

PRAYER

Reflections on This & That
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A few general remarks

A friend once told me he wanted to avoid deep theological discussions. Instead all he wanted to do was pray and teach on prayer. Even a spiritual minor can ask more questions on prayer than a generation of world-ranked theologians can answer. There's nothing simple about prayer.

Still, this much is clear: Jesus who would have known all about the difficult questions related to prayer urged people to pray always and not quit (Luke 18:1). It's true that even that Luke text is filled with unanswered difficulties but it's clearly a call to prayer, persistent prayer. And there's the assurance that a God who keeps faith with his children hears the prayers.

So maybe we should begin there: Trust in the Holy Father to whom we pray. I say trust in him rather than our understanding of him. The Father is no great "Unknown" because he has made himself known in Jesus Christ and this gives us grounds to trust him. Just the same he's too grand to be fully grasped so we're to trust him even when we don't understand his ways. We did that to a great degree with loving parents, didn't we? Christ would say: Think noble things of God and trust him.

Then I think we should pray believing that the reality of things is vast and complex. No prayer is as simple as it seems. I recognise that a heart in agony has no time to think of such matters but it's true even when I am in awful pain. If our prayer is a request it may be asking for something that God chooses not to give because he has other agendas in motion. I can understand why Tevye in *Fiddler On The Roof* wonders how it could be hard for God to make him a rich man without upsetting world affairs. Still, even his sensible question is more complex than he knew. In another place on the site maybe I'll go into this in some detail.

We should pray expressing the desire of our hearts even if we think we might not get what we ask for. There are those who think if you pray thinking you might not get what you ask for that you aren't praying in faith. That just isn't true and James 1 is not speaking to such a situation. It isn't a lack of faith to humbly admit that what we ask for might not suit God's purposes. But even with that reservation we are still urged by Christ to pray and Paul encourages us to make our requests known to God (Ephesians 6:18). Tell him what you want without fear or shame and trust him to work the richest and best result.

I'm sure we should pray prayers of various kinds. All kinds of prayers, Paul says in Ephesians 6:18, because prayer isn't simply the way we ask for what we want. There are thanksgiving prayers. There are prayer of praise and prayer of penitence. There is prayer that simply rejoices in the presence of the Holy Father. Prayers that ask for nothing, vow nothing and promise nothing. There are prayers that go up simply because we want to talk to our Father who is our Friend. It seems that only in the area of request prayers do we have questions on top of questions.

We need to bear in mind that prayer is only one expression of the rich and complex relationship we have with God and the world. Naturally, I believe prayer is vitally important but it isn't the

"most important" thing in a Christian's life. In light of the entire biblical witness, to claim it is makes little sense.

A PRAYER AT A WEDDING

Holy Father, what is happening here is so familiar to us that we often find it difficult to see the glory and beauty and wonder of it. Yet in the presence of this young couple we still sense that what we are witnessing is a truly astonishing event where two people express their heart's desire to love one another as they want to love no other in the world and this they commit to do all their lives.

Holy Father we don't know very well how to speak the truth about this occasion—the serious truth of it as a profound covenant to be honored with unchanging commitment and the joyful truth that it is the beginning of a thrilling human adventure with the unexpected around so many corners.

Do help these two here and now to feel your nearness and your longing to bless them and help them as they remember that your happy Holy Son honored just such an occasion as this in the company of his precious little mother. Bless them Lord that in an often sad and always struggling world that has lost the capacity to wonder they will this day and until their lives here are done they will bear witness to a fullness of life—that they will be able to mirror a life of unswerving devotion, joyful silliness, deepening friendship, loving and generous forgiveness of any and all wrongs done and a happy contentment in days well lived in quietness. So bless their loving union that together, as husband and wife, they will hold before our eyes the mystery and truth of the Lord Jesus and his Bride, the Church.

We pray too, Gracious One, for ourselves, who are their families and friends, that we will be to them in their special times of need all that we can be. Enable us then to keep this our commitment to them by blessing us all with wisdom, strength and the grace of willing hearts.

This prayer in Christ's name.

A Prayer for Forgiveness

We apologize Lord for the uncleanness we've harbored and even nurtured as well as the overt acts of wickedness we've engaged in.

We apologize for our bitterness and smugness, for our curled lips and the contempt with which we've received strugglers against sin. A contempt we've shamefully cultivated and even justified.

We repent of our arrogance, an arrogance that led us to think we're wise enough to know the whole story, wise enough to lump all sinners together and wise enough to "know" their repentance isn't genuine. We're sorry for taking the frequent moral losses of fellow-sinners as proof of their unrepentant heart rather than construing them as proof that they're fighting an awful battle for spiritual survival.

We apologize Lord because you pour out the warmth of your grace on us even while in our spite we often withhold our sunshine from those who shiver in the dark of their sin, lonely and cold and sometimes close to despair.

We repent for keeping your rain from falling on hot fevered souls who burn with shame—keeping it from them because they aren't quite to our liking and giving it, when we do, only to those who grovel in our presence or ceaselessly carry themselves as if they are second class citizens in your kingdom.

We apologize for our satisfaction with the shallowness and selectivity of our love to others when yours is fathomless and universal.

We apologize that our cheerful commitment to love and righteousness is so fitful when yours is changeless and for the grudging way we offer forgiveness, the cool way we offer fellowship, the stiff way we greet the returned or returning prodigal when you greet all of us with such rejoicing and generosity.

We apologize for the self-satisfaction and self-congratulation we feel when we look in the mirror and we repent that we've narrowed your demand on our lives to the "manageable proportions" of loving those who love us, which hides the fact that we fail by our refusal to love our enemies or to bless those that curse us and to do good to those that spitefully use us. And all that, even while we congratulate ourselves on our moral maturity.

Forgive us for comparing ourselves too favorably with others and refusing to compare ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ who without even trying and without a hint of self-righteousness shows us all to be shabby at best.

Forgive us for taking the credit if it happens to be true that we are more devoted than some others; for taking credit for all this as if a rooster could take credit for making the sun to rise.

Forgive us for not taking seriously your questions: "Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Forgive us when we impatiently dismiss the crushing disadvantages of those whose moral struggle shows less success than ours even while their struggle is a nobler and braver struggle than our own.

We cannot ask forgiveness for not being you, Holy One, but we do sincerely ask forgiveness for the measure to which we fail to live up to our present possibilities and we ask you sincerely to deliver us from a preoccupation with our sinfulness. Enable us to have a clear sense of it, a deep regret over it and to keep our eyes focused on you to admire, worship and serve you, the highest we know that we might be transformed more and more into your likeness which we have seen in the blessed Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray.

A prayer for God's coming

O Lord, it seems that we have always been looking for you. Prophets told of your coming and psalmists sang of your future arrival. The whole creation groans and wonders when you wilt show yourself and right all wrongs. Your church herself wonders why thou are taking so long to arrive. Sometimes (but only sometimes) we think that even the evil doers of the world have moments when they wish you would come and stop them in their evil tracks so that they will not plunge deeper into the moral mire they love to wallow in.

Millions toil only to have the wages of their honest labour cruelly snatched from them and they weep bitter tears as they continue impossible tasks. Men sell their body parts and even their children to stay alive and women are forced into shame so families can eat a handful of rice. People ask for bread and are given a stone while tyrants live in luxury and governments reward violence. It's been so long and still we haven't seen you exalt the humble and bring down the proud and arrogant. We have heard such stories of you in olden days and we believe them, but we wonder why there are none to tell today. We hear of them happening here and there and we wonder why they don't happen everywhere. Forgive our impatience but do please

remember that it stems in part from your own established righteousness and reputation and the promises you have made. Still, forgive us and help us to continue to believe that in Jesus Christ you have vindicated yourself and will gloriously fulfill all your promises, and that we will see and know it.

With sadness and some fear we recognize that you might have come to us and gone away again—might have come to us in disguise, perhaps as a child wanting to be loved, a woman looking for justice or a man wearily and in some irritation looking for his soul. Perhaps we were too busy praying for thy coming that we had no time for you. We implore you not to leave us this way but to return to us. And when you do finally come to us without disguise may you find us busy responding compassionately to you in your many disguises. O come to our aid, we pray, though we are a wicked and wayward human family for there is so much pain and suffering and loss and there is no help beside you.

A PRAYER FOR PREACHERS

Sovereign Lord and Holy Father, forgive us who are called to gospel for you—whatever we are and whatever our place in life—forgive us for every word or gesture that would take the hearts and minds of those who hear us away from you and your blessed Son, Jesus Christ. Because we are sinful, in our foolishness we are prone to come to linger on our faithfulness or our skill, wisdom or popularity. It is not to our credit that others might not know that we do this but bless us indeed by making us aware of it and aware that you are saddened by it for then we have the opportunity to renounce it.

Permit us to apologize and in your patience and kindness will you continue to entrust us with your precious gospel for in our better moments we desire to be faithful servants and yet we fear that we may be under the spell of self-love for a long time. Because you are faithful and because we can do nothing praiseworthy without your constant help we make our request with assurance that you will in your own good time and by your many chosen means provide what we need to honor you always.

Deliver us from smooth sophistication and posing and from well-expressed humanism that adds some verses for religious coloration and is made a substitute for gospeling. For your Church's sake keep us from parading our cleverness and from religious lecturing that starves your needy

people and weakens them in the face of the task you have commissioned it to carry out. Deliver us, too, we pray, from the kind of humility that calls attention to itself and therefore ceases to be humility; forbid us to be lazy and call us to be workmen who need not to be ashamed, not to be dabblers so that by your Spirit in our prayerful diligence you will enrich us with the truth you entrust us to speak that we too might be transformed as you wish our hearers to be.

Do thou protect us, we ask, for we have no other who cares so much for us all and for your own glorious purpose in Christ who alone makes us worthy and for the sad and sinful world that you so love and wish to come to know and love and live the Story. In Jesus Christ this prayer.

A prayer in a time of happiness

Holy Father, who is made happy by the safe return of a lost child, I want to express my happiness at the safe return of my recently gravely ill best friend. Thank you!

I want to tell you how very happy I am at her unwavering faith in you even in, especially in, the midst of her great fear. What a lovely thing that is to see. Thank you!

I want to thank you for the truth that her recovery is also the confirmation and illustration of the truth that you hear the prayers of all of us for you have no "pets". Thank you!

I want to thank you for all the prayerful friends and those who though not friends are friendly, brotherly and sisterly, and that in your kindness to my Ethel you speak assurance to them also in the event of the coming of their sore troubles. Thank you!

I want to thank you that the faith you have generated and sustain in us can remain vibrant even in the profoundest sadness and that it knows how to be deliriously happy in a glad day. Thank you!

I want to thank you that there are countless thousands who refuse to give you ultimatums—"make us happy or else"—but who, like their Master, trust you in joy and pain. Thank you!

jimmcguiggan, and for ethel.

A prayer in time of trouble

Holy Father, my Ethel is going through another very distressing time and I need to ask your help. Like millions of other chronically ill people she is weary of the struggle and you must know very well how it is for those of us who love her to have to watch it for you love her also. We

fully accept that being part of a human family you are working to redeem and glorify means we share in the universal hurt and since we are at peace with you in Jesus Christ we have no quarrel with you and feel no need to defend ourselves against you as though you were our enemy rather than our Holy Father who is very fond of us.

We've not asked for exemption from illness or death or heartache when it comes and we're not asking for it now, only that you would make your loving presence known in a more manifest way that can be felt by two of your emotionally weakened children who at this time are longing for such an assurance. We recognize too that there are countless poor souls who suffer without such a comforting blessing and if some sense of "distance" is to be part of this entire experience then so be it. And if that be the case and we are to have a deeper understanding of the hurt of this whole groaning world that senses that "distance" and your apparent absence, then we pray that you be especially near us so that your peace will guard our hearts in a very difficult time and that not only will we love you still cheerfully and be bound more closely to one another in dependence on each other but that in some way others will be blessed.

The test results will be what they will be and we long to be what we can be so long as we are assured that you are who and what you are. Of that we're sure in light of the Christ and we ask you to help us to maintain that clear vision in our hearts.

ethel and jimmcguiggan

Does prayer change God's will?

I need hardly tell you that the vital concern is not whether our prayers can change the will of God but that our prayers (as an expression of our lives) come into line with his will. We're to be less concerned with changing God's mind than changing our own. This we're well aware of but in times of stress some vital truths take a back seat.

But the question about our prayers changing the will of God is only part of a larger issue which is this: should we see our relationship with God as dynamic, one in which he wishes us to make "creative" decisions and proposals? Should we view our lives with and under God as pre-played chess games where, however "free" we think our moves are, we're simply doing what God had predetermined will be done? Should we vision human life as already mapped out in every

detail, no matter how miniscule and that every nanosecond has already been written in God's great book of our lives independent of anything we will? Should we conclude that everything—without exception—is what God wills that we will so that in the end it isn't we who are living but God living his will through us; should we conclude that we have no more freedom than a single-celled amoeba?

If we were to conclude that that's how life is then all talk about what God thinks of our requests, protests, proposals, praise and even our sins is empty rhetoric because all those are what he has eternally determined we will request, protest, propose, praise and even sin. To hold the above is to insist that what is is because God would have it so and therefore he pulls the strings according to his exhaustive blueprint from which there can be no deviation. [That is consistent Calvinism but it doesn't begin to look like the biblical witness.]

Does prayer ever change the will of God? I'm sure the answer's yes and no, depending on the perspective from which we speak.

There are some things that neither human or demon, nation or individual, prayer or protest will change and one of them is this: God has committed himself to his creation—to bring it to glory in and under Jesus Christ!

But God's commitment to redeem and glorify his creation includes a moral relationship with the human family and that in turn includes the free moral response of humans.

In Jeremiah 18:1-12 God himself insists that the behaviour of a nation can change his purpose toward that nation.

Of course we need to bear in mind that God's will in such a setting is linked to human behaviour; it isn't a "still picture" of what God is going to bring about. If he purposes to bless or chastise he purposes to do it based on the human situation relative to himself and his overarching purpose for the human family.

He doesn't pretend that he's purposing to bless and he doesn't pretend that he's purposing to discipline and he doesn't pretend he has turned from that purpose when the nation turns from its evil.

So to say human behaviour "changes" God's purpose is only true in a sense. The option of "change" is already built into God's way of working with us in light of his holy character and his

overarching purpose. In light of Jeremiah 18:1-12 we might ask, “Does God change his mind?” In truth, the answer’s no, even though he changes his purpose and action depending on the human response.

Nevertheless, it leads to all kinds of confusion to think of the will of God in terms of his having laid out a completely exhaustive and changeless blueprint for everything he does in relation to us and that blueprint is written entirely independent of our response to him and our requests of him.

Whether God blesses us or redemptively curses us is not based on rules of engagement that we have laid down for him to pay attention to. No, God works with us in light of his own character and purposes which undergird our very existence.

Nevertheless, God did say (and with a double-barrelled announcement to stress he would not recover) that Hezekiah was to die of his illness and when the king begged for a longer life God altered his declaration and gave him fifteen more years. The text leaves no doubt that God responding to Hezekiah’s prayer (see Isaiah 38:1-5). Here then, is an individual case where God announced his will in the form of Hezekiah’s sure death and moments later announced his will in the form of Hezekiah’s sure recovery and it occurred in response to the man’s plea. Clearly, then, a human plea can change the will of God—that is, change God’s specific purpose.

But the matter isn’t as simple as it appears (though consistent Calvinism turns texts like this into empty chatter). There is nothing in the text that suggests that God specifically purposed as a matter between him and the king to take Hezekiah’s life! The man was dying of what we’re inclined to call “natural causes” and God honours him with the announcement that he will indeed die.

“Natural causes” here are nothing more than the outworking of God’s original curse in Genesis 3 which culminated in death so we’re not to think of “natural causes” as something other than the will of God. For convenience sake “Natural causes” are what we might call the “general” will of God. God has purposed illness and death for humans but how he works it out doesn’t require an individual decision for every individual. If you’re a human you have been appointed to die (Hebrews 9:27 and Genesis 3:19) but not necessarily because God made a specific judgment about you—you die because he has made a general judgment that covers the human family.

[Just the same, this is the decisive will of God. The death of any human comes under the heading of God's Genesis 3 decision. God doesn't awake each morning, so to speak, and decide how many he will kill today.]

My guess is that Hezekiah was dying because he was a member of the human family that is under God's redemptive curse rather than that God specifically determined that Hezekiah die for some individually determined reason. Hezekiah pleads for an extension and God chooses to offset the death sentence the king was under.

It's important, then, I'm certain, to differentiate between the various aspects of God's will and the levels in which they function in relation to us.

It remains true, however, that God may choose specifically to destroy a man or a nation in light of his/its moral behaviour and change his plan if the man or nation changes in moral behaviour. If moral behaviour can change God's specific purpose we can be sure that prayer may do the same.

But it seems clear in the case of Hezekiah (though the details are difficult to trace) that God had more than the Judean king's welfare in mind. Hezekiah purposed to be God's helper (though flawed) by continuing to live to God's glory and God took that into account in the face of Assyria and the wider purposes of redemptive history. He may well have wanted Hezekiah to publicly renew his commitment to him and the nation's place in salvation history. There is more in this text than a man asking God for help and getting it and there's more in this text than a man's prayer changing God's specific purpose.

It Doesn't Matter (2)

We're not to read God promises to us in light of our own agendas; they're to be read in light of his agenda. We're not to read them thinking, "This is what I'd like him to mean"; we're to read them thinking, "Let's see what he means."

"I tell you, then, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24, NEB)

"Whatever you pray for in faith you will receive" (Matthew 21:8, NEB)

"Anything you ask in my name I will do" (John 14:13, NEB)

“If two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father” (Matthew 18:19)

Those texts are to be understood within the parameters of God’s kingdom purposes (compare Matthew 6:33). He means to bring the saved of all the ages to glorious, deathless, joy-filled lives of righteousness and the assurance that that is so is Jesus Christ who has personally already experienced triumph over sin and death and all that goes with them.

Until he returns he has chosen (elected) out of the earth by his gospel a New Covenant people, the Church, which is his body to be a community/nation of witness of God’s saving and redeeming purpose. That holy people is assured that whatever it needs it can have it for God does not send it on a mission without equipping it (compare Ephesians 4:7-16). The texts of prayer above aren’t spoken outside God’s agenda and they are to be understood in reference to equipping the People of God as servants of that agenda.

That kind of speech is common in our daily lives only we don’t notice it. A mother to a child in an ice-cream shop. “You can have anything you want!” In this setting “anything” doesn’t mean anything.

A boss to an employee in a work setting about an important project. “I want you to see that this is done!” The junior says. “Yes, but I’ll need a number of things.” The boss says, “Anything you think you need, you’ve got it!” In this setting “anything” doesn’t mean anything and it certainly doesn’t mean the boss’s job.

A woman to her friend in serious financial need. “I’ll do anything to help you get free from this.” In this setting “anything” doesn’t mean anything and it certainly doesn’t mean bank-robbery.

If you don’t like the illustrations make up your own; life is filled with this kind of speech and this kind of commitment.

God doesn’t make a commitment that would put us on the throne. He can’t surrender his sovereignty and it’s only silliness or unfathomed desperation that would think otherwise. “Your wish is my command!” God can’t make that kind of promise and still remain Lord of All. A commitment like that turns him into a divine warehouse, a heavenly message boy, a deified genie, a God at our disposal.

Is God less than God because he can't surrender his universal sovereignty? He would be less than the God the Bible describes if he thought that giving every Christian a blank cheque would be a good idea!

Even humans know better than to let their little children have anything they want!

So where does that leave us? Do the texts mean nothing? Are we not to ask God about personal needs? No, the texts do not mean nothing but they are not to be turned into a blank cheque for that only leads to disappointment and resentment when the pray-er does not get the good thing they pray for.

And we're certainly to bring our personal requests before God for while good parents don't undertake to fulfil every desire of the child they often give the child what it asks. In the meantime those parents provide day in and day out the things the child must have (from them) to keep it alive and well. A refusal of some specific request doesn't blot out the ceaseless provision.

There are some things that good parents can't give their child—not if they care for the child and this has nothing to do with “power”. To provide what is requested might be easy enough as far as the ability to do it but if the parents know it runs contrary to the child's good then they can't do it and keep faith with themselves and the child.

But what if what an individual is asking for something reasonable and good? (To be continued, God enabling.)

It Doesn't Matter, God's no Genie

“I tell you, then, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24, NEB)

“Whatever you pray for in faith you will receive” (Matthew 21:22, NEB)

“Anything you ask in my name I will do” (John 14:13, NEB)

“If two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father” (Matthew 18:19)

Do these texts offer a blank cheque signed by Jesus?

If they offer a blank cheque, do they offer it only to a few Christians or to every Christian; only to you or to everyone?

If God has given you a blank cheque he has given a blank cheque to the person sitting next to you or on the other side of the room; to people you like and to people who don't like you, to those you agree with on most things and to those you can never agree with on anything.

If we take the above texts literally and absolutely and every Christian got a blank cheque they'd have power over the weather, over life and death and every other conceivable thing. God wouldn't rule the world; we would!

At voting time, Harry wants Wilbur Wilburson for the country's leader and Wilma wants Margaret Margetson. (On the other hand, why wouldn't we ask for leadership for ourselves as James and John did?) Joe wants a sunny day for the picnic or a funeral and Harriet wants rain for their crops. Wilson wants the immediate death of a present tyrant who's abusing his wife (Wilson's daughter) and she wants his immediate salvation. Elizabeth wants her aged mother to rise from her terminal bed and the weary mother wants to go on home to Jesus.

To take the texts above literally and absolutely would mean the abolition of death because lovers would not only pray for the recovery of their beloved who are ill, they'd pray for the resurrection of their beloved dead (didn't Mary and Martha?). Would they pray only for the cure of their aged parents and want them to struggle on in feebleness and ill-health—would they not pray for unbroken fullness of health as well? And, of course, they'd pray for their own unbroken health.

There'd be no lost people in the world. Two of us would pray for the salvation of every person in the world in every generation—without exception and it would come true! And why would we wish to wait for their salvation—immediate and full salvation is what we'd ask for. Why stop there? Ask for the immediate and utter obliteration of sin in the world and it's done!

But why should any of that be a problem: God can do anything!

That's not true!

Even it were true that God can do "anything" the very idea that he would want to do "anything" might be worse than untrue—that he would want to do some things that we'd want him to do might be a flaw in his character.

Listen: it doesn't matter that the texts say what they say. To so understand such texts that it turns God into our divine Genie who's there to say, "Your wish is my command" and turn the world into chaos is not to take the texts seriously at all.

The texts must be listened to in light of who God is and what he purposes. (To be continued, God enabling.)

Prayer "in the Spirit"

What does it mean to "pray in the Spirit"? Christians are called to do various things "in" the Spirit. The Greek preposition *en* usually means either "in" or "by" and it's only by looking closely at the context we can determine which rendering is best. But our grasp of the context doesn't always help us sufficiently so serious students of scripture remind us that a given text could equally be translated "in the Spirit" or "by the Spirit". While the meaning of these two prepositions can overlap they can and sometimes do send us in two distinct directions. Then, again, there are times when there is no preposition, just a simple dative case (as in *pneumati*) but the question remains whether we should render it "in" or "by".

Occasionally there is a dispute whether the Greek word *pneuma* in such a context is the human spirit or the Holy Spirit but most of the time there's agreement that the Holy Spirit is in view. Certainly it appears to be the Holy Spirit that Paul has in mind in Ephesians 6:18. Paul speaks of people "beginning" their life with God in Christ in/by the Spirit (Galatians 3:3) "walking" (living, says NIV) in/by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16) and "living" in/by the Spirit in 5:25. Christians, Jews and Gentiles in context, access the Father in/by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:18) are made into God's dwelling place in/by the Spirit (2:22). The Colossians "love" in/by the Spirit (1:8) and so forth.

When Paul says we live or love or walk (behave or conduct ourselves) in/by the Spirit what does he mean? Would it be the same if he said we live or love or walk in/by the Father? Would it be the same if he said we live or love or walk in/by the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, yes and no. We're certainly told that it's in/by Christ that we live and have access to God; but while the same work is accomplished by the triune God working in concert it's clear that there are specific roles maintained by the Father, Son and Spirit (the "economic" Trinity as it's sometimes called).

Yes, but what does it mean to do something "in/by" the Spirit? For us the word "by" is clear enough. We'd immediately think of the Spirit enabling or empowering us so that if Paul says, "we live by the Spirit" we can easily understand him to mean that the Spirit empowers us; that it's because of what the Spirit does that we are able to live. We could just as easily understand him to mean we live by (the teaching, guidance or in accordance with) the Spirit. We might think of God's statement to Israel that humans live "by every word that comes from God". If Paul says we live "in" the Spirit we find that a little harder to grasp but the dative of sphere is common enough to us. There are people who live "in" fear and there are those who live "in" faith. This locates them in a particular realm or setting. Obviously they aren't physically located "in" faith or fear the way people sleep "in" a room; faith or fear is the boundary within which they live. So it is with those who live or walk or pray "in (the) Spirit". The Spirit, so to speak, is the realm in which they move, the atmosphere in which they breathe, the parameter within which they think or shape their prayers or behaviour.

So what does it mean to "pray in the Spirit"? It means to allow the Spirit to be the shaper of our prayers, the guide and teacher on the things for which we should pray and the purifier of our motives in praying such prayers. It means we won't pray for something that is contrary to what the Holy Spirit aims for or nurtures.

But what does that mean? Does he mean we are to say nothing until the Spirit puts the specific words and subjects into our minds; as if he literally whispered into our minds something like, "Here's what you are to pray for, here is how you will word the prayer and here is the motive from which you should pray it"?

I'm sure that's not what Paul has in mind. He seems to think the Christians have more personal input into the matter than that. He isn't asking the Holy Spirit to do the praying he calls on the Christians to do the praying. Yes, but if the Spirit shapes and enables us to pray what do we have to do with it? Look, we need to work with scripture and life and stop thinking as if lives were like already played chess games and that we're mindless pawns or a limp rag flopping in the wind. This section in Ephesians is a call to war! Certainly it is God that enables, protects and sustains us but we are up to our necks in the battle, we are supposed to exert ourselves, we are to engage the enemy. Paul says "pray!" He tells them to pray not in terms of "the flesh" (in

selfishness, self-reliance or with personal agendas) but in terms of the Spirit. We are to think of who and what he is, who and what he stands for, what his agenda and ultimate purposes are and within those parameters—pray!

He calls them to pray for him and he calls them to pray all the time for all the saints. And how, by the grace of the Spirit, are we to get to know the Spirit? Well, whatever else we are to do we must in community with the saints wield the Spirit's sword, wear the gospel on our feet and carry the shield of faith and pay attention to the armor he speaks of. Experience of the Spirit as we know him in and through Jesus Christ (for he is the Spirit of Christ!) will purify our conceptions of him and more and more we'll pray "in the Spirit". This section is martial and prayer is part of the equipment of our warfare!

Prayer and God's silence

I don't want to know all the answers—I only want some understanding on numerous issues that perplex me about prayer. I don't want to fully understand every issue generated by every question—I only want to have an understanding of the direction I should be going as I think about them. I don't want to substitute answers to my questions for actual praying—I couldn't keep from praying if I were ordered to!

[It irritates me more than a little when people speak to people like me who are filled with questions and treat us as if we thought "knowledge" was a substitute for living; as if we were more interested in "head" knowledge than "heart" knowledge. I don't think that to seek understanding is one form of ducking out of real living.

While I don't think "knowledge" is everything, I've no reason to believe that God gets a kick out of how we exult in our ignorance (if and when we do that). There's nothing particularly pious about that airy dismissal of serious reflection on central issues—"Oh questions like that don't bother me. I just trust the Lord." Yes, I can see that trusting is right and makes sense but then some of us are bothered by such questions even though we do trust the Lord. A pursuit of understanding could easily get out of hand but so can a mindset that's too willing to remain ignorant. Maybe we should credit one another with the best motivation while we all trust the Lord completely.]

Jesus never tried to prove that prayer “works”. He took it for granted and prayed. He might never have thought about the matter (“Does prayer work?”)—that wouldn’t surprise me in the least. When we wonder if prayer “works” it’s almost always in the context of asking “for” things; that is, when we’re making requests. Like, “Give us this day our daily bread” or, “Heal my very sick child” or, “Please bring Harold back home to us” or, “Please keep our marriage from falling apart.” This is legitimate prayer material, of course, and it’d be tragic if we couldn’t make our requests known to God. There’s no reason for us to apologize for doing it (Philippians 4:6) even though later in life we might apologize to God for some of the things we requested.

Prayer “works” as surely as a friend enjoying conversation with his friend “works”. In what way does it “work”? Well, it enriches the friendship, deepens our sense of the “personal” nature of God (you can’t pray to a “force” or a “process”) and his interest in our lives and all this has “social” consequences for the worshiper since it cultivates intimacy with God and inner strength and stability. It generates likeness to God (friends become like their friends) and that in turns means everyone around us will benefit.

Yes, but isn’t prayer all one-sided? We do all the talking and God says nothing! I can see how people can come to feel that way—how difficult can it be to understand that? I notice, however, that if we get some of the “big things” we ask for—cure from some debilitating disease, a saved marriage, a redeemed child, a serious financial rescue, and the like—then we don’t think God has been speechless. In situations like that we think he has spoken loud and clear. The truth is, even if this is a crass way to put it, I don’t think we care much if we never heard the “voice” of God so long as we know he listens and responds to our requests, especially at critical moments and in major things.

Then again, while it’s true we pray audibly I would say that my speaking to God is almost always silent though conscious. If my talking with God can take place without a sound maybe God speaking to me can occur without a sound.

It’s commonplace for us to say that God “speaks” to us in scripture and we’re content with that truth. We don’t constantly feel the need to have God speak to us audibly though there are times when we’d like that (we assume the conversation would always be pleasant, don’t you know). We’d have a conversation with God and no doubt we’d fill it with the questions of the

day, the things people argue about but I would guess that the main thing we'd gain by a God who speaks to us audibly is that we'd "know" he is truly there, he's real and he truly does have an interest in us. I don't think any of the above is strange and I'm certain that if I knew I could bear to have him speak audibly to me—that what he chooses to say to me are pleasant words rather than words of judgment about how I am living out my life before him—I know I would want that.

If he ever chooses to do that I'll be more than happy but in the meantime I confess that I'm happy for him to speak to me in scripture and life, as he now does. It's his chosen way to communicate at present and while there is much I don't understand in what he has said and while I'm sure he hasn't said anything about some of my specific questions [he's not a divine almanac or the repository of information for Trivial Pursuit] I'm certain of his central purpose in his communicating with me (as with countless others). But how he speaks to us is less important than what he says when he does speak in his own chosen way.

He has spoken finally to us in and as Jesus Christ and that colours our understanding of all that he has said, is saying or will say in the future.

Prayer for Forgiveness

We apologize Lord for the uncleanness we've harboured and even nurtured as well as the overt acts of wickedness we've engaged in.

We apologize for our bitterness and smugness, for our curled lips and the contempt with which we've received strugglers against sin. A contempt we've shamefully nurtured and even justified. We repent of our arrogance; an arrogance that led us to think we're wise enough to know the whole story, wise enough to lump all sinners together, "knowing" there was no genuineness in the repentance of any of them. Taking their frequent moral losses as proof of their unrepentant heart rather than construing them as proof that they're fighting an awful battle for spiritual survival. We apologize Lord because you pour out the warmth of your grace on us even while in our spite we often withhold our sunshine from those who shiver in the dark of their sin, lonely and cold and despairing.

We repent for keeping our rain from falling on hot fevered souls who burn with shame—keeping it from them because they aren't quite to our liking and giving it, when we do, only to

those who grovel in our presence or ceaselessly carry themselves as if they are second class citizens.

We apologize for our satisfaction with the shallowness and selectivity of our love to others when yours is fathomless and universal.

We apologize that our cheerful commitment to love and righteousness is so fitful when yours is changeless and for the grudging way we offer forgiveness, the cool way we offer fellowship, the stiff way we greet the returned or returning prodigal when you greet all of us with such rejoicing and generosity.

We apologize for the self-satisfaction and self-congratulation we feel when we look in the mirror and we repent that we've narrowed your demand on our lives to the "manageable proportions" of loving those who love us which hides the fact that we fail by justifying our refusal to extend love to enemies and to bless those that curse us and to do good to those that spitefully use us and all while we congratulate ourselves on our moral maturity.

Forgive us for comparing ourselves too favourably with others and refusing to compare ourselves with Christ who shows us all to be shabby at best.

Forgive us for taking the credit when it happens to be true that we are more devoted than some others. Forgive us for not taking seriously your question: "Who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Forgive us when we impatiently dismiss the crushing disadvantages of those whose moral struggle shows less success than ours even while their struggle is a nobler and braver struggle than our own.

Prayer is a confession

Prayer often makes a request for help. But prayer is bigger than bringing our "want lists" before God as if he were a supermarket or the divine warehouse filled with goodies we can choose from. Prayer is a confession that we're not up to the job of facing the demands of existence, we're not able to carry alone the burden of the human condition, especially in a fallen world.

Prayer brings to God our crises, anguish and profoundly felt needs and says to him, "These are beyond our power to cure or to get or to fix."

Prayer is not the same as taking our loved one to the doctor or the surgeon. We go to them saying, "Here is a physical condition, please use your medicine and skill to fix it." When we bring cancers, failing kidneys, twisted bodies, sightless eyes and demented parents to God we are taking these things more seriously. We are not denying the place of the medical men and women; we're not making less of the conditions, we're making more of them. We're not taking them less seriously we're taking them more seriously. When we take them to the medical people we're connecting the conditions with bones and enzymes, blood supply and bacteria, tissue and neural circuitry. When we take them to God we connect the conditions with a cosmic rebellion, a fallen humanity, a redeeming work of God that comes to focus in the cross of Someone of whom it is said that "he carried our sicknesses and bore our diseases."

We bring our diseased bodies to the doctors asking for what we can't always have. When we bring them to God sometimes he gives us healing through the doctors and sometimes not; but always, when we bring ourselves or others to God in prayer, we have come at his bidding for it is God that has drawn us into his presence and as soon as we have entered we have given the hurt and loss and fear the seriousness it deserves. Whatever happens after that at least we have seen disease and death for what they ultimately are—something that God alone can work with. That confession is never a mistake.

The bar burned down

I've just recently been told (though I'm not sure it's to be taken as historical fact) that in a small mid-western conservative town in the USA, a newcomer decided to build a bar/tavern. A local church started a campaign to block the opening with petitions and prayers. The petitions failed, however, and so did the prayers and the work progressed right up to the week before opening; that's when lightning struck the bar and burned it to the ground.

The church folks were all smiles ("Prayer works!" they told each other, "even if it takes a bit longer than expected!"). They congratulated one another until the bar owner sued the church on the grounds that it was ultimately responsible for the destruction of his property.

The church hired a lawyer and denied they had anything to do with the destruction of the building.

The judge looked over the paperwork at the hearing and commented, "I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but as it appears from the paperwork, we have a bar owner that believes in the power of prayer and an entire church congregation that doesn't!"

Now there's something about that little story that leaves me uneasy but I can't quite put my finger on it.

Which automobile should I buy?

Underneath and shaping many of our concepts about prayer is the notion that there is a “will of God” laid out for how we actually live our daily lives. It’s as though God has a chart on his wall that has an exhaustive list of things outlining how our lives are to proceed. This notion is untrue.

There is the non-negotiable “will of God” that is determined by his nature and character [it is not his will to lie or be faithless, for example].

There is the “contingent” will of God that is nevertheless in accordance with his non-negotiable will. [He freely wills to create and would be just as holy and wise if he had chosen not to create; he freely wills to allow us to sin/obey and in light of our response and how he assesses that response, he responds within the parameters of his overarching purpose—compare Jeremiah 18:1-12.]

There is one aspect of the contingent will of God that is nevertheless in accordance with his non-negotiable will. It is that he freely wills to have no will [no specific path laid out that must be followed; no exhaustive list of decisions he has made for us ahead of time]. He “doesn’t care” which route we take in specific execution of an attempt to honour him in our daily living and with our lives as a whole. Of course what violates an explicit expression of his will for us is not part of that notion. [We're not to think that in choosing to have no explicit will in these specific issues that God has (as some put it) limited his sovereignty. No, his choice to do that is an expression of his sovereignty; it's his sovereignty in action.]

In this area all kinds of paths are open to us and none are determined by God in the sense that non-negotiable expressions of his will are.

Should I take a job in Pittsburgh? Should I marry or remain single, should I marry Liz or Jennifer [presuming either would have me], buy a house or rent, have children or not, bring my elderly mother to my house or give her over to the expertise of a caring nursing home, buy stocks in company X, promote the building of a church building, pursue a medical degree in college or major in law?

There is nothing in scripture to suggest that God has these things mapped out for individuals. It's clear that when he so wills he makes a specific expression of his will known concerning individuals [Jeremiah, Paul and so forth]. It's also clear that he gifts people [via all the interpersonal relationship realities he has structured for human life] with this gift or that but he gives them input into how that is worked out and he gives them the help of many others. [Many a man thought God called him to be a preacher when everyone else was sure he was kidding himself. The voice of the church [and sometimes even non-church people] is one strand of the "voice" of God in the matter. We're too easily duped by our desires and current interests and current difficulties so we should not be too quick to trust our agendas without clear witness.]

Imagine this. A man comes to God asking him about his taking a job in San Oblique and he wants to know if it is the will of God. God wants to know why he's considering such a thing. The guy says it would be extra money to give to good works. God thinks that's a fine thing. The man admits it has the downside because it would mean he'd be away from the family more. God sees what he means and says, hmmm. But on the other hand there's a little church near there that could use him from time to time while he's there and he thinks that's a good thing. So does God. But it might not work out too well and the family might experience financial burdens as well. God thinks that's a serious consideration and wishes the man well.

A bit disappointed with divine well-wishing the man asks, "So you're not going to help me with this then?" God says, "I am helping you and have been helping you long before you prayed about this matter. Who do you think enables you to weigh the pros and cons and makes you sensitive to my purpose and the lives of others? I've been shaping you and enriching your heart and mind for years to help you work with such decisions." But the man says he doesn't want to

go against God's will in the matter and God tells him, "That assumes I have 'a will' in the matter; something you have no reason to believe. Relax!"

It was at this point that the man tells God he doesn't want to make a costly blunder that might work out really bad.

"Oh," says God, "is that what this is about? You want me to keep you from getting hurt?" The man admits he did have that in mind; he and his family. God says, "I thought you came to make sure that you wouldn't be violating my will for your life, to make sure that what you were planning would honour and please me." The man admits he wants to please God but that in coming he was particularly asking for protection against what might be a painful mistake. God said:

"I'm not much into keeping people from ever getting hurt or making judgment mistakes. I'm not much into giving people infallible guidance in stocks and bonds and what is the best automobile to buy—I'm more into giving them a great heart and a love for me and for fellow-humans. Look this isn't a question of good and bad, honourable and dishonourable. It's a question of good, better and best. If it were about good and bad we wouldn't be having this conversation. Since it's not about what's good or bad or obviously stupid—which is another face of 'bad'—don't worry about it. I don't care which one you choose because you're doing it to please me and either way I'm content because you are wanting to please me so make your choice and work at it."

The man says, "So you never have anything to do with specific issues or give people a nudge in a given direction about matters such as I've raised?"

God says, "Oh I wouldn't say that. I reserve the right to make whatever moves I see fit to make. But you are missing my point. I'm always nudging people in the direction of good and wise decisions because I'm always enriching their minds and purifying their desires. I don't ceaselessly indicate what people should decide on but I do ceaselessly shape them so that they can make better, wiser and less selfish decisions that please me, bless others and themselves. But I don't do it by waving a magic wand or pulling strings that I've attached to them. I don't do puppetry or determinism and I'm no Genie of the lamp."

The still somewhat disappointed man said, "But I hear people saying all the time that you made your will known to them on specific issues" and God said, "Yes, I hear a lot of that myself but don't believe everything you hear."

"Yes, but what about Gideon's fleece?" the man wanted to know. "Oh, yes, that. You think I approved of what he did?" God wanted to know. "Have you considered I might have been tolerating his faith-less response?" He raised the issue of apostles casting lots to replace Judas and God asked him if he took that event as normative. God asked him if that was what the NT church normally did or was Acts 6 not the way such things were normally done throughout the entire Bible. The man rather liked Gideon's approach and God said he didn't care much for people giving him ultimatums whether they were Gideon or not. The man said people often pray saying, "Here's what I am planning to do, Lord, but if you don't want me to do it put a stop to it." God said he heard that a lot but wondered why people would think it pleased him that they were forcing his hand. He said it was as if they said, "I'm going to do this on Friday so you'll need to veto it before then or I'm taking it that you approve of my purpose." He said, "I'm the sovereign God and won't be boxed in by human agendas or timetables. People need to have a little modesty."