

Prioritising Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks so much. Evening, everyone. I want to begin by telling you about my trip back from Moldova. A few years ago, I was in Moldova. That's in sort of central eastern Europe, basically, or thereabouts.

A few years ago, I was in Moldova on a mission trip. And on the way back, we got to the airport, we got through security, all of that in very good time, sensible time. But it was minus 20 degrees outside. And I genuinely have never seen such ridiculous weather.

And it got worse and worse. It was written, as it were, on the wall. Of course, our flight was cancelled. And they kept rearranging and rescheduling our flight. But we ended up in this airport for more than 24 hours.

You can imagine what the airport in Moldova is like. I think there were three gates, certainly no McDonald's. We got so bored in that 24 hours that we actually started playing curling, as in like on an ice rink, using the luggage trolleys.

It was fun. But it was a long time. I wonder what's the longest that you've ever had to wait in an airport. And when you do have a wait like that, what do you do with it?

[1 : 0 8] Even just like an ordinary wait somewhere, if you had an hour or two to spare to wait for something, what do you do with that time? I guess for a lot of us, the default when we found ourselves waiting unexpectedly is probably to get our phones out, isn't it?

And I wonder what your poison is, whether it's Instagram or Facebook or TikTok or your emails. Maybe you prefer to distract yourself with a good book. Or you listen to a podcast.

Or you're the multitasker who likes to try and do all of these things at the same time. That feeling of waiting, I guess depending on what we've got to do, it can produce different things in us, can't it?

We can get bored. We might be grateful, though, for the opportunity to get something productive done. We're often impatient, aren't we, for the thing that we're waiting for as we wait. But however that particular wait makes us feel, one thing I think is always true, and whether we manage to do this or not, we want to make the most of that time, don't we?

And that's true in life, generally. We want to make the most of the time that we have to be as productive as possible. There are so many self-help books with exactly that message. How can you get more done?

[2 : 2 2] Do more better. Use your time more wisely. It's such an emphasis in our world today, isn't it? In this letter in 2 Thessalonians, and we'll see this particularly next week, Paul wants the Thessalonians to be productive Christians.

He says that they ought to be at work. Having assured them that Jesus hasn't yet returned and that he absolutely will, he says just get to work whilst you wait. I wonder then how we as Christians ought to think about productivity, about getting stuff done.

As Paul tells the Thessalonians to get to work, it strikes me, and we'll spend lots of time on this, I'm sure, with Alistair next week, but it strikes me that whatever we're doing, we want to do it, don't we?

To the best of our ability. To be the best consultant that we can be. To be the best manager we can be. To be the best nurse or student that we can be. Working as if for God, for his glory, in our jobs every day.

And also as we do that, that we would take every opportunity that we can to share his gospel and to care for people and love people as we do that. We want to be, don't we, productive Christians.

[3 : 31] Paul too wants the Thessalonians to be productive, growing Christians. But before he gets there, in this little section that we've had read for us this evening, his emphasis is on prayer.

He says this is what's coming. The victorious Jesus is coming. And as you wait, get to work. Make the most of your time in the airport. But first, Paul's priority is prayer.

And I don't actually think that that's a massively different priority. Because counterintuitive though this is, Paul would say that prayer is the most productive thing we could possibly do.

So that's our focus this evening. The productive priority of prayer. Two questions I think this passage answers for us. Maybe these are questions that we've had about prayer.

I'm sure just as helpful to us as they were for the church in Thessalonica. Question one, why bother praying? You ever asked that question? Why bother? And question two, what are we supposed to pray for?

[4 : 38] So firstly, why bother praying? Here we're going to go through three reasons that prayer is a priority for Paul. Whether you're a Christian or not, I guess we've all asked this question at some point.

It's a massive question. And we're going to tackle it here really just by way of introduction. If you'd like to talk about it more, grab me afterwards. I'd love to talk about it. Katie and I have just actually finished reading this book.

Sorry, it's got coffee all over it, this copy. But it's called Enjoy Your Prayer Life. It's really helpful on this sort of stuff. If you'd like a copy, we've got, I think, some spares back there. If not, you can have my coffee stained version.

But this is a question that I think we've all asked. Why bother? And here is why we ask it. Because God is sovereign.

He is in complete control. And that's wonderful news. Let's just dwell there for a bit. Because if your God is not sovereign, then you cannot be sure about anything.

[5 : 33] And his promises to us are not really certain at all. If your God is not sovereign, if he's not completely in control, then Christianity isn't really good news at all.

In all the challenges of life today, if your God is not sovereign, then there is no comfort knowing that a good God is powerful to help. There is no comfort that what you face will be used for your good.

And there's no comfort, no assurance that when you die, you will have eternal life with him. But God is sovereign. The Bible is clear about that.

He is in control. And not just in control of some things, but he really is in control of everything. We'll see that in our passage. That means that in all of the challenges that you face in life, he is in control.

And he has the power to save you and to save you eternally. See, that's the burden of Paul at the end of chapter 2. Have a look at verses 13 and 14 with me.

[6 : 34] And as I read these, just ask yourself, who has the agency here? Who's doing the work? Who's in control? Brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

He called you to this through our gospel. Guys, this is all God. He loves. He chooses. He saves. It's the sanctifying work of who? The Spirit.

He calls. And this is wonderful good news. Paul says this to reassure the Thessalonians. They've been deceived about Jesus' return.

But says Paul, you are nevertheless Christians. You've got it wrong, but you are nevertheless Christians. And so for us, just let that give us assurance too. For it is him, not you, that achieves it all.

Certainly for me, that is very good news. It's not dependent on my moving towards him. It is his gift to me. And then what does Paul do?

[7 : 40] Well, he tells these guys to pray. We've got to ask then, if that's who Paul is saying God is in chapter 2, if God is all-powerful and all-seeing and unchanging, if God is sovereign, then surely our prayers aren't going to make a single bit of difference to him.

Why bother? Isn't that just a massive waste of time when we could be doing more productive things, even good things for him? Especially when, if we're honest, when we pray, doesn't it just very often feel as though no one is listening?

And in our experience, don't we often know that it feels like there is no answer to our prayer? Why bother? Why, Paul, should this be a priority? Well, just quite quickly, here's three reasons to pray from this passage, and we'll rattle through them.

We'll spend more time on what to pray for afterwards. But here are three reasons. Firstly, it's a commandment. God tells us to. In a way, he does that here through the apostle Paul.

First, as Paul provides an example. See, at the beginning of verse 17, may the Lord, and then verse 5 of chapter 2, may the Lord. They're examples of Paul praying. But Paul does explicitly also command them to pray.

[8 : 55] See the repetition in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 3. We'll see what he tells them to pray for. But for now, just notice that he does. He commands them to pray. And of course, it's not just through Paul here that God commands his people to pray.

In the Gospels, Jesus tells his followers to pray. It's all over the Bible, isn't it? Both the Old Testament and the New. Prayer is a priority for the believer. If we trust God's word, then we've got to see that to pray is a commandment for the Christian.

Secondly, it's an instrument. In the book of James, we're told you do not have because you do not ask. You do not have because you do not ask.

The implication there is simple. It is that there are things that we haven't received because we haven't prayed. It does not mean that we will receive all that we ask for.

But if we do not ask, how can we receive? But then doesn't that sound a bit like a contradiction? If God is sovereign, if he is in control, then why should he require that I ask him for the things that he wants to give me?

[10 : 06] The answer is it's because our prayers are his instruments. We saw something quite similar to this in John chapter 4 with Graham this morning. See, God is not only sovereign over the ends, the outcomes.

He is also sovereign over the means, the instrument by which something is carried out. See how that works in our passage. We saw in verses 13 and 14 how it's the work of God that saves, how he chooses and loves and saves and calls.

But notice that in verse 14, he does that through our gospel. It is through Paul and the other writers of this letter, through their sharing of the gospel that God works.

That's true today. It's true of preaching. It's why we share the gospel, because it is God's instrument, the means by which he saves. And the exact same thing is true of prayer.

Prayer is one of God's means. It's the way that his ends are achieved. So pray. For it is his instrument. And thirdly and finally, it is for your nourishment.

[11 : 12] For as we pray, God grows us in our faith. See, if God were sovereign and if he used our prayers as his instruments for carrying out his sovereign will, but he did not want our good, then prayer would indeed be a waste of time, wouldn't it?

But God absolutely does want our best, not only in this life, but ultimately eternally. Just as Paul encourages the Thessalonians in chapter 2, verse 15, to stand firm, to hold fast, to not get carried away with this idea that Jesus has already returned, as we saw last week, but instead to stay on the path and have faith in Jesus that he will return.

But then in verse 16, he prays that they will have the eternal encouragement and hope that he has. He's praying that they would continue to grow in faith.

And if God is both sovereign and good, which if we trust God's word, he absolutely is those things, then prayer is for your nourishment, that you would grow in faith.

So just really quickly, there's three reasons that prayer is a priority. It's a commandment, it's an instrument, it's for your nourishment. It's good to think more about these things, but we don't have too much time.

[12 : 33] But if nothing else this evening, I hope that we would be convinced that the Christian ought to be making prayer a priority. As we wait for the return of Jesus, making the most of our time in the airport, this really is then the most productive thing that we can be doing.

Maybe you are convinced that prayer is a priority, but that doesn't actually make prayer any easier, does it? And maybe you struggle to know exactly what to pray for. If you're anything like me and you look at the world we live in, it's really because there's just so much we could pray about.

But even as we just look at our own nation or our own city, even just our own friends and family, as we look around the church, don't we see that there's so much we could be asking for and praying for?

We could just be praying all the time. And yet, I'd guess that our problem, certainly my problem, is not too much prayer. Nor do I think it's praying for the wrong things.

I think much more likely a problem for us is prayerlessness. Much more likely that we are prayerless than struggling to get anything else done because we're spending all of our time praying.

[13 : 48] And I wonder if part of that is because we're just overwhelmed. We know that prayer is a priority, but we don't know what our priorities should be in prayer. We don't know how to pray and we don't know what to pray for.

So if you've ever asked that question, Paul gives us three really helpful priorities for prayer here. The first one on the screen is gospel encouragement. We saw it in verses 16 and 17.

This is what Paul is praying for the guys in Thessalonica. That God who gave eternal encouragement and good hope would also encourage your hearts, the hearts of the Thessalonians, their hearts, the very center of their being, encouraged towards what?

And as Paul prays for them in verse 5 of chapter 2, it's very similar. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

It's the same sort of thing. Be encouraged in your heart, in the depth of your being. Be encouraged by the gospel that God has loved you, that he has chosen you, that he has saved you, that Christ persevered for you, even to die for you, and that you would persevere in the same way by faith, that you might live with him forever.

[15 : 09] That's gospel encouragement that he's praying for. I guess that's no surprise that that's what Paul prays for, for these guys in particular, in light of the persecution that we saw them face in chapter 1, in light of the deception that they seem to have fallen for in chapter 2.

They're not having an easy time, and so he prays that they would be encouraged. And I think this is just a wonderful priority for us in our prayer too. It might be helpful here to first think about Christians across the world, maybe especially those who, like the church in Thessalonica, are persecuted for their faith.

Open Doors, wonderful resource if you've come across Open Doors. They're a charity working to encourage persecuted Christians. And every year they publish the World Watch List, where they rank the 50 countries where Christians face the sharpest persecution.

There are 52 weeks in the year. Maybe you could pick one country from that list each week of the year. You can have two weeks off. Pray that the Christians there would receive real gospel encouragement.

That even as they face this kind of persecution, that deep in their hearts they would know God's love. That they are chosen. That they are saved. That they would trust in Christ's perseverance for them.

[16 : 24] That they would hope in eternity. And as we keep this priority for prayer, we can pray for one another too, can't we, as a church? Recognizing that in one way or another, we all face some kind of persecution for our faith, whether that's at work or at the club or with our family or our friends.

I guess we're probably not in physical danger, but don't we desperately need to be encouraged by the gospel? And so let's pray this way for one another. If you're in a small group, I wonder if you could write a list of those in your group and just pray for a different person in your group each morning.

Or if you serve on a team here at church, whether that's welcome or tea and coffee or embassy or kids or whatever it is, could you do something similar with those in your team? Could you grab someone after the Sunday service and pray and encourage them in this way in person?

As we do that, would our priority in those prayers be this? Not for a new job or a restored relationship or physical healing or for a more manageable workload. There are so many things that we can pray for for one another.

And we can, of course, pray for those things. But would our first priority in prayer be this? That in our heart of hearts, we would have eternal encouragement and good hope, knowing God's love and Christ's perseverance for us.

[17 : 45] First priority, pray for gospel encouragement. Second, pray for gospel empowerment. See how verse 17 continues, Paul is concerned in this letter that they would continue to do good, not thinking that Jesus had already returned and therefore giving up, but staying on the path that they would continue to share the good word of God.

That's not simply that they would be kind and friendly, but they would literally speak the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's prayer for gospel empowerment. Again, in verses three and four of chapter two, Paul reminds them as he has prayed for them, he says, the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.

He continues, we have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. He prays that it would happen, knowing that it will happen.

Isn't that interesting? He is in verse 17, praying God's promises back to him. For God has promised that he will give them everything that they need so that they might do good works and so that they might speak good words and so that they might be protected from evil.

Again, like praying God's promises back to him, doesn't that sound so pointless? If he's already promised to do this or that, surely he'll do it whether I pray or not. But of course, as we've already seen, God is not only concerned with the ends, but also with the means.

[19 : 26] He is sovereign over the fulfillment of his promises, but he is also sovereign over the way that they are fulfilled. And our prayers are part of his means.

So pray those promises back to him. And especially here, the promise of gospel empowerment. Again, isn't that so helpful for us in our prayers for one another?

Not only to pray for gospel encouragement and eternal hope, but for gospel empowerment. As we think again of our brothers and sisters across the world, that they would have all the strength that they need to stand fast, to hold firm, to flee from sin, to live such good lives, to speak the gospel.

But for me, this is really where I see the local church is just so wonderful and beautiful. That we can love and know and trust one another so deeply, praying not just simply for generic strength to do these things or generic strength to share the gospel, but a challenge.

As you look around the room, just a small number of us here, how many people here, even when there's just a very few of us, members of this church, your church, how many of them do you know what tomorrow is going to be like for them?

[20 : 42] Do you know what family life is like for them? As we seek to be a church of disciple-making disciples, do you know the places where they're going and spending time with people who don't know Jesus?

Do you know how you can be praying for them? Because this is the strength of the local church, as we love and know and trust one another, we're able to pray just really specifically, for gospel empowerment in each other's lives, to live and speak the gospel.

So this is the second priority for the church in Thessalonica, to pray for gospel empowerment. And thirdly, and finally, to pray for gospel advancement. See in verse one, that is what Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for for him.

He says, pray for us, that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. As Paul continues to do this work of traveling and sharing the gospel, kindling churches all over the known world.

And as he does that, the message is spreading rapidly, and people are trusting in Jesus, honoring him. And churches are growing. And he says, pray, pray that this work would continue.

[21 : 59] How encouraging for the Thessalonians to know that they're not alone and to pray in this way. But of course, Paul also gives the other side of the coin in verse two. Pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith.

Of course, the Thessalonians know that that's true. We've heard about the sorts of persecutions that they faced because that's true. That was true wherever Paul shared the gospel.

Some honored Jesus, trusting in him, and others continued to reject Jesus, having no faith. And so I guess that too is an encouragement to the Thessalonians, isn't it? This is exactly what they had experienced.

And Paul says, in that experience, pray. Pray, pray not just for your own church, but look out at the world and pray that more would be saved, that the gospel would spread, and pray for protection from those who reject it.

And of course, we can be praying like this today. Again, I think it's appropriate to start by thinking about the great mission field of all nations in countries where the message, even right now, is rapidly spreading.

[23 : 10] If you sometimes look out of the doors of this church and feel discouraged about the spread of the gospel in this city, just go on Google and look at how the gospel is spreading in places like China and South America, and be encouraged that the gospel is, even now, spreading rapidly.

And yet, in lots of these places, real protection is needed from those who continue to reject the gospel. A good example of that in Qatar, the World Cup has shone something of a spotlight on Qatar, hasn't it?

And we've heard about migrant workers, often exploited by the government, even dying in the process of delivering this World Cup. And lots of those migrant workers are Christians.

And in Qatar, if you're not native to Qatar, if you're a migrant, then you can worship however you like. But Qatar is a Muslim country, and so the Christians there are forbidden from evangelizing to native Qatari people.

And yet that is exactly what they're doing. Of course it is. Secretly and with great fear and trembling, they are disciple-making disciples, holding out the wonderful truth of the gospel to the people around them.

[24 : 23] One pastor in Qatar said this about their efforts. That fear is always reminding me of the strength there is in the word of God. Real courage is to totally depend on him.

Do you see the two things that he is burdened for there? The sovereignty of God and the power of his word, and dependence on him, which is prayer. So absolutely we can pray for the Christians in Qatar who are depending on him, that they would continue to have freedom to worship, but especially as they share the gospel with their Qatari neighbors, that the message would spread rapidly and that they would be protected from the evil of those who reject it.

We can pray for people all over the world with this priority, gospel advancement. But we don't want to focus on the global mission field at the expense of the local. And again, I think the local church is just wonderful here.

For we ought to know what the coalface of mission is like for one another, so that we can pray very specifically for each other in that. We've already talked about that, but we also have a role to play as a church together.

I guess that's why we do the extra things that we do at Christmas, the Christmas Kids Club and the carol service. So let's pray for those things, that at them the message would spread. It's why we send preachers to towns like Peebles and Bells Hill.

[25 : 45] It's why I'm doing what I'm doing as pastor in training, to be sent. Just as Alistair goes to Fernie Hill, recognizing that the nation that we live in desperately needs the good news of this gospel.

So pray for these things, that the gospel would spread here. And every time you hear the gospel proclaimed publicly, every time someone steps into a pulpit, would you pray for them?

Actually, in that moment, pray for them and pray for those who are listening, that the message would spread. Pray that as it is received, it is honored.

And that those who don't honor it, who continue to reject it, that despite that, we would continue to be free in this country to worship here as a church. And again, as we know and love and trust one another, understanding the context in which we live and work, pray that we would not be led into the temptations of evil and the wickedness all around us, but that we would be delivered from evil.

This is what it looks like to pray for gospel advancement. So there are three priorities as we pray. Gospel encouragement, empowerment, and advancement.

[26 : 56] Even with these priorities, I recognize prayer really isn't easy, is it? And if you really do struggle to know what to say, whether you're praying out loud or in your head, and I guess that's most of us at times, maybe overwhelmed by so many things to pray for, even as we look at a passage like this and see sort of three categories or priorities that we can pray about, it can be really hard, can't it, to know how to put that into words, to know what to say.

Let me offer just two things that I've found super helpful before we finish. The first one's from Spurgeon, and Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, said this about prayer. It's very simple.

He said, the fewer the words, the better the prayer. I just find that so helpful. The fewer the words, the better the prayer. I think especially when it comes to praying out loud, in public, in front of other people, it's tempting, isn't it, to do everything that we can to come across as eloquently as possible.

As if the more beautiful our prayer, the more likely God is to hear it. And that is nonsense. Beautiful public prayers are helpful if they help others to pray with you.

But otherwise, they are nothing but self-aggrandizing hypocrisy. So firstly, just say what you mean and pray simply from the heart, remembering that the fewer the words, the better the prayer.

[28 : 27] And secondly, don't be scared of set prayers don't hear me wrong here. Spontaneous prayer is great. As I've just said, it's good to say what you mean and pray simply from the heart.

But the Bible itself is just full of really helpful prayers that we can pray. Of course, there's the Lord's Prayer, probably most obviously. There's also the Psalms. There are also prayers like this one that we've just read together that with just a little bit of work, as we've seen, we can pray for ourselves or use to help us pray for ourselves.

But not only the Bible, there are also lots of really helpful books out there. I've plugged this one before. I think it's actually quite difficult to get hold of. But if you can, this is an excellent book, Valley of Vision. Sometimes we just don't have the words to say.

And very often prayers like these help guide us in our prayers. So don't be afraid to use those. Much better to get praying. Ultimately, remembering for this church in Thessalonica as they faced brutal persecution, as they have this big wobbly over the Lord's return, Paul says, Jesus has not yet returned, but he will, and he is victorious, and he will be victorious.

And in the meantime, grow. Grow in the light of his coming. And this is the priority as you do that. Get praying. So what do you do in the airport?

[29 : 50] We've used that really in this sermon basically as a metaphor for waiting for Jesus. But actually, like what do you use that time for? Well, you wait for that transfer, or you wait for the train, or you're in the coffee shop and your friend is late, or as you brush your teeth, or walk to the bus stop, or you sit on the bus.

Do you know how much dead time there is in your day? Every time you're tempted to get out your phone, there are lots of good things, of course there are, that we can use our phones for, but when we're tempted to get it out and just doom scroll through our social media drug of choice, that's dead time.

That one study I saw reckoned that we, all of us, have at least an hour and a half of dead time every single day. And I don't say that to tell you that you ought to be more productive with your dead time to do more, to be more productive for the glory of God or whatever it is, in whatever it is that you're already doing.

But simply to say that there is nothing more productive we can do with our time than to pray. And guys, there is so much time that we have to use to pray with and so much that we can pray for.

So just get praying. And when we pray together, we're about to do that. Be earnestly praying in your own heart. Whether you're comfortable praying out loud or not, be praying in your heart.

[31 : 10] And whenever we gather together to pray as a church at our monthly prayer meetings or on Zoom tomorrow night or whenever else, can you make it a priority to be there? For it is.

It's a commandment. It's an instrument and it's for your nourishment. So pray. And when you do, remember these priorities. Gospel encouragement, gospel empowerment, and gospel advancement.