simplify our decision making or relieve ourselves of the responsibility to think and to love. We may get a flash of inspiration, but often the answer lies within ourselves. It is still God’s answer.

If we ask for something a little more tangible, like praying for a safe journey when we are travelling, we do not usually think of it as a miracle if we get one. There are always risks with travel, and it is neither wrong nor foolish to pray, but in most circumstances we would probably have a safe journey anyway. Our prayer is an earnest one, but it is an acknowledgement of God’s love and care and an indication of our desire for it. Again, it is an expression of the relationship – not cheap travel

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insurance! God’s answer is in the continuing of the relationship as much as in our safe arrival.

This does not solve the issue of “unanswered” prayer, but it does help to put it in perspective. It is, of course, perfectly possible to give an affirmative response to the question, “Does prayer work?”, because, in general, we find prayer does build up and make real our relationship with God, but still have an issue over “unanswered” prayer.

Asking and receiving

Asking and receiving is very much a part of any relationship, and Jesus tells us – commands us, even – to ask, and promises we will receive¹⁸¹. However, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5, it is no good asking for anything that just takes our fancy. We must ask according to God’s will – “Your will be done”¹⁸².

Such a limitation or condition would hardly surprise us in a human relationship – indeed, it would probably be tacitly understood without ever mentioning it. We might well ask favours of a member of our family, a friend, or a lover – but only for things that we think they would approve of us having or receiving – or that we hope to persuade them to approve! So it should be no great surprise as a limitation when we ask things of God.

We must ask “in his name”¹⁸³. As we have seen, this is much the same as asking for his will to be done. We must ask in faith – again, faith that can only come from our trust in God’s promises. Our faith is not a blind faith that God will grant our every whim and fancy. Our faith is trust in a loving God who desires to give us what is best; we believe he will give us what we ask if we ask in his name, according to his will, which is to bless above all else. “Ask and you will receive” is not the same as “Your wish is my command!”

Indeed, a world in which God said to us, “Your wish is my command,” far from being a place of blessing, would be an impossible place and a diabolical one. If in such a world you prayed for dry weather and I prayed for rain at the same time and place, how could God grant both prayers? If two armies fighting one another in battle each

¹⁸¹ John 16:24

¹⁸² Matthew 6:10

¹⁸³ Matthew 18:19-20; John 14:13-14, 16:23-26

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prayed for victory, which one would God make win? If you fell off a cliff and prayed not to hit the ground too hard, God would have to suspend some of the laws of physics – and, be warned, the rocks on the ground, no longer held in their place by gravity, might come up and hit you! You could never be sure you would be able to find your car as God may have removed it to make room for someone who prayed for a parking space! We can only thank God he has not made the world like that!

We usually ask for things in prayer when we have a problem – even if only a minor one. We do not normally ask for what we are perfectly capable of getting for ourselves; we tend to ask for things we need but cannot get, or for things to happen when we are unable to guarantee them to happen on our own. Unless we are in the crisis of poverty we do not ask God for bread or even a new pair of shoes – we go and buy them. Yet bread is one of the few specific things Jesus tells his disciples to pray for – “Give us this day our daily bread.”¹⁸⁴

Possibly Jesus and his disciples were very dependent on the generous provision of their supporters for their daily bread¹⁸⁵, and I have heard that it can be a moving experience to pray that line of the Lord’s Prayer in a community where there was no certainty that there would be any bread that day. The “us” in the prayer can, and should, be understood globally and inclusively; the prayer is, as Rowan Williams has reminded us¹⁸⁶, a prayer for bread for everyone and justice for all.

For those whose daily bread can almost be taken for granted, however, could it be that Jesus intended the asking, not as a plea for God’s help, but a recognition that we depend on him for our daily needs? Asking for something when we know we will get it – if only because there is money in our pocket and a shop down the road – becomes a sign of our relationship rather than a plea for help.

As always, we must remember that prayer is primarily about relationship, not about getting answers. More than that, it is not just something we do – it is something God does¹⁸⁷, in us and through us, as we saw in chapter 3. As we pray, our wills, our wishes, the things we ask for and pray for, become closer to his wishes, his will. As God leads us – and as he draws us ever closer to him – we should find that our desires, our wishes, our passionate concerns, do begin to line up with his will. Praying that God’s will is done becomes both our desire and our practice in prayer. Asking for

¹⁸⁴ Matthew 6:11

¹⁸⁵ See Luke 8:3

¹⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, “Being Christian” p72 (SPCK 2014)

¹⁸⁷ Romans 8:26-27

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things in prayer becomes a way of co-operating with God in the doing of his will – as we saw in chapter 5. It may well be that, as we grow closer to God and our wills begin to be one with his, we will see more “answers” to prayer – prayers in which we ask, and receive that for which we ask – simply because we will be asking for the right things.

Freedom and frustration

There are, however, no guarantees, and we have seen (in chapter 4) at least one reason why. God’s will is not a simple concept, as if we just needed to know what it was, put that into our prayers and they would immediately be granted. There are three aspects to God’s will – the blessing he wants to lavish on his creation, the creative, loving response he desires from his creation and the freedom he gives to his creation both in how it responds and whether it makes a loving response at all. It is part of his will to give his creation that freedom.

We may see these three aspects most clearly if we think of them as they relate to human beings – blessing us, desiring our love, and giving us freedom to love in return or not and to decide how to do it – but it is well to remember that it is the whole of creation that God loves and the whole of creation that God desires to respond to him. We must not discount that other parts of creation, not just human beings, may have some freedom in being able to respond and how that response might happen. As we noted in chapter 4, he desires not only that we human beings beat our spears into pruning hooks¹⁸⁸ but also that the wolf lies down with the lamb¹⁸⁹.

The problem comes, as we saw in chapter 4¹⁹⁰, that if we or any part of creation exercise that God-given freedom in a way that is not in accordance with his will – not in accordance with his desire to bless, and with his desire that we respond in love – then his will to bless may be frustrated by his will to grant his creation freedom. The three aspects of his will are each expressions of his love – but they may be in tension, in conflict¹⁹¹.

¹⁸⁸ Isaiah 2:4

¹⁸⁹ Isaiah 11:6

¹⁹⁰ Pages 45-46

¹⁹¹ It is perhaps an academic point, but it could be argued that any prayer that God’s will is done will always be answered, and answered with a “yes”. Such a prayer will be, not just that blessing will be the result, but that created things will act with the freedom it is God’s will to give them. If the blessing is frustrated by the freedom, then God’s will has still been done in that freedom has been exercised.

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It is not difficult to see how this happens. For example, we might pray for those living in poverty or in the developing world who are exploited for profit or power by rich and powerful people with commercial and political interests. We might pray that the exploitation may cease, something that would seem to be very much in accordance with God’s will, but our prayers can only be answered if the rich and powerful, those exploiting the poor, change the way they work, which, in their freedom, they may not do. God is reluctant to interfere directly with people’s freedom – after all, it is part of his will to give it to them. He does not want automatons or puppets, and to interfere with their freedom would be to make them less than human, to make them something other than what he created them to be.

There are, of course, less direct ways God can intervene. Exploitation of the poor is hardly a new problem and the Old Testament is full of warnings from the prophets that there would be sanctions, or, at least, consequences, such as disease, conquest and exile¹⁹² if the rich and powerful did not change their ways. The rich and powerful rarely changed their ways and the sanctions often took place! God may not intervene directly to control people’s hearts, minds and actions but he can bring pressure to bear in other ways. We must not forget the influence that campaigns such as the jubilee debt campaign and indeed that lobbying by individuals may have. God works through other people who are more “in tune” with his will.

We are, however, left with an uncertainty. Will our prayer to end the exploitation of the poor be “answered”, be granted? We can see that God’s will may well be frustrated by the freedom it is his will to give us. It may be frustrated by the rich exercising the very same freedom God – and we – desire both the poor and the rich to enjoy!

What if we pray for healing for someone? If we can assume that it is God’s desire that the person is healed, how might God grant that prayer, and what might prevent him from doing so? The most obvious way he can grant the prayer is that he can inspire and guide the doctors, nurses and others caring for the sick person. If more than normal care is needed he can “speak” to them through their minds and hearts much as he may speak to us in prayer – a wise decision or a flash of inspiration which brings a breakthrough in healing may be a moment of professional brilliance, or divine inspiration – or both.

¹⁹² See, for example, Amos chapters 4-6

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If that is going to be of no avail, what then? Does God change or suspend the laws of nature in some way, perhaps for a moment in time or in a very restricted location, so that the progress of the disease is halted? That God could do it is not an issue – but would he, and what would be the consequences of changing the laws of nature, however briefly or locally? Obviously, we cannot know, but, again, the laws of nature are part of his will and to change them may have untold consequences for the rest of the created order, as my facetious example of the rocks above suggests!

We cannot be sure what God would do. We can see that God has a problem – a dilemma. Does he fail to heal and let the suffering continue, or does he intervene, suspending or changing natural law, even if briefly, with consequences we cannot even begin to imagine and which only he can see? If the sickness is caused by micro-organisms, germs, viruses or something similar, at very least it would seem intervention would mean God destroying them or interfering with their freedom. They are part of his created order; does he destroy one part or restrict its freedom in order to save another? We cannot assume God is only interested in human beings. He loves all his creation.

This dilemma may well be one of the things that lies behind Jesus’ requests that those he healed keep quiet about it¹⁹³. His love drove him to heal, and his miracles were part of his proclamation of the kingdom, but he knew that each healing was an intervention in his own created order. His love for his creation and his will to give it freedom, itself an expression of that love, were so often in tension. He did not want to have to keep dealing with that tension; he had other, more important things to do – to proclaim the kingdom and redeem the world¹⁹⁴. He had not come just to deal with individuals’ day-to-day problems, however serious for the individuals themselves.

What we can learn from Job

The book of Job is not primarily about prayer – it is about suffering. The problem it addresses is why people suffer – materially, physically, mentally and spiritually. In particular, it looks at why good people suffer; it demolishes the theory, widely held in the ancient world and not entirely dead even today, that if you suffer it is God punishing you for something you have done wrong.

¹⁹³ See, for example, Mark 1:43-45, 8:26; Matthew 9:30-31

¹⁹⁴ Mark 1:38

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Suffering, however, is the number one subject of prayer – at least, of prayers of asking. If someone suffers sickness we pray for healing; if someone suffers oppression we pray for justice; if someone suffers need we pray for plenty. A book which helps us understand suffering is going to be a book which helps us understand prayer.

At the beginning of the book we are told that Job is a prosperous and respected man. Above all, he is a righteous man. We might, from a Christian perspective, wonder how anyone, even Job, can be perfect or totally righteous, but if Job had any shortcomings they must have been minor. The author of the book insists he was “blameless and upright”¹⁹⁵.

Then Job starts to suffer. He loses his flocks and herds, then his family¹⁹⁶, and finally his health¹⁹⁷. He is in a very sorry state. Interestingly, when Job prays, he does not spend much time asking to be relieved of his suffering. His prayer is more of a lament for his plight, suggesting that it would have been better for him not to have been born, or to have died at birth¹⁹⁸, and that it would now be best if God took away his life¹⁹⁹. If he asks anything more positive, it is for God to show him why he is being made to suffer.

Job asks what sin he is being punished for, for he believes he is innocent²⁰⁰. This request is primarily directed at his three friends – the so-called Job’s comforters, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – who come along and, despite their good intentions of comfort and support²⁰¹, try to tell him that, as God is just and loving, Job must have done something very wrong for God to allow all this to happen to him. They – and a fourth man, Elihu, who comes along after the three have finished and has a slightly different perspective²⁰² – argue with him for chapter after chapter, but Job’s conscience is clear. Eventually they all give up, but Job is left with the question – why? Why all this suffering?

¹⁹⁵ Job 1:1

¹⁹⁶ Job 1:13-19

¹⁹⁷ Job 2:7

¹⁹⁸ Job 3:11

¹⁹⁹ Job 6:8-9

²⁰⁰ Job 6:24

²⁰¹ Job 2:11-13

²⁰² Elihu’s perspective (Job chapters 32-37) is somewhat convoluted but moves towards the idea of “Who are any of you to take God to task?” – to some extent prefiguring what God has to say in chapters 38-42. Significantly, Elihu seems not to be included when God speaks of his wrath, which is directed against Eliphaz and his two friends (Job 42: 7-9).

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Then, God speaks, though not until nearly the very end of the book²⁰³. He does not answer Job’s question. He does not tell Job why. Later on God has hard words for the so-called friends who insisted Job’s suffering was a punishment inflicted by God²⁰⁴ – that was certainly not the reason Job suffered.

What God does in response to Job’s question, why? is ask Job a series of questions – rhetorical questions which imply that Job is really quite out of his depth even to ask why or to question the way God runs the universe. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding”, God asks Job²⁰⁵.

“What do you know about it all?” seems to be the gist of what God is saying to Job. “How can you possibly understand?” Job is quite mistaken to think that there is a simple answer to what on the face of it seems a simple question.

That is our problem, too. We are inclined to think that, given God’s almighty power, his infinite knowledge and his overwhelming love he could and would sort out all the problems, including ours, at the snap of his divine fingers. Injustice? Poverty? Sickness? Death? No problem, surely. Just get on and pray. A little talk with Jesus will make it right, all right.

Of course, it does not make it right. What the book of Job teaches us is that it just is not that simple. We can have an over-simple view of what it is like to be God. A little talk with Jesus will almost certainly help – but it will not immediately eliminate every problem, and God never said it would. Paul’s ministry was not short of miracles²⁰⁶, but when it came to praying for his own healing his prayer produced a different result; not healing, but “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness²⁰⁷.” Paul found his prayer did not solve his problem, at least, not in the way he wished, but it did possibly rather more – enhancing both Paul’s relationship with God and his ministry.

After all, God could not solve the problem of sin without the suffering of the cross. No amount of power, knowledge or love could take that cup away from Jesus²⁰⁸.

²⁰³ Job 38:1

²⁰⁴ Job 42:7

²⁰⁵ Job 38:4

²⁰⁶ Eg Acts 14:9-10, Acts 17:18

²⁰⁷ 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10

²⁰⁸ Mark 14:36

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The book of Job tells us that suffering is a mystery too great for us to fathom²⁰⁹ – and that will also be true of the prayers we make when we pray for those who suffer. At least, from our consideration of the will of God and the tensions that it can involve, we have some clue which helps us see *why* it is a mystery; God’s will to bless is so often in tension with his will to give the particular blessing of freedom.

The mystery of *answered* prayer

This all sounds rather negative, but it is more in the nature of “clearing the ground” of some misconceptions. Jesus would not have given his disciples the command to ask if there were no hope of an answer. People in the Bible and since would have long ago given up bothering to ask if it were always futile.

What we have seen is not in any sense “Why God doesn’t answer prayer”. What we have seen is that, when we ask for things in prayer, we are engaging in something rather more than just a simple transaction like going to a shop and asking for a tin of baked beans. We are, by God’s grace and invitation, entering into the mystery of God’s activity, seeking, as we saw in chapter 4, to co-operate with him in the doing of his will. His will is not simple; it involves at times tensions and conflicts. We do not just put in a prayer and out comes an answer, like operating a slot machine; what happens is a mystery, and all we can say is that we have glimpsed a little of why that is.

For, of course, prayers do get “answered”, sometimes in a most obvious and exciting way. The Bible has examples²¹⁰, and many more instances where remarkable things happened and it is difficult to imagine that prayer was not involved even if it is not actually mentioned. It is as much a mystery how some prayers get “answered” in this way as it is that others are not.

The point is – we need to keep asking. Not because we expect to get exactly what we ask for, but because that is the way we co-operate with God in the doing of his will. If at times God’s desire, his will, is frustrated it certainly is not going to happen every time! The tensions and conflicts that sometimes frustrate may at other times be resolved. Our prayers may well be part of that resolution – we may ourselves be part

²⁰⁹ For further perspectives on the mystery of suffering I can recommend the book referred to in the Introduction and quoted in chapter 5 – “Seeing in the Dark – Pastoral perspectives on suffering from the Christian spiritual tradition” by Christopher Chapman, Canterbury Press 2013

²¹⁰ Eg. 1 Samuel 1:10-11, 20; 1 Kings 17:20-22; Nehemiah 1:4-11, 2:4-6; Acts 3:24-31; Acts 9:40-41

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of the answer to the prayer, we may ourselves be inspired to act, we may, as suggested in chapter 4, become a “lightning rod” for God’s power in ways we cannot imagine and of which we may be unaware.

Our prayers will at times need to be passionate, for all the reasons discussed in chapter 5²¹¹. We can make them quite specific if we believe a particular blessing is right – a healing, for example, or meeting a particular material need. We are then more likely to pray with passion, asking God for exactly what we desire. We can still be praying “Your will be done”, making our prayers always subject to his overriding will. God can deal with it if our perception of the need or the right way to respond to it are not quite as he sees them.

Whether we are right or wrong in exactly what we ask – but perhaps particularly if we happen to be right – our passionate and sincere prayer becomes a powerful vehicle for God to use. Maybe it will be a means of inspiring us or some other person to action, maybe a way his power can be released in ways we cannot understand. It may enable him to transform the situation.

Persistence in our prayers can sometimes be even more important. Jesus made the point of prayer needing to be persistent when he told the story of the man who wanted to borrow three loaves at midnight²¹² and again with the parable of the unjust judge and the widow²¹³. We can be confused by these parables because we tend to equate God (wrongly) with the reluctant householder or the judge, and imagine that persistent prayer is needed to bludgeon God into taking action. It is not God that needs to be bludgeoned – it is the situation, perhaps those involved who refuse to act in creative love. Our prayers are like missiles, but they are fired, not by us at God, but by God, the inspirer of our prayers, at the situation. They do not in some way explode, as if attempting to use force to gain compliance with God’s will, but they are vehicles for God’s love and power which, eventually, may transform the situation in ways that we can rejoice over even if we do not understand.

By asking – if we ask according to his will – we are participating in the mystery of God’s activity – at God’s invitation. There is a problem; his will is frustrated. He is giving us the opportunity, the privilege, of being part of his solution. We cannot be sure what will happen. We cannot understand all the mystery of his activity. What we

²¹¹ See pages 63-64

²¹² Luke 11:5-8

²¹³ Luke 18:1-8

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do know is that God will seek to bless – and our prayer may be the way, or part of the way, the blessing comes.

The joy of answered prayer

I lay on my hospital bed recovering from major heart surgery. My prayers were largely of joy and thanksgiving – that the operation appeared to have been successful, that I was receiving excellent care, and that I had had tremendous prayer support from others all along.

The prayer support I had received was amazing – almost overwhelming. It brought tears to my eyes at times to think of it – tears of joy, but perhaps tinged with a feeling I was being given undeserved special preference. Not only did my parish and family pray for me, but, as a Reader and member of Deanery Synod²¹⁴, I had contacts beyond the parish, and so many others, from other parishes and beyond sent messages of support assuring me (and my wife) of their prayers.

And yes, the prayers were answered. Yet I cannot say that without them the operation and other treatment I received would have failed. The chances are they would have been just as successful – the skill of one of our top heart surgeons and the incredible care of an amazing and dedicated team of nurses and doctors were absolutely key to the success of the treatment and to my recovery. Perhaps the prayers tipped the balance at some point – I cannot tell.

What was important was that the prayers were there. If God had needed an extra vehicle to work through beyond the skill of the doctors and nurses to do his healing and creative work, then that vehicle was there – in the form of the prayers of all these people – and mine. We were not bludgeoning God to persuade him to heal me – we were working together with God and with the surgeons, doctors and nurses in God’s creative and healing work. Afterwards, I and they could join together in joy and thanks and praise.

Then, one evening, as I lay there, it was my turn to pray for others in the ward.

²¹⁴ A Reader is a lay minister in the Church of England, licensed to preach and take some services. Deanery Synods are part of the governance structure of the Church of England.

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The alarm was sounding. A nurse almost ran past the end of my bed wheeling a trolley of dressings and equipment. Through the door I could just see that, in a room across the corridor, strenuous efforts were being made at what I took to be cardiac resuscitation. Someone’s heart had stopped, it seemed; within moments almost the entire ward staff were there on the scene. The activity was intense and went on for a couple of hours.

I prayed; I did not know who the patient was or even exactly what the problem was: all I could do was pray for healing, life and for God’s will to be done. Later, I asked one of the nurses; the patient had survived and had been taken back to intensive care.

But there was more. Like me, most of the patients in the ward had had heart surgery and had spent a day or two in intensive care before coming to the ward. The man in the bed opposite mine had only come from intensive care that day and his catheter was giving him pain. When he could attract a nurse away from the emergency across the corridor he pleaded with her or him to remove it. No way – until the doctors had approved. Again I prayed – for him to have relief from his pain, for a response from the doctors – and that God’s will would be done. A little later the doctors gave clearance.

Then there was the man in another room across the corridor who would keep calling out, “Nurse, nurse!”, or complaining of pain or calling for a doctor. He had (I understood) spent many days in great pain and his mind was probably somewhat unbalanced. He certainly seemed unable just to press his buzzer and wait for attention like the rest of us, but his incessant cries disturbed other patients and must have severely tried the patience of the staff, and the cries did not stop during the emergency.

I prayed again – just a silent prayer. The cries ceased. Not, admittedly, for long, though a further prayer made another break. Perhaps it was my imagination (or wishful thinking!) but were the cries in the days after less frequent?

On another occasion it was me that needed the prayer. My treatment included a daily infusion of antibiotics – and one day the tube through which the infusion was administered was blocked. The nurse sought assistance from her supervisor – while I prayed. By the time the supervisor had come and tried to flush the blockage it was clear.

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Chapter 6 – “Answers” to prayer – the big question

I had prayed about a range of issues, from the potentially tragic to the merely tiresome – and, again, the prayers were answered. Of course I cannot say that my prayers made all the difference. The person whose heart had stopped might well have survived just as a result of the efforts of the doctors and nurses. The doctors might have agreed to the catheter being removed no less quickly than they did. The cries of “Nurse, nurse” might have died down anyway. The blockage in the tube might have cleared just with time or the skill of the supervisor. Once again, however, my prayers were there, a channel for God to use, and I was filled with a gentle joy that God’s healing work was done, whether my prayers had made much difference or not. Even so, answers had come, four or five times in a short space of time....I just thank God I could be there and offer the tiny part that I could.

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Chapter 6 – “Answers” to prayer – the big question

Summary – chapter 6 – “Answers” to prayer – the big question

- Jesus promised that, if we ask in prayer, we will receive, but it does not always seem to happen. “Unanswered” prayer is probably the biggest problem people have with prayer. Does prayer really work?
- Prayer is the way we express and enjoy our relationship with God. It is not primarily about “getting answers”. The question, “Does prayer work” is about whether or not through prayer we build up and enjoy our relationship with God – not whether it solves our problems or gets us what we want or need.
- None the less, asking is a very important part of prayer, both because asking and receiving is an important part of any relationship and because Jesus commanded us to ask and promised that we will receive.
- Our asking has to be according to God’s will – in his name – and in faith. Our faith is not that God will grant our every whim and fancy, but that he loves us and desires to bless us. “Ask and you will receive” is not the same as “Your wish is my command!”
- Prayer is not just something we do. It is something God does, in us and through us. As we pray our desires, our wills – and hence what we ask for in prayer – become closer to his will. Asking for things in prayer becomes a way of co-operating with God in the doing of his will.
- God’s will is primarily to bless his creation and to seek from his creation a creative, loving response, but it is also to give freedom to creation in making that response. That can give rise to tensions and conflicts. To pray, “your will be done” is not only to seek God’s blessing but to ask that we, and all creation, respond in freedom – and the freedom may frustrate the blessing.
- That may help us to see why prayer does not always get the “answer” we – or God – would want. It does not explain everything, however, and the story of Job tells us that we really are out of our depth to try to understand. Suffering – and hence the prayers we offer, which so often are about suffering – is a mystery too great for us to fathom. In seeing how freedom can frustrate blessing we get just a glimpse into the depths!
- Blessing is not frustrated every time. Prayers do get “answered” – and Jesus would not have told us to ask if there was no point. Jesus’ command to ask is an invitation, given to us by God’s grace, to enter into the mystery of God’s activity and at times be part of the way that the blessing is given and the frustrations and tensions overcome. There is a problem to be solved – and, in commanding us to ask, God is inviting us to be part of his solution! A privilege – and a joy!

Discovering Prayer

Chapter 6 – “Answers” to prayer – the big question

Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 6.

- Much of this chapter has been a summary of earlier chapters. You may find it worthwhile looking back at some of the questions “To think about” at the ends of chapters 1-5 and see if you have any further thoughts or additional responses. Has some of the additional or illustrative material in this chapter helped – for example, the story of Job?
- Is “unanswered” prayer a problem for you? Has this chapter helped you to understand why prayer often seems unanswered? What has helped, and what has not helped? What help could you give to someone else who struggles with what seems to them to be “unanswered” prayer?
- How do you react to the idea that, in commanding us to ask in prayer, Jesus is inviting us to participate in the mystery of God’s activity?

Chapter 7 – Prayer and Mission

What links prayer and mission?

Whenever mission is talked about, it is rarely long before the need for prayer is mentioned. There is certainly no doubt that mission and mission activities need to be supported by prayer. We pray for those engaged in mission (hopefully everyone!), we pray for God to guide mission, inspire it and make it successful, and we pray for those to whom mission is directed. Prayer meetings are sometimes held to support particular mission projects and activities.

I wonder, however, if we sometimes have a rather limited idea of what supporting mission with prayer really means. In this chapter I want to draw out from what has been said already five “strands” – ideas which may help us to see the links between prayer and mission more clearly. I hope they will also help us understand better how important prayer is in mission. I call them “strands” because they are ways that prayer and mission are woven or bound together rather like strands in a piece of cloth or a rope. They are not ideas that are completely independent of each other; each “strand” very much depends on and interacts with the others, just as strands in a cloth or rope overlap and intertwine. That is how the cloth or rope is made and in a similar way prayer “makes” mission. The need and desire to pray about mission, to pray for God to guide and inspire it and to pray for its success, is just one of those “strands”, but there is much more that links prayer and mission than that.

What is mission?

It is not my intention to try to define mission, let alone discuss the theology behind it. That would require a separate book, if not several books, and others more knowledgeable about mission than I have already written them!²¹⁵

²¹⁵ See, for example, Stephen Spencer, *Christian Mission*, SCM Study Guide, SCM press 2007

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That being said, if we are to think about how prayer and mission are linked we do at least need to have an understanding of what mission is. It may still be necessary to dispel the outdated idea that mission is “what missionaries do” – usually in far-off places like Africa or South America. The term “missionary” is fortunately falling into disuse, and it is important to see that it is as much mission to invite your neighbour to church in Kingston as it was to establish the church in Kenya, and it can be as much mission to run a project for the homeless in Birmingham as it can be to run a hospital in Burundi.

Mission is all of what the church is there for; it is what the church does or tries to do, at least if it is being true to the instructions Jesus gave to his disciples²¹⁶. This is borne out by the way the word “mission” has been adopted (and arguably devalued) by the secular world; businesses, charities and governments often speak of their “mission” – what they see as their purpose, or what they are there to do.

For a brief description of mission we can turn to the “Five Marks of Mission”²¹⁷ adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Mission is primarily God’s mission. It is entrusted by Jesus to the church in the power of the Spirit²¹⁸. Mission is what the church was created for, though it must be said that mission is much more than just what is entrusted to the church. Mission is nothing less than God creating and saving the entire cosmos²¹⁹.

²¹⁶ See, for example, Matthew 28:19-20 (“Go and make disciples”), Mark 16:15ff (“Go and proclaim the good news”), Acts 1:8 (“You will receive power...and you will be my witnesses” – see also Luke 24:47-49), John 20:21-23 (“As the Father has sent me, so I send you” – the word “mission” comes from a Latin root meaning “send”).

²¹⁷ The Five Marks of Mission originated with the Anglican Consultative Council which, in 1984, began to develop a “mission statement” for the worldwide Anglican Communion and formulated the five “Marks”. These were adopted by the Lambeth Conference in 1988 and by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1996. Churches of other denominations have also adopted them.

²¹⁸ The five marks also reflect Jesus’ own summary of his mission (see, for example, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22, John 3:14-17) and, as Jesus was sent, so the disciples, and we, are sent (John 20:21).

²¹⁹ Spencer, *ibid*, page 12

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It is obvious from that and from the “Five Marks” that mission is not merely a matter of proclaiming the Christian message and making converts. It is a holistic expression of God’s love and care for the whole of his creation – of which proclaiming the message (often called “evangelism”) is only a part, though an important part.

Which means, of course, that mission is an expression – if not the expression – of the “horizontal cross-piece” of our relationship with God. Recalling the illustration first used in chapter 3²²⁰, our relationship with God is “cross-shaped”. The upright of the cross, the “vertical”, represents the growing relationship, the growing love, between ourselves and God. The cross-piece, the “horizontal”, represents our growing love for others and for all of creation. The “horizontal” is at all times supported, sustained and inspired by the “vertical” – and both are works of God’s Spirit within us.

As our love for God and our understanding of his love for us – the “vertical” – grows, we become more aware of God’s love for others and we are drawn into that love. Insofar as we are able and are led, we desire to be channels by which that love is expressed. Being channels of that love – the “horizontal” – is what our mission is. Indeed, it can be said that our mission, or our part of God’s mission, itself is cross-shaped – it is God’s love flowing down to us and then through us out to the world.

Prayer supports mission

The need – and our desire – to pray about mission and for mission is the first “strand” I want to draw out. Such prayer is likely to be one of the first responses we make as we seek to be channels of God’s love. We pray for God to guide and inspire mission, for his help for all engaged in it, for the success of their endeavours and for those who are, or who we hope will be, in some way helped as a result. We pray for the church, its leaders and people, its clergy and laity, ourselves as well as others, as it, they and we go about mission. We pray for mission agencies and societies. We pray for individuals whose part in mission particularly interests or concerns us. We pray for charities and other organisations engaged in relief of poverty, hunger, sickness and all forms of need – religious and secular, for all are in some way doing God’s work. We pray for those to whom our mission is directed, such as the poor, the hungry, the sick, those who have not heard the Christian message and those who have rejected it. Indeed, we pray for any with any kind of need – the list could go on. We support mission by praying for it; prayer supports mission.

²²⁰ See pages 34ff

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So there is no shortage of things to pray about when it comes to mission! We have seen earlier how we might cope with a “prayer list” that gets rather long²²¹; what is important here is that all of these things need to be prayed about. For this is not a chore or a duty; it is a response to God’s love. Praying for those in need, and for those seeking to meet that need – whether it is a human or material need or a need for the Gospel – is part of that “horizontal cross piece” of our relationship with God. It is an expression of our love and care – and of God’s love and care.

Prayer is mission

Which leads on to the second “strand” by which prayer and mission are woven together. For when we pray for mission our prayer is not just wishful thinking. We pray believing that our prayers will make a difference – if we did not believe, then they would be merely lip-service rather than an act of love.

To fulfil God’s mission is to do God’s will, and, as we saw in chapter 6²²², our prayers will be one of the ways we co-operate with God’s Spirit in the doing of his will – in meeting needs, in putting right things that are wrong and in proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. We cannot, of course, claim that without our prayers the needs would never be met, the wrongs would never be put right or the Good News would never be proclaimed, but we believe that in our prayers we are working with God to bring these things about. Our prayers are not just an expression of desire but part of the action of achieving what it is that we – and God – desire. Our prayers may change us, they may change others, they may change the world. In praying we are not just supporting mission but doing it and enabling it. Prayer is mission.

Of course, prayer is not all there is to mission. Mission may require action or speaking; when we pray about mission we are usually praying that people will be strengthened, inspired, enabled or simply allowed to act or speak; we may be praying for hearts and minds and lives to be changed; we may sometimes be praying for miracles. It may well be that it is we who need to speak, or act, or be strengthened or inspired – or even our hearts and minds that need to be changed. The prayer is part of the action, but not the whole of it. Sometimes, though, it is all that is needed – all that we or anyone else need to do or can do. For some, who perhaps are prevented

²²¹ See chapter 5, page 70

²²² See page 86

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from doing much at all by sickness or circumstance, it is the way they can play a part in mission and be part of the proclamation of God's kingdom.

It is not just when we pray for or about mission that our prayers are part of God's mission. Every time we pray for others – our prayers of intercession – we are expressing God's love for them as well as our love. All our prayers for others are expressions of love – our love and God's love – and are a part of God's mission. We are also being channels of God's love, and therefore engaging in mission, when we pray for ourselves, for God's mission is to us as well as through us. Our prayers of thanksgiving, praise, confession, absolution, silence and listening, as well as our "asking" prayers, are all ways that God's love is channelled to us and through us. While prayer is not all there is to mission, we can probably say that we are doing mission every time we pray.

Prayer drives, inspires and equips us for mission

The third "strand" is that prayer drives, empowers and inspires mission. Strictly, of course, it is not prayer that does that but the relationship we have with God and the love which grows between us; the more we are drawn into that love the more we desire to channels of that love to the rest of creation. Prayer, however, is the principal way that relationship is built and maintained, the practical way God's love for us and ours for him is experienced, expressed and enjoyed.

So it is not wrong to say that it is through prayer that we are inspired, even driven, to love others as God loves them and so fulfil his mission. It is through prayer that the Spirit works to empower us and maybe even change us so that we are equipped for mission. To put it simply, it is God's love that gives us the passion, the "fire in the belly", that moves us to work for God's kingdom, and it is through prayer that God puts the passion and the fire there. It is perhaps here that it is most obvious that prayer "makes" mission – and that the other "strands" intertwine with this one and make it stronger, or more effective.

Again we can be reminded that it is not just when we pray about mission or for mission that prayer and mission are linked. Every part of our prayer, whatever it may be – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, asking, listening, silence, or just resting in God's love – is a time when God's Spirit is working in us, equipping us for mission, transforming our lives and inspiring us to engage in mission and to desire that God's kingdom will come.

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The listening is particularly important. Inspiration for mission is not just a matter of fire in the belly; passion needs to be directed if it is to be effective as mission²²³. We need to listen to what God might want to say to us, perhaps revealing needs and opportunities we may not have seen for ourselves and which he may know are more important than any ideas of ours, however sincere and well-meant they may be and however passionate we may be about them. Through listening to him we may be filled with a new passion, perhaps for a new thing!

Prayer is an aim of mission

“God...gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him...may have eternal life.” At the heart of God’s mission is the offer of eternal life – to bring people into a loving relationship with himself through Jesus. It is not all that his mission aims to achieve, as other parts of scripture bear witness and the “Five Marks” make clear, but it is central to the Good News and implicit in the first two of the “Marks”. It is the ultimate expression of God’s love of which we are the channels.

In mission we are aiming to bring others into that loving relationship with God. Prayer, of course, is the way – at least the main way – that the relationship is initiated and expressed, experienced and enjoyed. Translated into practical terms, a central aim of God’s mission is to get people praying. The fourth “strand” is that prayer is an aim of mission.

Of course getting people praying is not the only aim of mission; the “Five Marks” make it clear that there are others. The “Marks” are in some ways a statement of what mission aims to achieve. Prayer is not specifically mentioned in the “Marks”, but it is implicit in the second one – to “teach, baptise and nurture new believers”.

If we are to bring people into the relationship that is at the heart of God’s mission, teaching on prayer is absolutely essential both in the initial teaching and the nurturing – indeed, in practice it needs to continue long after the believers have ceased to be “new”. In my experience this is not always so – prayer so often seems to be something we are expected to “pick up” somehow without much teaching. Prayer should have a high priority in the teaching programme of every congregation. I am reminded of Gerard Hughes’ words that “Training in prayer should be the main

²²³ Spencer (*ibid*, page 33) identifies Contemplative Listening – listening to God, to other people and to ourselves – as one of five principles that should guide mission.

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preoccupation and service given by the bishops and clergy to the adult members of the Church”²²⁴. This implies we should have more sermons and study sessions on prayer than anything else – perhaps more than everything else put together!

Gerard Hughes is not far wrong. Prayer is, as I suggested at the beginning of chapter 1, the Christian’s most fundamental activity – in practice you cannot be a Christian without it. It needs to be taught – teaching it, to “new” and “old” believers alike, is close to the heart of mission!

Prayer transforms those engaged in mission and makes their witness real and credible

The final “strand” is closely related to the third, which we saw was that, through prayer, God puts the passion and the fire within us. For it is not just that the passion and the fire drive and empower us. As we pray, as our love for God and for his creation grows, our lives are transformed. To put it another way, the passion will show and the fire will produce warmth that others will feel. There will be something different about our lives, and that will be a part of our witness, our proclamation of the Good News. It will authenticate our message; people who get to know us will be able to see that knowing God makes a difference in our lives, and hopefully they will want to know more and even want that difference for themselves. “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Those words, often attributed (probably wrongly) to St Francis, are worth remembering, for it is our lives that often do the preaching.

We must, however, be realistic about what transformation there will actually be in our lives. Yes, we want to be channels of God’s love. Maybe we will be more caring and loving, more willing to make sacrifices for others and to go the extra mile to help others than the people around us, but it may not be as obvious as we would like – or even true some of the time! We are sinners for whom Christ died, not angels from heaven visiting the earth, and most of us will never be Mother Theresas or Martin Luther Kings.

Indeed, it could be that, if every member of the church were a Mother Theresa or a Martin Luther King, the rest of the world might be impressed but might not feel they want to join us! They might well find the idea of joining such a group rather daunting!

²²⁴ Gerard W Hughes, “God of Surprises” Darton, Longman and Todd 1985 (reprinted 1990) page 22.

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We must also remember that Christians do not have a monopoly of love and care – there are people of other faiths and none who show tremendous love and sacrifice. Without wishing to belittle the wonderful example some Christians are to the rest of us and to the world at large, for most of us the transformation in our lives may lie in a slightly different place.

What may be much more evident is the value we place on our relationship with God, on the joy it gives us and on the prayer that nurtures the relationship. What will show is our love for prayer, our enthusiasm for worship and our desire to go ever deeper into spiritual matters through activities such as reading, meditation and study – and our desire to share that love and enthusiasm with others – though hopefully not in a way that is sanctimonious or patronising. When we offer eternal life – life that is lived in close and loving relationship with God – it will be clear that eternal life is something we ourselves have, and not only have, but value and enjoy.

Passion drives us – and the passion arises from the reality of our life with God. If we have no passion people will see through us. Unless we have that relationship, that life with God, we will have no gospel to proclaim – an empty message, a theory that is not borne out in our lives.

But we do have a gospel to proclaim, something we want to share, and the exciting thing that we have to share is the living, vibrant relationship that we have with God. God loves us! It is a real, exciting relationship, and in practice prayer is the main way that relationship comes into being. Of course it is important to explain how the work of Jesus enables us to have that relationship, but what we also want to share in mission is our experience of that relationship, which comes primarily in prayer, for it is only our experience that will show that what Jesus did actually works! That is the gospel we have to proclaim to others.

The final “strand” is that our witness is real and credible – we are offering something others can see we experience and value ourselves.

Beginning and ending with prayer; prayer makes mission

Mission begins with prayer. God’s mission is not just something we feel we “should do”. Mission will only happen – indeed, will only begin – because we have a passion to proclaim the Gospel message, to see lives changed and to see the world changed. That passion will arise from a deep and loving relationship with God expressed and

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sustained by prayer. Prayer makes mission; no prayer – no mission – at least, not by us!

The other “strands” entwine with that – they are far from being separate independent ideas. If we have that relationship and that passion, our prayers for mission will not just be a dutiful hope but expressions of our desire to be channels of God’s love to the world and of our desire to enable others to be channels also. They will be ways that mission is done – our prayers will be ways of co-operating with God in the expression of his love and the doing of his will.

Not only that, but our proclamation will ring true. We will not be telling people they should accept certain beliefs or obey certain commands. We will be inviting them to join us in a relationship, a way of life, that they can see knocks us off our feet with joy.

And the end of it will be that they are praying, too.

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Summary – chapter 7 – Prayer and Mission

- Mission is God’s mission, entrusted to the church in the power of the Spirit. It is not just a matter of proclaiming the message and making converts – it is a holistic expression of God’s love and care for his creation. Mission is God creating and saving the entire cosmos.
- Our mission – our part in God’s mission – is the expression of the “horizontal” of the “cross-shaped relationship” we have with God – our desire to be channels of his love to others and to the whole of creation.
- It is possible to identify five “strands” by which prayer and mission are interwoven:
 - **Prayer supports mission.** We pray for mission – for God to guide and inspire it, for those engaged in it, and for those whom they will help.
 - **Prayer is mission.** Our prayers are not just wishful thinking or an expression of a desire. They are ways we co-operate with God in doing his will – in fulfilling his mission.
 - **Prayer drives, inspires and equips us for mission.** It is our relationship with God and the love which grows between us that drives and inspires us to be channels of God’s love and so fulfil his mission, but it is principally through prayer that that relationship is built and maintained. It is through prayer that God’s Spirit works in us to love others as he loves them and inspire and equip us for mission – to give us the passion and the “fire in the belly” that moves us to work for his kingdom.
 - **Prayer is an aim of mission.** At the heart of God’s mission is the offer of eternal life – life lived in a loving relationship with God, a relationship that is expressed, experienced and enjoyed through prayer. A central aim of mission is to get people praying.
 - **Prayer transforms those engaged in mission and makes their witness real and credible.** When, with passion, we bring to others God’s offer of eternal life they will be able to see that we have eternal life ourselves – and it something that we value and enjoy in the present. We are not offering a theory – we are offering something that we know has transformed our lives – and they can see it.
- No prayer – no mission. But prayer leads to love, love leads to passion, passion leads to mission – and mission leads to prayer as others receive God’s offer of eternal life. Prayer makes mission.

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Things to think about, do, or discuss after reading chapter 7.

- What do you understand by the word “mission”?
- What do you think people mean when they say that mission needs prayer, or that it must be supported by prayer? Has your view changed at all over time (not necessarily as a result of reading this chapter!)
- Do you feel you have a passion for mission? Do you have a passion for anything else, like caring for the environment or human rights? If so, might this have anything to do with mission or prayer? (I wasn't thinking of a passion for chocolate!)
- When you pray, (assuming you do), do you find it leads or has led to a growing love for God, for others, or for both? Do you find you have a growing desire to lead others into a relationship with God?

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Some guidance notes for silent prayer

Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)

An important and valuable part of our praying

Silent prayer, also known as **still prayer** or **contemplative prayer**, has been mentioned several times in this book. Although it is certainly not the only way to pray I believe it can form an important and valuable part of our praying. The reasons for this have been set out in various places, particularly in chapter 3 in the section “Let go and let God,”

Although I feel strongly drawn to silent prayer I cannot claim to have a great deal of experience of it or knowledge about it. However, I want to encourage others to try it and hopefully make it a part of their regular prayer, so I have brought together in this appendix some of the ideas I have come across which either I have found helpful or I believe have helped others. A few of the ideas are my own, but most have come from talks or discussions given or led by others or from the many books on the subject.

If you already regularly spend time in silent prayer you may find that this appendix is of little further help, so feel free to ignore it – and carry on the way you do! It is certainly not a comprehensive guide to silent prayer; it is merely something that I hope may help people to get started. For further help I would point to the wealth of suggestions and guidance in the many books there are about prayer, and silent prayer in particular, some of which have been referenced in the text or bibliography.

A simple approach

If, as suggested at the end of chapter 1, the idea of silent prayer is new to you, or something you have never experienced, the simple ideas below may provide a way to

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start. As mentioned in chapter 1, the aim is to spend the time with God in silence, enjoying his company. Your mind and heart need to be quiet as well as your lips and tongue; say nothing to God, either out loud or inwardly.

You are always in God's presence; he is always with you and in you. There is nothing you have to do and no special technique to master in order to get into his presence or to enjoy his love. In practice, however, these simple suggestions may help:

- Sit comfortably, though not so comfortably you go to sleep!
- Concentrate on your breathing, at least to begin with. Just feel your breath go in and out, without trying to control it or alter its rhythm. This helps to keep other thoughts from “buzzing around” in your mind and distracting you from thinking of and enjoying God's love.
- Trust that God is present and loves you deeply. Think of his love as something to enjoy! It is as if he says to you, “You are my beloved,” as he said to Jesus at his baptism. You may like to think of yourself as resting in him, enfolded in his peace and love.
- If other thoughts keep intruding, there is no need to “feel bad” about it or to try to resist them. Just return to the thought of resting in God's love as soon as you can. Relax!
- Starting with a little prayer like this may help:

Lord God,
I am going to try to be quiet for a little while.
Help me to rest in your love and trust you.
Amen²²⁵.

- and then be quiet!

- If other thoughts will not leave you in peace try repeating (inwardly or out loud as you wish) a simple word or phrase like “Jesus” or “God loves me”. (There are other suggestions in chapter 3.) It may help to do it in time with your breathing. Although this would seem to go against the idea of silence it is better than trying to fight off daydreams and worries or wondering whether you left the gas on – and you may find you can stop after a while and be truly silent.

²²⁵ The word “Amen”, which means “So be it” is often used to conclude prayer. You do not have to use it, but you may like to, particularly if it is your usual practice in prayer.

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Try it, maybe for just 2 or 3 minutes to begin with. Try it more than once, if possible gradually increasing the length of time you spend. Some people like to spend 10 or 20 minutes or more. It may in any case take a while to get used to the idea. The fact that other thoughts often intrude can mean it sometimes takes several minutes to “quieten the mind,” so for that reason alone you may want to spend longer – though a shorter period sometimes gives the other thoughts less chance to start! Hopefully, however long you spend, you will find it worthwhile.

Silent prayer as part of our praying

You may find the approach outlined above is a good way to start or finish a time of prayer, before or after whatever other praying you may want to do. Certainly, having a time of silent prayer does not stop you from also having a time when you speak to God (inwardly or aloud) about your concerns or use words to praise him, thank him, adore him or confess to him, then or at some other time. Whatever you do, the Spirit is praying, too. Another approach, as suggested in chapter 5, is to think briefly of any particular concerns you may have, or write them down, before you start, as a way of laying them before God for the Spirit’s intercession while you are silent in God’s presence.

Some further suggestions

These amplify and extend the suggestions above and you may find them of further help.

- Although sitting is likely to be the best posture for silent prayer for most people, it is not in any sense mandatory. Feel free to adopt any posture you find helpful for prayer. If you sit it is probably best to have a fairly upright chair (not necessarily hard) which gives good support. Keeping your feet flat on the floor is often recommended (this requires a reasonably high chair) but personally I find that it usually becomes uncomfortable after a short while. Find what suits you!
- Remember that silent prayer does not, as a rule, produce amazing “feelings” or experiences – though hopefully it will give you, with time, a greater awareness of God’s peace and love. We sit silently with God because we love him and he loves us – not because he gives us “experiences”.

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- It may help to think of yourself sitting (or whatever) with God just as you might sit with a friend. When you are with a close friend or loved one, even though you will almost certainly speak from time to time, you do not have to do so, let alone keep up a continuous rattle of conversation. However, you know that your friend would want to have you there and you want your friend there. In the same way, God loves you and wants to have you there – and you want God there. Nothing needs to happen, even though occasionally something does; normally you are just there for each other.
- As you think of yourself as enfolded in God’s peace and love, or have some similar picture, a mental image, or even an actual picture if you have one, of a child in a parent’s arms, or lovers in an embrace, may help. It may also be helpful to read something from scripture or some other passage²²⁶ before you start or have one in front of you as you pray; the meditation in Appendix 2, or part of it, may be suitable.
- You may find it helpful to look at a symbol such as a candle or a cross, or at an icon, or a picture, either as mentioned above or of something else, or to have something to hold, such as a cross, a rosary, or a prayer rope²²⁷.
- Do not worry too much if sometimes the other thoughts that may keep “buzzing around” in your mind just will not go away. Of course it is generally better if they go and you can let your mind be filled with thoughts of God and his love, but if they will not you are still praying; God is there for you and you are there for him, even if your mind has not quite caught up with the fact! God can work with that; he wants you, if necessary complete with “buzzings”. He may even quieten them for you – or you may realise that some of the “buzzings” are actually God speaking to you!
- **Repetitive prayer.** In repetitive prayer a simple prayer such as the “Jesus prayer” (or sometimes more than one prayer) is repeated over and over. Each utterance of the prayer is a prayer in itself; for example, the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”²²⁸ contains elements of adoration, contrition and supplication. However, the repetition

²²⁶ Suitable scripture passages might be Psalm 23, Psalm 131, Isaiah 30:15 or Matthew 11:28-30. If you have Benignus O’Rourke’s book “Finding your hidden treasure” (see above and bibliography), reading one of the chapters (all of which are short) may be appropriate.

²²⁷ Rosaries are widely used in the Catholic church and prayer ropes in the orthodox (eastern) churches. They are increasingly being used by Christians in other churches. It is not suggested you use them here for their normal purpose but, if you are used to using one or the other it may be helpful just to hold it while you are seeking to rest in God and enjoy his love. You may even like to go on to use it in the way you are accustomed after your time of silence. Crosses (including “holding crosses” with smooth edges designed to be held) are available from many Christian bookshops and similar outlets.

²²⁸ The Jesus prayer may be used in abbreviated or modified ways, eg, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.”

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carries with it a deepening understanding and appreciation of God, his love, who he is and what he does. In that sense it is similar to silent prayer and obviously from a practical point of view is a variation of using a repeated word or phrase to quieten our minds. Another example is the words “O God, make speed to save me (us), O Lord make hast to help me (us)” based on Psalm 70:1 (also Psalm 40:13). They are used in Church of England liturgy and were first suggested by the monk John Cassian in the 5th century. The use of the rosary, repeating the Lord’s Prayer (Our Father) and the Hail Mary, is a further example. For more on repetitive prayer see the bibliography – particularly books by Simon Barrington-Ward and others on the Jesus prayer.

- Both silent prayer and repetitive prayer can be used in group or congregational settings as well as in private prayer. Groups meeting for silent prayer may begin the session with a talk or meditation by one of the members and arrange for music or a suitable signal to indicate the start and end of the time of prayer. It can be helpful for a leader to repeat the words of a repetitive prayer while other members listen and pray – a practice that is widely used in the orthodox tradition with the Jesus prayer.

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Appendix 2 – A meditation

You may find this (or the first part down to “Let God love you”) helpful as an introduction to a time of silent prayer.

“Confession”

You don’t need to come grovelling.

No matter who you are, or what you’ve done,
or what you’ve not done,
God looks on you with love –
an enormous love.

He says, “You are my beloved.”

He wants you, he loves you, he understands.

He wants to enfold you in his arms.

He wants to embrace you,
to hold you in his loving gaze.

So let go and sink into his arms.

Be quiet.

Be still.

Enjoy.

Let God love you.

It’s in the embrace,
as you are held in his loving gaze,
as you rest in his arms,
that you’ll realize there are some things that are wrong,
things you want to put right.

(God says, “Yes, that’s right, there are – but stay with me.
Let me help you with them.” And, if you let him,
God will tighten his hold on you and

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embrace you more firmly.)

It might be things you have thought, said or done,
or not thought, not said, not done. And you want to change that.
But, just as likely, it's the world you want to change and need to change
(though changing the world will change you).
Or perhaps it's not so much things you need to change
as things you want or need to do. Maybe
serving, teaching,
praying, prophesying,
healing, campaigning,
inspiring, leading,
caring, giving,
loving.

God says,
"Yes.
Let's do it.
Together.
Stay in my arms.
Stay in my gaze.
Abide in my love²²⁹."

(I wrote these lines following a retreat led by Chris Chapman in 2015. Although not written just for that purpose, I have found it helpful to read them, particularly the first part (down to "Let God love you"), before a time of silent prayer, and sometimes to have it before me as I pray. I have included it in case you may find it helpful too.)

²²⁹ John 15:9

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Appendix 3 – “Ask and it will be given to you” – a sermon

This is an edited and abridged version of a sermon preached on the Gospel reading Luke 11:1-13:

“ [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.’

And he said to them, ‘Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, “Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” And he answers from within, “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.” I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’”

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That Gospel reading tells us about Jesus teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father", as it's sometimes known. In the first verse, we read that one of Jesus' disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

I wonder, who taught you to pray? Perhaps praying is something you have never really got to grips with, but if you have, did you have the benefit of someone from church, or even Sunday School years ago, or perhaps a parent, who taught you, and you've prayed regularly ever since? Or was learning to pray something that happened more recently? Or was it much more haphazard – you just sort of picked up the idea of praying from someone, perhaps by listening to prayers in church? Sometimes I fear that rather haphazard approach happens all too often – we're just expected to pick the idea up and do it. One of the problems with it is that, if we learn just by listening to other people doing it, we can copy their mistakes as well as the good bits! And then we can add a few mistakes of our own!

But, going back to the disciples, I think they would have had some sort of teaching about prayer in the synagogue, long before they met Jesus. They would at least have heard people pray there and picked up something – like I have suggested may have happened to some of us. But, here they were, asking Jesus to teach them to pray. I think they must have realised there was something about Jesus' prayers that was somehow different from what they were used to. And prayer was very important to Jesus – he made a point often of going away to lonely places to pray on his own, and then spending quite a time there – Luke tells us on one occasion he spent the whole night doing it²³⁰, and Mark tells us on at least one occasion they had to hunt for him²³¹.

If Jesus' prayer was so important to him, and in some way different from the prayer they were used to, it's no surprise they wanted to know more and try it for themselves. So they ask – and Jesus tells them how to begin.

The big difference between Jesus' prayers and any others might well be reflected in the first word – "Father". Jesus, we know, called God "Father" and here he is telling the disciples to do the same. One of the problems we have with this is that we are well aware that relations between fathers and children or fathers and sons are not always what they should be. In Jesus' day, perceptions of family relationships, even if not the reality, were probably very different. What we can be sure is that, when Jesus

²³⁰ Luke 6:12

²³¹ Mark 1:35-36

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thought of God as his Heavenly Father he had a very loving relationship in mind – reflecting the “steadfast love” of God so often celebrated in the Old Testament, particularly the psalms²³², and indeed the words spoken at his own baptism, when God said to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased.”²³³

We can't be sure if Jesus actually used the very familiar and intimate word “Abba” here – we know he did on some other occasions – that would have been a bit like calling God “Dad” or “Daddy” – a real acknowledgement of a close family relationship. We know Paul used the word “Abba” and seemed to expect others to use it²³⁴, and he probably got the idea from the disciples who would have got it from Jesus. But, even if Jesus didn't say “Abba” on this occasion, the point is made – praying is not like subjects grovelling before a mighty king but like children coming to their father.

For Jesus, prayer was coming to the Father he loved and having a chat – or, perhaps, even, just spending time together and enjoying each other's company. And that is also how he wanted his disciples to see it – and, of course, how he wants us to see it. Prayer is the expression of a relationship – a close relationship, one we want to build up and indeed enjoy! Friends, family members, lovers, anyone in a relationship – at least, a relationship they want to continue and build up – talk together, spend time together, just come and enjoy each other's company. That, I think, was what was so special about Jesus' prayers and it may well have been what attracted the disciples and made them want to pray like Jesus.

The closeness of our relationship with God, with Jesus, is something that Jesus and others in the New Testament mention often. Paul, for example, sometimes uses the little word “in” to describe how close we are to Jesus, for example, in Colossians 2:6-7, where he says, “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him...” The relationship is so close it can be described as being “in” Jesus and Jesus being “in” us – something Jesus himself says in John's Gospel when he says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”²³⁵ And he introduces the same idea in our Gospel reading today – as we'll see in a moment.

Having told the disciples to address God as “Father”, Jesus goes on to teach them what we know as the Lord's Prayer. But, rather than go through the words of the

²³² eg Psalms 63:3, 100:5, 103:4, 8, 11, 17, 136 (all), 138:8

²³³ Mark 1:11

²³⁴ Romans 8:15

²³⁵ John 15:4

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Lord's Prayer in detail, I thought it would be more helpful to look at what Jesus said immediately afterwards – because some of it's a bit obscure and open to misinterpretation!

Immediately after the words of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells the rather odd little story about going to a friend at midnight to borrow three loaves of bread. The first problem we have with this story is that we are probably unaware of the social background. In the society of Jesus' time, it was a solemn duty to give hospitality. If someone – certainly a friend or a bona fide traveller – turned up at your door you had a duty to entertain him – to feed him and let him stay the night. And if you had nothing to offer, you'd just have to go round to a friend or neighbour and beg or borrow something – and it was, I guess, just as much the neighbour's solemn duty to help you out as it was yours to entertain the traveller in the first place.

With that piece of background in mind, let's see what Jesus actually says. What he does is ask a question rather than tell a story. Unfortunately, it's a rather long convoluted question, stretching over 3 verses, verses 5, 6 and 7 of our reading, and our translators have tried to turn it into something more readable. In so doing they have rather lost the sense. So, here's the story as it appears in the Revised Standard Version, one of the modern versions that manages to preserve the original sense.

Jesus says:

“Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him,
‘Friend, lend me three loaves;
for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey,
and I have nothing to set before him’;
and he will answer from within,
‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed;
I cannot get up and give you anything’?²³⁶

That's all one sentence, one question, starting “Which of you” and ending with a question mark. It's what we would call a rhetorical question – because the answer is obvious, or would have been to the people of Jesus' day. Jesus asks, “Which of you ...would have this happen to them?” – and the answer is, in that society, “No one!” No one would be unaware of the social obligations – and everyone would co-operate to help out where necessary.

²³⁶ Luke 11:5b-7 RSV

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As Jesus points out in the next verse, it wouldn't be because of friendship that the friend would give him the loaves – it would be just because he asked – and in that society, asking would impose a solemn duty to respond – if, of course, he had the loaves to give him. The man had what we could almost call a “right to ask” – if not a duty to ask – and a right to expect to receive.

Then Jesus goes on to say, “Ask, and it will be given to you.” And this is where we can come unstuck, because we tend to take this statement, this promise, in isolation from the rest of the passage and indeed in isolation from what is said elsewhere in the Bible and assume it says something that it doesn't. We think it is telling us that Jesus says, “Ask for anything you like and you'll get it!”

To put it another way, it's as if we think God is saying to us here, like the genie from a magic lamp, “Your wish is my command!” Perhaps, when it's put like that, we can see that there is something wrong. After all, if anyone should be issuing commands, it is God who should be commanding us and not we who command God.

So, what is Jesus really saying? “Ask and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened.” But ask for what, and search for what, and knock at which door? Going back to his story, or rather, question, about the friend at midnight, he is talking about asking for something that we have a right to ask for, even a duty to ask for. He illustrates this by talking about children asking for food – children have a right to ask their parents for food when they need it and a right to expect to get it – not some cruel alternative or nothing at all!

Perhaps we can re-phrase what Jesus says as, “Ask for what you really need, or that it is right and proper for you to have – and you will get it”. And, as Jesus expands the whole idea to include searching and knocking as well as asking, we can think of it as searching for what we really need to find and knocking on the door so that it can be opened and we can be allowed in to where we really need to go.

It isn't until we get to the last verse of our reading – verse 13 – that we discover what Jesus is really getting at – what it is that we can ask for that we really need, search for that we really do need to find, knock for that we really do need to have opened for us so that we can be let in. It's the Holy Spirit. And this is where we have come, as it were, full circle. We began by thinking of our prayers as a time when we, like children, come to our father. It's a close, loving relationship. But, as I said a bit later on, it's much more than that – it's much more a matter of being “in” Christ, being “in” Jesus, and he being “in” us. It's something much closer, much closer even that a

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good family relationship. And here at the end Jesus describes what that really amounts to – it is the Holy Spirit coming to us and dwelling in us. We have a relationship, not just with a great God in heaven – although we certainly have that as well – but with God who by his Spirit dwells in us.

And that is what we really need to ask for, what we really need to search for. And the idea of knocking – and a door being opened – is a good one, too – because it speaks of the idea of welcome, of fellowship with the Spirit – and, of course, of the idea of us dwelling in Christ as much as he by the Spirit dwelling in us.

We have a right – and indeed almost a duty – to ask for the Spirit to come, a right to search for him – to hunt for him, if you like, to really want him – and a right to have the door opened so that we can have fellowship with him – that is what Jesus is telling us. But we do have to ask, we do have to search, we do have to knock. It doesn't just happen. And it is the asking, the searching and the knocking that is our prayer. Of course, in prayer we can ask for anything – help, healing, even material things – but the heart of prayer is **not** asking God to sort out our problems, great or small, but asking him to come and dwell with us. The prime purpose of our prayer is to build that relationship – what we ask for is God himself!

If we look back at the words of the Lord's Prayer we can see this – it is carefully balanced. Yes, we do ask God to sort the day to day issues – we ask for our daily bread, and for him to keep us out of trouble – not to bring us to the time of trial. But we also ask for the kingdom to come – we align ourselves with God's own desires, with God's own purposes – something we need to do if we are to have a close relationship with him. We seek his forgiveness – again, how else can we get close to him if there is anything between us spoiling the picture. And we call him 'Father' – Father who loves his Son and whose steadfast love endures for ever²³⁷ – and are assured that calling him 'Father' is not just wishful thinking, because it is what Jesus told us to do.

When you pray, remember it's not just a chance to ask God to sort your problems, or indeed other people's. Its main purpose is to build your relationship with God. If you're at a bit of a loss for some words to say – well, you could try saying the Lord's Prayer, if you don't already do that!

²³⁷ Psalm 138:8

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Books quoted in the text

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Jane Holloway – **Prayer – a beginner's guide.** (Bible Reading Fellowship 2009 – Revised and updated edition.) *Referred to in Chapter 2, this is a guide to prayer adopting a similar pattern to "ACTS" as mentioned in Chapter 2 but more developed.*

Julian of Norwich – **Revelations of Divine Love.** Translated by Clifton Wolters. (Penguin Books Ltd (Penguin Classics) 1966, reprinted 1985). *Quoted in chapter 3, this is one of the world's classic works on spirituality and is an account of visions of God's love given to a woman in the late 14th century. This translation*

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is (I think) slightly more free than some of the later translations available and more readable. It is now out of print, and Penguin Classics have published a new version translated by Elizabeth Shearing.

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Father Gregory Fruewirth OJN – **Words for Silence**. (SPCK 2008.) *Quoted in Chapter 5, this book is a series of meditations through the Christian year for anyone walking the contemplative path, seeking a more intimate union with God, or desiring a deeper prayer life. It is based on talks given by the author as superior to members of his order, the Order of Julian of Norwich, a contemplative order within the Episcopal Church (USA). The author is now Priest Director of the Shrine of Julian of Norwich in Norwich, UK*

Barbara Brown Taylor – **When God is Silent – Divine Language beyond Words**. (2nd edition Canterbury Press 2013.) *Quoted in Chapter 5, this book looks at how those who preach cope with the fact that God is so often silent. Aimed primarily at preaching, it contains insights that can help us when God is silent in response to our prayers and when silence – God’s and ours – is the only way to pray.*

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Stephen Spencer – **Christian Mission**. – SCM Study Guide (SCM Press 2007.) *Referred to in chapter 7, this is a good introduction to the theology of mission.*

Gerard W Hughes – **God of Surprises**. (Darton, Longman and Todd 1985 – reprinted 1990.) *Quoted in chapter 7, this is a radical look at prayer and the way we relate to God.*

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Other books relevant to prayer

These are listed in alphabetical order of author's surname.

Henry French – **Prayer – Steps to a deeper relationship.** (Bible Reading Fellowship 2011.) *Another “beginner’s guide” though with much that will be found useful to those who would not think of themselves as beginners! It adopts a different approach from Jane Holloway’s book above. Some of the suggestions for action could be time consuming and need to be approached with discretion!*

