



2018 Week of Prayer

Praying for the world in the footsteps of the apostle Paul

Topics

- Day 1:** Paul's prayer for the congregation of Ephesus is grounded in love (**Ephesians 3:14-21**) – Akash Sirpal
- Day 2:** Paul's song of praise and thanksgiving for the character of the young congregation in Thessalonica (**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**) – Joseph Pejane
- Day 3:** Paul prays for the Corinthians to encourage them in difficult times (**1 Corinthians 1:4-9 and 2 Corinthians 1:3-11**) – Helené Fouché
- Day 4:** Paul's prayer for the Philippians as fellow workers of God (**Philippians 1:3-11**) – Derik Myburgh
- Day 5:** Paul teaches Timothy how to pray for the authorities and the world (**Timothy 2:1-8**) – Christina Landman
- Day 6:** Paul's prayer concluding Romans praises the eternal God who now reveals his plan of salvation of all nations (**Romans 16:25-27**) – Ntozakhe Cezula

Introduction

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you have a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way. (Colossians 1:9-10a, NIV)

Paul prays for the believers in Colossae while during the time of his imprisonment in Rome. He received witness about their faith in Christ Jesus as well as about their love for all believers. For this, Paul gives thanks to the Lord. He also heard about false teachers who were confusing the faithful with all kinds of religious rules in addition to what Christ has done. Paul emphasises the supremacy of the Son and prays for this faith community that was founded by Epaphras and that Paul has not yet visited himself. His prayer encourages the believers to keep the faith in a confusing and troubled world.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians we find different elements of Christian prayer. The first element is the fact that Paul *prays to God*. The whole letter witnesses to *an integrated life through prayer*. A second element is that of *thanksgiving*. Paul gives thanks to the Lord for this congregation and for God's involvement in their lives and ministry. A third element of Paul's prayer is that of *intercession*. He prays that God will give them wisdom so that they will live to God's glory and will persevere serving God. Chapter 4 deals with a fourth element. Paul motivates the faithful to persevere *also in prayer*, by being watchful and thankful. Paul asks, in the fifth place, that the Colossians *also pray for him*. They should pray for open doors to proclaim the gospel and that Paul will be able to bring across the gospel. Paul closes his letter with a *prayer for grace* for the congregation.

We are confronted here with important perspectives on prayer from a single letter of Paul to a congregation of Jesus Christ. Let us keep this in mind when we bow before our Lord in prayer during the *2018 Week of Prayer*

and after. Our world today is no less challenging than that of the congregation in Colossae in Paul's day. We need one another's prayers and should encourage one another throughout the year to pray to God.

With the aim of worship through prayer over six days of the *2018 Week of Prayer*, we will refer to different epistles the apostle Paul addressed to the faith communities and individuals throughout his ministry. Paul's prayers for the congregations remind us that Christ has sent his church out into this world to proclaim the wonderful message of God's power and redemption. In order to fulfil this calling faithfully, every believer and every congregation of Christ must keep their eyes fixed on the Lord. In order to do this we also need one another's prayers and support. Therefore, we encourage one another to continue with the practice of the *Week of Prayer* and to learn from Paul how we can pray for each other in 2018.

May the Lord in his grace and love hear our collective prayers and supplications.

We thank Helené Fouché (DRC), Akash Sirpal (RCA), Derik Myburgh (URCSA), Ntozakhe Simon Cezula (URCSA), Joseph Pejane (DRCA) and Christina Landman (URCSA), members of the United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family, and who wrote the guidelines for the prayer week. May the Lord richly bless the *2018 Week of Prayer*.

Donald Gantana, Eddie Orsmond, Akash Sirpal and Gideon van der Watt

(On behalf of the Task Group of the United Ministry for Service and Witness of the DRC family)

The authors' points of departure

The following have been our points of departure in drafting guidelines for the *2018 Week of Prayer*.

- The goal of the *Week of Prayer* is to pray together for the coming year. In our unity with Christ's church in this world, we bring the actions of the congregation and church before God in prayer.
- We consciously choose to emphasise prayer in the guidelines. The reflections are short in order to leave more time for prayer. The guidelines will nevertheless stimulate thoughts around specific themes.
- Prayer is not only one spiritual activity among many others. Prayer is first a disposition and an attitude determining all aspects of our lives. In our inner room we make sure that we are focused on God, so that we may outwardly also live focused on God. In this way our entire life becomes prayer.
- The *2018 Week of Prayer* is an intensive inner room for the congregation with an eye to take up the year's activities with a deliberate submission to God and in unity with brothers and sisters of all denominations. The prayer meetings wish to assist us, to be busy with God's things in such a way that God will always be in the centre. The emphasis is openness and serviceability towards God.
- We present these guidelines in the form of reflections with some suggestions for prayer themes. The authors all have their own approach to the guidelines. This permits for diversity during the six days of the prayer week.
- We also reflect consciously on the fact that the congregation and the church as body of Christ will be the extension of Jesus' humanity through our actions during 2018 in this world.

Our prayer is that the Lord will use the actions of our congregations and the broader church during 2018 to bring about the kingdom of heaven also on earth.

Day 1: Paul's prayer for the congregation of Ephesus is grounded in love

Ephesians 3:14-21

Akash Sirpal

Background

The focus of our text is Paul's second prayer for the Ephesians; his first prayer for this congregation is in Ephesians 1:15-23. Paul starts with his prayer in Ephesians 3:1, interrupts himself in verse 2 and returns to his prayer in verse 13 from where it runs on through to verse 21. It is interesting to see how Paul outlines the work of each Person of the blessed Trinity. He talks about:

- the riches of the Father's glory
- the power through the Holy Spirit
- Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith.

What we pray reveals what really matters to us

As followers of Christ, we are generally urgent and earnest when we are in prayer because what we are praying for or about really matters to us. When a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness or a child becomes rebellious and leaves home, we turn to earnest prayer.

What matters to Paul is the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is amazed at God's eternal plan of redemption. We see this both in Ephesians 1 and 2. Paul is also in awe of God because of what he has realised for the church. God has brought all nations to Christ. God has brought the Gentiles to Christ by faith, and that on the same basis as he brought Jews to believing in the Messiah. Thus, it could not be said that there were two types of believers; there is only one kind of believer: a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul realises that he and the Ephesians are receivers of endless, infinite blessings. God has already given us as followers of Christ a rich bounty. We do not come asking for blessings out of poverty, but as people who have already received a blessing in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

How does Paul pray?

To kneel in prayer, like Paul does, signifies reverence and humility before God, submission to God and adoration of God. Paul does not, however, command a posture for prayer as much as he is advocating a prayerful attitude. The use of the word Father to address God shows towards the intimacy of a child coming before his father who will welcome and receive his child in love. We are invited to come to God as our loving Father. We should always do so with reverence and in submission to his sovereign authority. We should not let intimacy turn into a familiarity that breeds contempt. God is still the Almighty Creator. When we pray, we must also recognise that we belong to this great family of saints in heaven and on earth. Even when we feel insignificant, we can still come before God with the same confidence with which the apostle Paul did.

Prayer should be made in light of God's infinite riches

God is the Father of glory. The universe declares the glory and splendour of his righteous power (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20). Paul prays that God who lacks no resources will meet us and that our inner being will be strengthened by his power through the Holy Spirit. We all have need of his power to strengthen us from within. We all face problems that are beyond our power to resolve. We are totally dependent on God. Sometimes we forget this, hence our neglect of prayer.

In Zechariah 4:6 the Lord Almighty says: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit.' We never outgrow our need for God's strength. We need the power of the Spirit so that God can change our outward behaviour by dealing with our inner being.

The life of a Christian is grounded in love

Paul uses a metaphor from botany to illustrate his point. God's great love for us we see in his sending his Son to us sustains everything. The Christian life is a living, growing relationship with God and others. It is like a tree with

its roots that go down deep. God's love is the soil in which it is rooted. Love is the first fruit of the Spirit. Even if in our growing up we have only known anger, hardships and abuse, we must learn to sink down our roots in God's love.

And being rooted in love, we must have God's power to lay hold of Christ's love with all the saints. To be able to embrace Christ's love, it must happen in community with others. If Paul's readers understand the love of Jesus for them, they will be able to love one another and thus form the new humanity for which Jesus died. On our own we do not come close to experiencing the fullness of Christ's love. We grow to appreciate it and understand it more as we hear the stories of his love towards others. Genuine love must be practised towards other people. It cannot be just theoretical. It must be forged in the fires of relationship.

Having understood the great work of God and having prayed for us to be rooted in Christ's love, the apostle ends his prayer with praise to God, a doxology. There is no limit to what God can achieve for his people, and it is impossible to ask him to do too much. So, we should not fear asking him. He can and will grant us wonderful things (1 John 5:14).

Prayer themes

- Thank you God, that we can call you Abba Father. Help us to come to you in humility.
- Lord, help us to experience your immeasurable love.
- May we be satisfied in all that you are for us in Christ Jesus and experience this in fullness.
- Help us to live in community with you and with our fellow Christians.

Day 2: Paul's song of praise and thanksgiving for the character of the young congregation in Thessalonica

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Joseph Pejane

Introduction

The faith community in Thessalonica was the second one after Philippi Paul founded on European soil. Acts 17 relates the story of how Paul and Silas' visit to Thessalonica ended in turmoil and strong resistance from the Jews. In fact, after only three weeks, Paul and Silas had to flee the city during night time. Despite the resistance, some Jews and Greeks, among whom quite a few prominent women, accepted the message that Christ is the Messiah. They came to faith in Christ and started worshipping together.

After some time, Paul sent his young companion Timothy to Thessalonica to look into the wellbeing of this small group of believers. Timothy reported that the new congregants were persevering in faith! They have indeed received and accepted the good news of Christ's salvation. They have responded with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit to Paul's preaching. Paul wrote this letter to thank God for them, and to encourage them to remain faithful. Paul starts the letter to the Thessalonians with a prayer. It is mostly a prayer of thanksgiving. Paul thanks God for the congregation's faithfulness. Paul does not in the first instance thank the congregation for what they were doing, but he thanks God. Their steadfast faith and their deeds of love do not come from their own achievement. It is God, through the risen Christ and his Spirit, that has performed a miracle in the congregation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Thessalonians set an example to others.

By looking at the good qualities and characteristics of this congregation, their exemplary faithfulness for which Paul is expressing his gratitude, we can learn what is really important for a congregation. We may even ask ourselves if we can also thank God for the same things in our congregation. Would Paul be able to write the same kind of letter to our congregation, thanking God for what he sees in us and hears about us?

Thanksgiving for the congregation's characteristics

Listing some characteristics that Paul does not mention in his prayer may be revealing and helpful. Paul is not thanking God for the number or the size of the congregation in Thessalonica. He does not measure them in terms of numbers. Paul is also not thanking God for their beautiful church building, nor for their healthy annual

budget. Paul is not even thanking God for their good strategic plans in promoting maintenance and growth as congregation.

However, in verse 3 Paul is expressing deep gratitude to God for three things: first, their work produced by faith, second, their labour of love and third, their endurance inspired by hope in Jesus Christ. Let us briefly dwell with each of these three characteristics.

Work produced by faith

When they first heard the gospel, God opened the hearts of the Thessalonians to believe in Christ. Faith is a gift from God: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God' (Ephesians 2:8, New International Version). Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Greeks among them discovered the worthlessness of their idols; they stopped worshipping them and turned to faith in Jesus Christ. And the Jews' eyes were opened to discover that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who would liberate them from the curse of their legalism. He would reconcile them with God. The prominent women also discovered that it was not their status in life, but becoming humble followers of Christ that really mattered.

This new-found faith involves more than only knowing that Jesus is Lord. The Thessalonians became followers, they entrusted their whole lives in obedience to Jesus their King. Their faith brought their lives into action; they started doing good deeds, serving God and one another. Yes, their faith turned into deeds. As James (2:14 and 17) explained in his letter: 'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ... Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.' Their good deeds were the proof that they believed and trusted Jesus.

Would Paul be able to thank God for the works of our faith as congregation today? How is our faith visible in the way we live every day, in serving God and one another?

Labour of love

Good deeds should be prompted by love. It is of no avail if we work hard, if we do everything that is required of us, if we offer ourselves to serve God and others, but it is not done in love. As Paul writes elsewhere, if it is not 'constrained' by the love of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14). Congregations may do many good deeds, give themselves laboriously and yet, it will not really be received as a credible witness in the world. If these words and deeds are not prompted by love, be it pious religious practices, or sacrifices we make, or giving away all we possess, or speaking wonderful words, we are like resounding gongs, gaining nothing, says 1 Corinthians 13.

What people saw in the faith community of the Thessalonians were deeds prompted by love. That is why others started talking about them; that is why the Thessalonians became a model to believers, right across Macedonia and Achaia and even further. The Lord's message rang out from them, much louder and clearer than a resounding gong, it was not even necessary to explain this message any further.

We may ask ourselves: have our deeds, being prompted by love, become an example for others to follow?

Endurance inspired by hope

It was certainly not easy for the congregation in Thessalonica, for those first believers, to persevere in their faith. They suffered severe hardship and persecution, exactly because of their new-found faith. They had to bring great sacrifices. And yet, they accepted the gospel with such great joy; it could only have been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Thessalonians could endure with such joy, because they had hope. They knew that they were loved by God. They were assured of being chosen by God. They experienced the power of the Holy Spirit working in them. They knew that they were now worshipping the living and true God. They could endure in hope, because they believed that Jesus was raised from the dead and that he had rescued them from the coming wrath.

Real hope is built on trust in the Triune God, whose Persons work in communion to save us.

Will Paul be able to thank God for our work produced by faith, for our labour prompted by love, and for our endurance in hope?

Pray that the Triune God will work in us, change us, and turn us around, so that we will also be able to set an example to others by following Christ and resembling him more and more. Pray that the Lord's message will also ring out from us, in our own region and even further across all boundaries.

Prayer themes

- Pray for your congregation that God will help you to:
 - do work produced by faith
 - do labour prompted by love
 - endure in hope.
- Thank God for all these characteristics that may already be visible in your congregation.

Day 3: Paul prays for the Corinthians to encourage them in difficult times

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 and 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Helené Fouché

Introduction

We hear more and more that people see the practice of religion as a personal issue. I often hear that people prefer to be in nature rather than going to church; that nature has become their church: "Because nature is the place where they are most aware of God."

I want to be bold and say that we live in a society where more and more people are living on their own. More and more people are alone. Perhaps this is not true of all societies to the same degree. This probably happens more quickly in cities than in rural areas. I do get the idea, though, that people tend to have less face to face contact.

We even hear about people who die without anyone noticing that it has happened. In this way George Bell died all alone in Queens in New York in 2014. His neighbours noticed one day that something smelled bad in his flat and they called the 911 emergency number. They did not go to investigate because they had no relationship with their neighbour. They did not realise that they had not seen him for some time. No, only six days after they had last seen him did they smell something odd and called 911. George Bell died alone in his flat. Cut off from others.

Context and background

Corinth was a big harbour city. Here people from the East came to trade with people from the West. It was a place where people from all over came together.

In Corinth it was good to be important and to be able to rely on yourself, to be worthy of self-satisfaction and to be knowledgeable and cultivated. The Corinthians liked to make themselves rich. In this way they could be proud of themselves. Everyone strove to have and do more than others in order to draw attention to their own status. This attitude towards life also filtered through to the church. Members of the congregation in Corinth started to pride themselves on their individual spiritual gifts. It brought more and more division in the church. Some members of the congregation started to think that they were more important than other believers.

To this congregation Paul writes a letter that starts with thanksgiving. A prayer, not praise or compliments. Paul thanks God for the gifts he has bestowed upon his children. This is not an exaltation of the greatness of individual members of the congregation.

Paul reminds the congregation that they have received enough from God; enough grace, enough knowledge and enough spiritual gifts. They have received this grace. They have not done anything out of their own or in their private spiritual life to attain it or to become important.

The first epistle to the Corinthians emphasises that this congregation should build herself up in what she has received from Christ so that she can live out her testimony in the midst of difficult circumstances in order to encourage others. The rest of the letter and the matters Paul discusses in it could possibly be elucidated by this

first paragraph: God's grace has been given to the congregation in Christ Jesus. That is why no one lacks any spiritual gifts. Christ is faithful. The congregation in Christ must testify to it.

Therefore, do not focus on what each person has or does not have, on what each has accomplished or earned by themselves. Focus on the grace the congregation has received in Christ.

Application

In recent years, research has shown that loneliness is very bad for one's health, spiritually and physically. Being lonely is even worse than obesity or smoking.

In 1939 during the time of the Second World War, the German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the book *Life together*. In a time of war in which people hate each other he writes about love and harmony. Bonhoeffer believed that God has given us a life together, in communion with one another.

According to 1 Corinthians 1 we have received this communion with others from and in Christ. The church is the communion of love. We must live as the body of Christ.

Paul reminds us that this gift of communion, of a life together, of *ubuntu* as it is embodied in African philosophy, comes from God. He reminds us of the reality that the communion of Christians comes from God.

This is what makes the followers of Christ a church.

In a world that becomes gradually lonelier and where people are fighting more and more for their own interests, where people enrich themselves and forget that they can be human, a person because of the people around them, Paul reminds us that we must be grateful as church that we still have each other to hold on to.

In the midst of this loneliness we are also living in difficult circumstances. You can probably list a whole lot of issues that cripple our communities. There are so many things that make us feel tired and hopeless. The community in Corinth also felt tired and hopeless. In the midst of these circumstances of Corinth Paul reminds us that Christ has given us to each other to encourage each other.

Prayer themes

- Give thanks to God for the gift of the church.
 - What makes you thankful to be part of Christ's body when you think of your congregation?
 - Where does the church offer you a place of encouragement?
- Pray for the unity of the church in Christ.
 - Are there examples of division among people in your congregation, community of town?
- Plead to God for us to become sensitive to others.
 - Are there perhaps people who feel that they cannot go on any longer?
 - Are there ways in which we as the body of Christ can encourage them?

Sources

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1939. *Life together*.

Day 4: Paul's prayer for the Philippians as fellow workers of God

Philippians 1:3-11

Derik Myburgh

Background

Paul finds himself imprisoned as a result of his zeal to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is uncertain exactly when and where the letter was written, but it was probably AD 61 and AD 63 in Rome. The congregation in Philippi was established by Paul and Silas on the second missionary journey in about AD 50 or 51. This is the first church that was established on the European continent.

Philippi was a city close to the port of Neapolis in Macedonia and it was under Roman rule. There was still a strong Greek culture. The city was situated on a trade route and was quite affluent due to a number of gold mines in the area. Paul and Silas' first encounter with the city was quite traumatic and they both landed in prison

(Acts 16:23). In spite of this bad start, a congregation was formed in Lydia's house. Ten years later the church was well established.

Prayer as thanksgiving

Paul starts his prayer by saying that he thanks God every time he thinks of the congregation. In all his prayers for them it is with joy that he prays. The words 'joy' and 'rejoice' occur 16 times in the epistle. It is indicative of Paul's positive feelings towards the congregation in Philippi. Despite being imprisoned while writing to the Philippians, thinking about the congregation and praying for them fill him with joy. A disturbing question: What will we have left if we lost everything for which we did not thank God last night?

Prayer as answer to God's work

Paul's joy comes from the fact that the congregation proclaimed the gospel from the very start, when he and Silas stayed at Lydia's house, right up to the present while Paul is imprisoned. This is certainly a missional congregation, a congregation sent by God into the world.

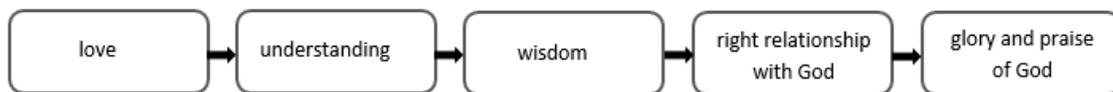
Being sent is not something to participate in when we feel like doing it. It is an attitude towards life, because God has started the good work in his people. God will bring this to completion on the day of the second coming of Jesus. Paul also reminds the congregation that they alike share in God's grace. They too share in Paul's defence and confirmation of the truth of the gospel.

As Christians we are indissociably part of the body of Christ. We share in each other's joy and pain. An isiXhosa proverb *Umntu ngumntu ngabantu* tells us that a person is a person through other people. We find our humanity in our relationships with other people. Jesus expresses the law and the message of the prophets in relationship terms when he states that the essence of the law is to love God and to love our neighbour.

'Defence' and 'confirmation' are terms used in court. Paul appealed against his earlier sentence in the case against him. His case is ongoing before the highest Roman court at the time of his writing to the Philippians. The defendant must defend himself by pleading not guilty. Then he has the task of confirming the truth of his defence in order to convince the court of his innocence. Paul points out that is not he as such that is on trial, but the gospel itself. The members of the congregation as the bearers of God's good news are all Paul's 'partakers' also in his imprisonment and defence of the gospel (verse 7, King James Version). For this reason Paul can rejoice all the time. He is not alone. He longs for them and calls on God to be his witness.

Prayer as a means of asking and listening

Paul also prays that the Philippians' love will grow and deepen in knowledge and insight. This will enable them to discern what is best as they live to the glory of God and wait as free people for Christ to return. The line Paul follows in his argument can be represented as follows:



Love is the point of departure. Without love we can only make a noise (1 Corinthians 13:1). Love teaches us to listen to God and to each other. Love helps us to understand what is really going on. Love and understanding lead us to wisdom in the sense it is used in the Old Testament: knowing God's will and doing it. God's love that has been freely given to us in Christ sets us free to live in a new relationship with God and with others. We then become witnesses of God's involvement in the world. In this way we are people sent by God to be God's fellow workers in our communities where we live and work. All of this to God's glory and praise.

Paul returns to the theme of prayer in Philippians 4:6 and 7 (New International Version): 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' We certainly have good reason to rejoice!

Prayer themes

- Pray for all Christ's congregations as witnesses that have been sent into the world.
- Pray for the wisdom to be thankful to God in all circumstances.
- Pray for each other. We are part of God's big family.
- Pray for the ability to discern between God's will and our own will.
- Pray for the courage to listen and act in love at all times.

Day 5: Paul teaches Timothy how to pray for the authorities and the world

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Christina Landman

Background

1 and 2 Timothy, as well as Titus, are known as the pastoral epistles. These three letters have been written to individuals, to Paul's two co-workers: Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete. Paul's other letters were written to congregations.

These epistles have been written in more or less AD 110. Wait a little, you will say, but Paul must have been dead by then! If Paul lived in Jesus' time he would have been more than a hundred years in the year AD 110. And indeed, the letters have not been written by Paul himself, but by his successors. Because they wanted to pass on his ideas, they wrote the letters under his name, which was perfectly acceptable in those times. Parts of these letters appear to have been written by Paul himself, such as where Paul reflects upon his execution that he knows is looming ahead of him. But the church orders as they are set out in the epistles are much further developed than they were in Paul's lifetime.

We thus see in these letters a Christian movement in transition. During this time there was a change from persecution to acceptance of Christians. In AD 96 Christians suffered bloody persecutions by the emperor Domitian. Although persecutions still took place AD 110, the frequency started to decrease. Christians were being accepted by society. It was thus a time during which Christians had to figure out for themselves how to live in peace with the authorities so that they could spread the gospel.

During this time Christians had to decide which cultural practices they wanted to take over from the communities in which they lived. Also which practices went against the grain of the Christian lifestyle.

There was discord among the Christian ranks. By this time different streams of thought have developed within the Christian movement. Some Christians, we can call them proponents of Gnostic thought, wanted to lay claim to Paul for their ideas. They were of the opinion that creation was evil and that a Christian had to live only by pure thought.

Christendom was busy developing from small isolated congregations to a universal church. This was also a time when all Paul's letters were being collected from all over the enormous area where his letters were sent. This letter was also attributed to Paul because it propagated Paul's ideas.

Contents

Let us call the writer of this letter 'the pastor'. The pastor writes to the receiver of the epistle how to pray for the authorities and the world.

The first point we have to make here is how important prayer is for both writer and receiver of the letter. The pastor refers to four kinds of prayers. These four types of prayers represent phases in the development of a Christian to maturity:

- Petitions are for beginners who still have a lot to atone for before the Lord.
- Prayers are for Christians who have already made peace in their relationship with God.
- Intercession is what Christians do who have already changed their works to fit their promises to God.

- Thanksgiving is for Christians who have already pulled all thorns from their head and who stand in a relationship of gratitude towards God.

The pastor says that all Christians, no matter in which phase of spiritual growth they find themselves should pray for the authorities and the world. Why?

So that there can be peace, so that Christians can preach the message.

And what is this message? What is the 'theology' that Christians have to spread?

It is written as a hymn, a liturgical fragment found in 1 Timothy 2:5-6a: 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.'

This is the 'theology' of Book 1 and 2 of Timothy: God is one, God is good, God is the Creator of all things, the true God. And Jesus Christ is the human face of God. Jesus Christ shows us that God cares personally for people, for all people. The true God is not like the Roman or Greek gods that are so far above and want to be appeased with offerings (or they strike you with a thunderbolt). God cares. God is through Jesus Christ the God for people. If things are not well with us, God takes it up personally.

Prayer themes

- Today too, Christians live in a world where the authorities do not always keep to the universal values that bring peace. These values are the values of care, humanity, righteousness and service rather than corruption, self-enrichment and power.
- We as Christians may and must pray that authorities will keep to the values that bring peace to this world.
- Christians live in a world where the human face of God is being obliterated.
Let us pray tonight that God's care and God's values will regain their place in this world.
- It is becoming riskier to live a Christian life in today's pluralist society.
Let us pray for our congregations, our churches and our fellow-Christians that we can continue to pass on God's message of love for all people.

Sources

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Day 6: Paul's prayer concluding Romans praises the eternal God who now reveals his plan of salvation of all nations

Romans 16:25-27

Ntozakhe Cezula

Glory to the God who strengthens believers

The epistle to the Romans ends in a doxology, that is, a liturgical prayer of praise to God. Romans 16:25-27 calls out for the eternal glorification of God through Jesus Christ. The Saviour God has the power to strengthen believers, to make them stand firm and to establish them in faith. The everlasting God will do this:

- through Paul's gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ
- according to the revelation of the mystery that the prophetic writings show to be true
- by his command to all nations.

The threefold strengthening of the Roman believers by God is to support and guide them in faith for their obedience to God in Christ Jesus. Let us have a closer look at these three aspects of the strength God gives believers.

Salvation for all

We begin with the first part of the statement that relates to Paul's gospel and his preaching of Jesus Christ. As we know, Paul did his ministry among the Gentiles. While he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ like the rest of

the apostles, his *intentional* ministry to Gentiles distinguishes it from the focus of the ministry of the other apostles. Nevertheless, Paul's preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles was not a message of his own making. It is God who would strengthen the Romans by a gospel message that affirms that Gentiles are co-receivers with Jews in Christ's plan of salvation.

The second part of the statement elaborates the first part. The good news or gospel that includes Gentiles in Christ's plan of salvation is a fulfilment of the writings of the prophets. This has now been revealed and, through this revelation, the believers in Rome will gain strength. The knowledge of this revelation should empower these beloved brothers and sisters to realise that there is no discrimination against them. Third, it is by the command of the everlasting God that it be revealed in Christ to all nations 'to bring about the obedience of faith' (verse 26, English Standard Version). This is reason enough for the Roman believers to grow stronger and stronger in the obedience of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Everything that has been said thus far can be formulated by using selected key phrases, namely: 'Jesus Christ', 'all nations', 'by his command' and 'obedience of faith'. Combined, this allow us to formulate as follows: 'God's salvation is offered by his command to all nations in Jesus Christ for the obedience of faith.'

This truth is an important factor in Paul's prayer for the followers of Christ in Rome. We should also consider his example in our prayers for Christ's church in our day.

The election of the Jewish people for God's salvation

Now let us take some steps back to pick up on the connection between the Old Testament and Paul's message to the believers in Rome. The Old Testament teaches that God has chosen the Israelites as his people. This election of Israel has been a blessing to Israel and often a 'curse' to other nations. It can be seen as a curse because the Israelites' understanding of their election by God often led to the destruction of other nations by the Israelites. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah offer examples of this. However, the books of the prophets Jonah and Amos, for example, have shown that God's love extends to other nations as well. (See especially Jonah 4:11 and Amos 9:7.)

In Genesis 12:2-3 with the calling of Abraham, God said to him 'you will be a blessing' and 'all the families of the earth will be blessed in you'. However, this has not been commonly known. With the coming of Jesus Christ, this knowledge that there should be no discrimination against other nations became public news. We can understand this as the revealed secret to which Paul is referring.

In our prayers for the church of Christ in our day, we should consider the continuity between the promise of the Old Testament prophesies and the fulfilment of the New Testament proclamation of the gospel.

A call for obedience of faith

We can now step forward again in applying Paul's prayer to our own context. Social psychology teaches us that humans have an intense need of self-esteem. Henry Tajfel says that we compare ourselves with those around us to get a sense of self-esteem. People often gain their self-esteem by believing others to be inferior to themselves. In this train of thought, if others were to be superior, this would cause a loss of self-esteem. In the quest for self-esteem, people will also categorise themselves into 'in-groups', that are 'superior', and others into 'out-groups', that are 'inferior'.

Based on this categorisation people ignore the good in others, highlighting only the bad in order to boost their own self-esteem. This tendency can even influence our interpretation of the Bible message and this is a real danger when we allow our own prejudices to inform our reading and understanding of the gospel. For, when we do obey Christ we can only do it in faith. And obedience of faith also means according to others the dignity that God has given them.

In South Africa, we experience different forms of discrimination. The church has not been immune to this challenge. We should, however, guard against these tendencies that strive to weaken our obedience in faith.

We may otherwise be fighting and working against the same God we confess to serve. If we view ourselves as better than others, we are already at risk of not obeying God in faith.

Let us then take Paul's teaching and example of praying for the Roman congregation at heart. Pray for the salvation of all people and for the transformation of our own hearts so that God can receive the glory!

Prayer themes

- Humility: May we be humble people in the church and in society.
- Corruption: Corruption is a fruit of disrespect for other people, undermining their intelligence and self-worth. It can be found both outside and inside the church.
- Discrimination: Discrimination of all sorts, including homophobia, undermines our obedience of faith. May we be saved from the inclination to discriminate against others.