

# When Paul Prayed

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



Published and distributed by  
***Thru the Bible Radio Network***  
P.O. Box 7100  
Pasadena, California 91109-7100  
(800) 65-BIBLE  
[www.ttb.org](http://www.ttb.org)

All Scripture references are from the *King James Bible*.  
(This message is also included in the hardback book,  
*J. Vernon McGee On Prayer*, copyright 2002 by Thru the Bible Radio Network.)

It's interesting that we don't often think of Paul as an outstanding man of prayer. When you think of anyone excelling in any field of service in the early church, Paul the apostle must be up toward the top. We would put him at the top of the list as a great missionary of the cross, and we can't think of any greater example of apostleship than Paul. If we were to make a list of ten of the greatest preachers of the church, we would certainly put Paul as number one. He was also one of the greatest teachers. The Lord Jesus was, of course, the greatest of all — "Never man spoke like this man" (John 7:46) — and Paul certainly followed in that tradition. He is also an example of a good pastor. According to Dr. Luke, Paul wept with the believers at Ephesus when he took leave of them. He loved them, and they loved him.

But how about being representative of a great man of prayer — would you put Paul on that list? We think of Moses yonder on Mount Sinai interceding for the children of Israel. We think of David with his psalms and the confession of his awful sin. We think of Elijah who stood alone before an altar drenched with water at Mount Carmel. Then there was Daniel who opened his window toward Jerusalem and prayed every day even though he lived in a hostile land under a hostile power. The Lord Jesus was the Man of prayer, so much so that one of His disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). But did you know that Paul was also a great man of prayer? With all of his other qualities, we seldom think of Paul as a man of *prayer*, yet this is the field in which he excelled, I believe, above all others.

When I was teaching at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, I would ask the students during their studies of Paul's epistles to make a list of all his prayers. They were to put down every time Paul said he was praying for someone. Lo and behold, student after student would come to me and say, "I had no idea Paul had such a prayer list. I didn't know he prayed for so many people!" Paul was a great man of prayer.

Years ago there was a preacher in Dallas, Texas, who was not a great preacher, but he had a great church and a great ministry — because his was largely a ministry of prayer. He wrote his prayer list on a roll of paper from an adding machine! When he unrolled it, it went through the living room, into the dining room, and on into the kitchen. When this man started praying down that list, the officers in his church could always tell it, because he would call this one and that one on the phone and say, "Look, I'm praying for So-and-So, and he hasn't accepted Christ yet. Would you go over and talk to him while I pray for him?" The officers would always say, "Well, we know that Dr. Anderson is praying because he has us all working." May I say to you, he had a great ministry because he had a great prayer life. By the way, what kind of prayer list do you have? How many people do you remember in prayer, even once a week? Maybe you are living a busy life these days, but once a week do you take time out to go down a list and remember specific people in prayer?

Paul the apostle is, in my opinion, the man God has given to the believer as the great example to follow when praying. The Epistle to the Ephesians records two of Paul's prayers. In chapter one, having set before us the church as the body of Christ, Paul fell to his knees in prayer. The second prayer is recorded at the end of chapter three. I would like to look at the *characteristics* of these two prayers, observing the things that are outward. Then I would like to look at their *content*, noting the inward parts of prayer.

### **Characteristics of Paul's Prayers**

*Motivated by Good News*

First of all, we find the *motive* for Paul's prayer. What was it that would cause this apostle to go to prayer? He told us:

***Wherefore, I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints.*** (Ephesians 1:15)

Do you notice what it was that sent him to prayer? It was good news, not bad news. Unfortunately, it seems that the most common circumstances that motivate us to pray are trouble, sickness, distress, or crisis. The story is told that years ago a ship at sea was going down in a storm, and the captain announced over the loudspeaker, "To prayers! To prayers! To prayers!" An elegant, refined woman came up to him and said, "Captain, has it come to this?" In other words, "Is it so desperate now that we are going to have to use prayer as a life preserver?" They hadn't been praying on the days when there was no storm, but when the storm struck and the ship was going down, it was time to start praying. Isn't that the sort of thing that causes many of us to pray today? It is the crisis rather than the time of rejoicing. It is bad news rather than good news that prompts us to prayer.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Should we pray at those times? By all means! But is that the only time we should pray? Shouldn't we have another motive? Shouldn't good news move us to prayer? Paul is saying, in essence, "When I heard about your faith — faith in God, faith in Christ — and then I heard of your love to the brethren, that moved me to prayer." It was good news that prompted him to pray.

### ***Intercessory***

Now the second thing to note is that Paul's prayers were *intercessory*:

**[I] *cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.***  
(Ephesians 1:16)

You'll find that same thing when you turn to the prayer in the third chapter:

***That he would grant you, according to the riches of His glory....*** (Ephesians 3:16)

We do not find Paul praying here for himself. Don't misunderstand me — I know he prayed for himself. He told us in 2 Corinthians 12 that he had a thorn in the flesh and that he went to the Lord about it. In fact, he made it a matter of very definite prayer three times because it was of great concern to him. Now, that was a personal matter. But you will notice that the recorded prayers of the apostle Paul are all intercessory, praying for others.

Have you ever stopped to think that this is an area in which you can engage? There are many folk today who say, "I'm not able to teach, I'm not able to preach, I'm not called as a missionary, I can't sing in the choir, and I can't do even personal work." My friend, you can pray. Actually, prayer is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. One of the greatest ministries that you and I can have today is to follow Paul's example and engage in a ministry of praying for others.

## ***Brief***

The third thing to note is the *brevity* of his prayers. Both prayers here in Ephesians are brief. In fact, all the prayers of Scripture are quite brief. The Lord Jesus said in Matthew 6:7, “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the pagans do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.”

One of Moses’ greatest prayers for Israel is recorded in only four verses (Deuteronomy 9:26-29). Elijah, on top of Mount Carmel as he stood alone for God against the prophets of Baal, prayed a great prayer that is only two verses long (1 Kings 18:36, 37). Nehemiah’s great prayer is recorded in only seven verses (Nehemiah 1:5-11). The prayer of our Lord in John 17 takes only three minutes to read in the Greek. Martin Luther argued that the fewer the words, the better the prayer. A great many people think that a long prayer means we are being heard or that we are extra pious or that somehow or other we are being very religious. A long prayer is no indication that we are being heard. We may be just repeating ourselves.

We need to recognize the fact that we are taking God’s time when we pray. Don’t misunderstand — He is willing to listen. But we are very careful about composing a letter that we send to some prominent individual. And if we are going to have an interview with someone important, we turn over in our minds what we are going to say when we get there because we want to go right to the point. Why don’t we do that in our prayer life? Why don’t we make prayer a real business? Why not study our own prayers? And why not make our prayers effective by getting right down to the point?

I like what a little Scottish lady said when a visiting preacher was quite lengthy at the prayer meeting. The people were all kneeling around while he stood up to pray. He was really wandering, as sometimes preachers do, until finally this little Scottish lady reached over, pulled his coattail, and said, “Call Him ‘Father,’ and ask Him for something!” My friend, we need to call Him “Father” and ask Him for something. Our prayers should be right to the point, if you please.

## ***Submissive***

Then there is a fourth characteristic of prayer that we notice here, and that is the *submissive* posture of prayer. Will you notice that Paul said,

***For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*** (Ephesians 3:14)

“I bow my knees.” That is something that is needed today. I wish we could return to the old-fashioned way of kneeling at the time of prayer.

When I was a very young preacher — in fact, during my first year in the ministry — I was invited to hold a series of meetings in Tennessee. The first service began on a Sunday night. The little country church was packed out, as they always were for those “protracted meetings,” as they used to call them. I said, “Let’s pray,” and I shut my eyes. Then I heard a tremendous shuffling, but I didn’t dare open my eyes because I was a young preacher then, and I didn’t want to be irreverent. I kept my eyes closed until I said, “Amen.” When I opened them, I didn’t see a soul! I thought, *What happened? They all walked out on me while I prayed!* But then they began

to come up between the pews just like the corn comes up — a few here, a few there — and in a minute they were all back in their pews again. They had been kneeling on the hard wooden floor!

I think kneeling is a good position. I hope you take that position when you pray privately. Get down on your knees — in fact, get down on your face before God. You see, man today is in rebellion against God. Did you ever notice the language that God used even for His chosen people? He said, “Ye stiff-necked...” (Acts 7:51). And all too often the same term could be used for you and me. Stiff-necked!

There are two words for “worship” in the New Testament. One means to bow the head, the other is to bend the knee. You can either genuflect — that is, bow the knee — or you can bend the head. But we are stiff-necked. We want to look up in the face of the Deity. God says, “Get down before Me.” The very fact that we bow is a recognition that He is sovereign and that we are to be obedient to Him. My, how this generation needs to learn that we don’t treat God as an equal! We are to treat Him as the Lord of heaven, and we do well to go down on our faces before Him. Paul didn’t seem to mind bowing before Him. He said, “I bow my knees before God.” We need to learn to get our bodies into a subordinate position.

### **The Content of Paul’s Prayers**

Now the *content* of the prayers of Paul is quite interesting also. Let’s take a little time to consider the inward parts of prayer.

#### ***With Thanksgiving***

We find there is a note of *thanksgiving* running through all of Paul’s prayers. Thanksgiving should characterize all our prayers. Notice again how Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers:

[I] ***cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.***  
(Ephesians 1:16)

You will find thanksgiving in his instructions to the Philippian believers also:

***Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer, and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.*** (Philippians 4:6)

Now “with thanksgiving” is a very strange expression in this context. Paul said that when you bring your requests to God you also are to come with thanksgiving! There have been several ways of explaining that. Some have said that what Paul really meant was for you to thank God *after* you get your answer. But the interesting thing is that the same tense of the verb is used throughout the passage, thus it cannot be so interpreted. Paul said that at the very moment you make your request you are to thank Him — right then and there. Others have tried to interpret it as meaning that you should thank Him for past favors when you make requests for future favors. The only thing is, Paul didn’t say that. He said you are to thank Him for the very request you have just made.

Somebody says, “Well, wait a minute. He may not answer.” But Paul also said that He *will*

answer. I believe one of the worst misnomers Christians use today is “I have unanswered prayer.” Have you ever stopped to think what an insult that is to God? What you are really saying is this: “I took a request to God, and He didn’t hear me,” “He wouldn’t listen to me,” or “He refused to answer it.” May I say to you, if you are a child of God and you brought a request to Him, He has heard and answered your prayer. But somebody says, “Wait a minute! I know that, practically speaking, I have unanswered prayers!” My friend, again may I resist you and say, you do *not* have unanswered prayers! You did get the answer. You simply didn’t like it, so you call it an unanswered prayer. May I say to you, God said, “No,” and *no* is a good answer. Why don’t you accept from God His *no*? Why don’t you put the blame where it belongs and say, “I do not have unanswered prayers, but I just don’t seem to be praying in the will of God”?

You don’t have unanswered prayer if you are God’s child; He is simply not answering them your way.

Paul experienced this. Let me paraphrase 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 where Paul said, in effect, “I had a thorn in the flesh, and I went to the Lord about it. I rationalized, saying to Him, ‘Lord, I’d be a better missionary if You’d take this thorn out.’ Since nothing happened in response to my request, I went back a second time and said, ‘No, look, Lord — maybe You didn’t quite understand what I was after the first time. What I really want is the thorn removed, and then I’ll be a better missionary.’” But Paul still didn’t get the answer he wanted, so he went back a third time, and the Lord said to him, “Paul, I heard you the first time. I have answered you. I am not going to take it away, but I am giving you grace to bear it.”

God says *no* many times and, frankly, I’m of the opinion that it is His best answer. When I was growing up, I never took a request to my dad that he did not answer. He *always* answered. But the best answer that he ever gave was *no*. I remember one time I asked my dad for a bicycle, and he said yes. But when I asked for a shotgun, he said no. That was the best answer. Likewise, God always answers with the best possible answer, and we are to make our requests with thanksgiving.

Oh, my friend, Paul always had a note of thanksgiving in his prayers. Part of that thanksgiving came out of his knowledge that God would always hear and answer. When he came to God he would say, “Here is the request,” and he would lay it out before Him. Then he’d say, “Lord, thank You for hearing and answering my prayer.” He always got an answer. And you, if you are God’s child, will get an answer.

### ***Directed to the Father***

Now, there is another thing that identifies Paul’s prayers. Will you notice this: He prays *to God the Father*. Somebody says, “You are being technical now. Aren’t you splitting hairs?” Yes, but I want to be very frank with you. I think it is very important to pray correctly. Let me illustrate: I went to ask about an important matter when I was in Portland, Oregon. Believe me, I got the runaround! They passed me from one man to another. Finally I said, “I want to talk to the man who *knows*. Don’t send me to somebody else. Send me to the man who can make the decision.” Then I called for a friend of mine who worked there, he came down from his office, and the whole matter was resolved in about three seconds. It is well to go to the right person. We are technical in situations down here. So what about our prayer lives? I think we had better be careful there also.

Paul prayed directly to God the Father. Listen to him:

*That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you....*  
(Ephesians 1:17)

Then over in Ephesians 3:14 he said:

*For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul was being very scriptural, because the Lord Jesus said to His apostles:

*And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.* (John 16:23, 24)

To paraphrase what the Lord Jesus Christ said, “Here is a new way of praying. You have never prayed this way before. Don’t pray to Me directly. Pray to God the Father in My name.”

You see, when you and I pray to the Son, we lose the benefit of His intercession. He is our great Intercessor. When we pray to God the Father, the Lord Jesus is at God’s right hand, and He “liveth to make intercession” for us (Hebrews 7:25). He says, “That is one of Mine down there who is praying. I laid down My life for him. Father, I want You to hear and answer his prayer.” We lose the benefit of our Intercessor when we attempt to go directly to the Lord Jesus with our requests.

Now, you say, that is a technicality. Sure it is. Do I think Jesus would hear if we prayed to Him? Of course He would hear. But when I pray, I want the benefit of everything God has to offer. And, my friend, don’t we want to be scriptural? He said, “Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” I may be splitting hairs, but I am just saying what is here in the Scripture, if you please. “Ask the Father in my name.” This is the thing that Jesus emphasized.

### ***Requested Spiritual Understanding***

As we consider the content of Paul’s prayers, it’s important to note that he requested *spiritual understanding*. I do think Paul prayed for material things. We know that he asked for the removal of his “thorn in the flesh,” and he prayed for others who were sick. He also prayed that they might have a good journey. So he did pray for material things. But the interesting thing here is that Paul was not praying for physical advantages or material possessions.

You and I are surfeited with secularism in our contemporary society. Today we even measure spiritual enterprises by that which is material, and that is unfortunate. I believe that right now some of the finest works of God are suffering financially. This business today of saying God is blessing a ministry or a church simply because the money is pouring in is totally false — I can name a whole lot of religious rackets that are bringing in the money, my friend. Prosperity is not the measure of success, not before God.

Spiritual understanding is what Paul prays for, and certainly this is what we need.

*That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend, with all saints, what is the breadth, and length,*

*and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.* (Ephesians 3:17-19)

You will find the same thought back in chapter 1:

*That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.* (Ephesians 1:17, 18)

Paul was praying here for that which is spiritual, that they might have illumination and understanding and know the love of Christ. How many times do we pray for that? Frankly, that is what I'd like to have. "Oh," you say, "don't you want to pray for health?" Yes. "Don't you want to pray that all obligations be met?" Yes. But after we've done that, what about spiritual understanding? Paul says it passes knowledge. This means your IQ won't help you here. It is something that only the Spirit of God can give you. For

*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.* (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10)

The Spirit is the One who leads us and guides us into all truth. We need today to have a fresh anointing of the Spirit of God to understand divine truth.

I am amazed at the error that is creeping into the church today. In fact, I am overwhelmed by it. Heresy is breaking out all over. Why? Because we haven't been praying for that which passes knowledge. We need to be praying for a spiritual understanding of the Word of God, my friend. Never have we needed that as we need it in this hour. I see man after man going off on a tangent. Men who I never dreamed would veer from the truth are today veering from the truth. We need to pray for each other that the "eyes of our understanding" be opened and that we may understand divine truth.

Now it may seem to you that I'm way out in left field when I say that. Perhaps you are saying, "I've been praying for a new automobile — the new models are coming out and I need a new car. Isn't it all right to pray about that?" Sure. But when you pray for that, also ask for a little understanding about how to drive it, as well as a little spiritual knowledge — spiritual knowledge to understand divine truths.

### ***Requested Spiritual Power***

That's not all. Paul requested *spiritual power*, and spiritual power is not measured by horses or kilowatts or what is under the hood of a car. Will you listen to him:

*And what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power.* (Ephesians 1:19)



He said, in essence, “I’m praying that you not only have an understanding but that you have a power, a dynamic, in your life.” What is that power? Well, the norm back in the Old Testament was the power of Jehovah “which brought you out of Egypt”; that was always the measuring rod of power. God would say to Israel, “I will do this for you, and I am Jehovah who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” That was power. He did it by miracle-working power. That was the norm then, but that is not the norm today for believers.

The norm today is this:

***Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.*** (Ephesians 1:20)

That is resurrection power. Paul could say, “...That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection...” (Philippians 3:10). What do you and I know today about resurrection power? What do we know of having that power which worked in Jesus, brought Him up from the dead, and put Him at God’s right hand? Think with me for a moment. As long as you and I are in these earthly bodies, we will never get rid of this old nature, but this old nature needs to be put in the place of death in order that we might live by the power of the Holy Spirit working through our new nature. Do we know anything about that power today? Have you felt that power surging through you?

I once rode with a man who was kind enough to take me out to his country club to play golf. He was driving one of those large luxury cars. He said, “You know, McGee, I have to watch the speedometer all the time because of the tremendous power of this car. The other day I was driving up to Portland, and I was going a hundred miles an hour before I knew it — but the police officer knew it! I just put my foot down on the accelerator, and oh, what power!” I said, “I wish that kind of power was in my life.” Wouldn’t you like to start living by that kind of power? Oh, not under a hood, but that power that raised Jesus from the dead! And that’s not all of it. God’s power that raised Jesus from the dead also “set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.”

Power! I’ll tell you what is power: Paul said, in effect, “I pray that the power, which brought Jesus back from the dead and then took Him off this earth in a glorified body back yonder to God’s right hand, might work in you.” *We* need to pray for that, do we not? And honestly, do we know much about that kind of power? Is our praying today really laying hold of God?

I’ll tell this corny story, if you don’t mind. The first time I went back to John Brown University, a group of students took me on a tour. They asked if I’d like to see the “flying field.” (They call them airports today.) I said, “Well I’ve been wanting to see a field fly.” I went out, and I discovered this: you don’t do any flying on a flying field. That’s where you take off. Flying is done up yonder.

Suppose you go out to the airport, you get into the plane, you race the motor, you roll down the runway, and then you come back and put it in the hangar. We can say we’ve been out to the airport and that we made it to the end of the runway, but we never took off! How many times do we really take off in prayer?

How many times do we really pray? How many times do we really lay hold of God? I wonder if God says, “Your prayer meetings are like flying fields. You ought to take off, but many of you never do. You just race your motors and go back to the hangar, and you wonder why there is no vitality. You wonder why there is no strength and why there is little interest in prayer

today.”

Oh, may God teach us to pray, and to pray as the apostle Paul prayed.