

“Pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Last week we began a discussion on prayer, seeking to answer from a Bible perspective the following questions:

1. What is prayer?
2. Why do we pray?
3. To whom do we pray?
4. When should we pray?
5. How should our prayers be framed?

Today we will undertake to answer our remaining questions:

6. Is there a minimum prayer?
7. With what spirit should we pray?
8. What is it proper to pray (or not pray) for?

I want very quickly to remind everyone of the importance of prayer, that these are not just idle words we speak in some rote and repetitious manner, but they are the petitions which we bring before The King of Kings. Our prayers are a matter of service and worship of The King, and must be considered in that light, undertaken with gravity, sincerity, fervency and faith, if we are to approach the throne of grace with any expectation that these prayers will be heard and answered in the ways we seek. Our prayers are not some kind of show piece or a chit to be traded for favors.

So on to our questions.

Is there some minimum or maximum prayer?

To be simple about this – no. Our prayers are intended to do many things – express thanks, proclaim praise, submit ourselves to God, request simple things, request complex things, seek His vengeance, seek deliverance, etc., and the idea that there is structurally some minimum prayer is not found in Scripture. There are examples of shorter and longer prayers throughout the Bible, and there is no direction given to us that dictates a specific minimum or maximum length or a minimum amount of content. Proper prayers come from the heart, and the placing of too many constraints around them makes it difficult to be effectual. The placing of strict rules leads to rote repetition as well.

In our public prayers as a Body, it is always a good idea to make sure they are framed remembering they are for the Body, not private, and presented as the public sacrifice to our King, but that doesn't mean they have to take specific forms or contain more or less content.

I am adamant about this, that our prayer should never approach anything that feels rote or practiced or routine. Prayer should be largely spontaneous, void of repetition

and full of feeling. How can a prayer be fervent if it is somehow restricted by rules or boundaries, including that of size or word count? Fervency is about passion, intensity, and focus. If you're focusing on fitting into a certain number of words that all falls by the wayside. The construction of a prayer is an intensely personal thing, and if it isn't for you, I submit that you might be doing something wrong.

No one can construct or write prayers for you, and the idea that you should poach or base your prayers on anything other than what is in the Scripture is dangerous. The idea the Episcopal church promotes with their Book of Common Prayer, or some of the prayer coaching you see in the religion section at Barnes and Noble or on the web are so not Biblical it is amazing to see that they exist in such number.

Prayer must be fashioned from our faith. Consider this

“And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” (Mark 11:22-26)

Notice how Christ ties three elements of faith together. First, that by faith anything can be done, that prayer is a request made out of faith, and in praying we must be willing and able to forgive. Forgiveness is in itself an act of faith, and we would do well to fill our prayers with forgiveness rather than wrath.

Prayer is inclusive of our groanings of spirit and the yearnings of our hearts.

“Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee.” (Psalms 38:9)

“Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.” (John 11:38)

The Lord doesn't need words to come from our mouths to know what we feel and how we are beseeching Him. “Groanings” doesn't mean in just a negative or despairing sense, it also means that exultation of joy you sometimes feel at a great victory or seeing His words flow across a TV screen or knowing that millions of people have seen a sign or heard our message. God searches our hearts and knows every fragment of every thought and emotion we ever feel. He knows what we're petitioning Him for before the words are fully formed in our heads, much less before they are formed into sound.

What I'm saying here is that a prayer can be as simple as an emotional surge if directed at God in faith. Our petitions, though brought before The King, don't have to be put on 80 weight parchment, written with a quill pen plucked off a rare swan, in ink with gold flecks in it, wrapped in a silk bow. They must be framed in a spirit of humility and faith, but God is expecting our prayers, He desires to hear our prayers, and is fully capable of interpreting them even when we don't articulate them with eloquence or even complete sentences or words for that matter. That persuades me that worrying about form and flow is not relevant, but focusing more on the spirit and what we are praying for is.

With what spirit should we pray?

This is one of the most important questions we must address. You can deliver the most eloquent and Scripturally accurate prayer of all human history, and if your heart isn't in the proper place, addressing the Lord in the proper spirit, it will be so much wasted time, energy and air.

I think this is such a critical issue for us in our situation at this hour. It is difficult for me to articulate the importance of this, frankly. We are some of the most globally scrutinized, vilified, mocked, attacked, and blood-sought than maybe any of God's people before us. The hateful way we are attacked from absolutely every part of the globe, makes conditions ripe for us to frame up prayers of constant destruction, vengeance and crying out for the wielding of God's sword against all mankind; it makes it easy to justify ignoring some simple Scriptural concepts in favor of venting our spleens to God all the time about how mistreated we are.

Crying out to God for deliverance is more than acceptable, and that's not what I'm talking about here. It is a difficult thing that we are tasked with doing, contrary to all human instinct and so-called reason. We are told to pray for those who despitely use us as well as for the destruction of the enemies of God. Indeed, in our constant pleading for the return of Christ, are we not simultaneously asking for the destruction of the world as we know it? One cannot occur without the other, so by definition we are! And there is no sin in that. We know we are supposed to love our neighbors, and not just in some clinical, abstract, theoretical way. It is not sufficient to say we stand with signs on the streets and therefore love them. If you don't actually love and care about the generation we walk amongst and genuinely seek to warn them to flee, where is your love? We've talked about this before, and bringing these prayers into that context highlights the difficulty but the necessity of the duty. You may be thinking "We have to bring these smelly, obnoxious, hateful, mean, arrogant, sinful, perverse, lude, lascivious, did I mention smelly people into our most personal and closed moments with God? Is there no place these beasts cannot violate?"

Yes, and put away that thinking. We must include them in our prayers, and again not in just some clinical or hound dog "well, geez, if I have to" sort of way. This frames at

least part of the spirit with which we must address ourselves when we pray. Our prayers are a submission to God, and He has told us to love our enemies. Therefore we must bend ourselves to that declaration and come with a spirit of submission and humility, genuinely believing we have no right to the favors we are regularly presented with.

One of the best passages I think you can reference to address this emotionally difficult thing to do comes from Jeremiah.

“As for me, I have not hastened from being a pastor to follow thee: neither have I desired the woeful day; thou knowest: that which came out of my lips was right before thee. Be not a terror unto me: thou art my hope in the day of evil. Let them be confounded that persecute me, but let not me be confounded: let them be dismayed, but let not me be dismayed: bring upon them the day of evil, and destroy them with double destruction.” (Jeremiah 17:16-18)

Here you have Jeremiah making a prayer which I believe must be very similar to our own, and if it is not, we would do well to model our mindset after his. He hasn't “desired the woeful day” – that is, in his heart, he has not sought out the destruction of Judah out of vengeance, hatred, or malice. He calls upon the Lord to testify on his behalf to that fact, as it were. Yet here he is praying for them to be destroyed all the same.

Why is that?

Because he is praying for the righteousness of God to prevail. Look at verses 1 and 2 of that same chapter

“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars; Whilst their children remember their altars and their groves by the green trees upon the high hills.” (Jeremiah 17:1-2)

How can the God that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah be righteous and just if when He sees a nation with sins so grievous they are written with a pen of iron upon their hearts He just sits idly by and takes no notice? I say to you that He cannot. If He does not fulfill the promises which He has made to destroy those who will not keep His ways, then there was no justice in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is the very embodiment of “thy will be done”. It is an acknowledgement that His revealed will is to destroy the wicked utterly, but that He has not revealed to us by any special sign or ability we have to identify who the righteous are, and we must not presume. Those who are our enemies today could be our friends tomorrow, just as those who are our friends may become our enemies with the next sunrise.

There is no contradiction or paradox here in praying for God's mercy upon those whom He will have mercy and praying for the destruction of those upon whom He will not. There is no inherent malice, hatred, or callousness; I say it is not inherently mean-spirited or hateful. We all know that it CAN be all of those things and more, but that comes from a foul spirit and an incorrect perspective, not from the act itself. It becomes contradictory and hypocritical to pray for these two things when your heart is in the wrong place and you are trying to wield God's power as though it were your own weapon. When we seek the justice and righteous judgments of God according to His promises, from a perspective of His glorification, they are right and proper prayers. If you're approaching the destruction of the wicked from some gleeful, spiteful place, then you are in a bad spot, and I dare say that God will not hear that prayer. And don't give me Psalm 58:10 here. That verse isn't talking about the here and now, it is talking about the final judgement, where there is no more uncertainty on these matters. If it doesn't mean that, I better start seeing some people with bloody feet. In our current position, we have a responsibility to approach the mercy seat seeking mercy and its bounty. Praying for both His mercy and His judgment in a spirit of submission and humility is consistent with Scriptural mandates and the overall spirit we should aspire to. I can't tell you precisely how to word those prayers or the "right" phrases to use.

What I can tell you is that the spirit you approach prayer is critical. Do you submit to the commandments of our Lord and love your enemies in truth? Do you see yourself and genuinely believe that if mercy can be given to you, then why not anyone else? Those are good starting points when you think on prayer. If you don't grasp those elements of the spirit, you will find it hard to pray for those who spitefully use you. If you walk around with a chip on your shoulder about how abused you are, you won't be able to seek mercy for anyone but yourself. If you approach the mercy seat in meekness with humility and reverence, your prayers will be better aligned to God.

What is it proper to pray for?

There are many things laid out in scripture that are appropriate to frame up in our prayers. This is not an exhaustive list, and I don't intend to ever try and present such a list. I am increasingly of the mind that if we are praying in sacrifice and seeking the glorification of God in this worship, there is nothing we could pray for that isn't proper. I will tackle a few of the things that are specifically called out and try to address them.

The men of the world

"I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Timothy 2:1)

Do not be careless in this prayer. I do not think it scripturally sound to pray for the deliverance of all mankind from the righteous judgment and destruction we are all deserving of. Put another way, I believe it is a sin to pray for the general salvation of

all mankind. And let's be crystal clear – that isn't what this verse says despite what the majority of preachers today will tell you.

The revealed will of God is plainly set before us in His word that not all mankind will be saved from destruction, and if He has revealed a thing will not be done, it is not our place to bring petitions before Him to undo that thing. It is sinful for us to presume upon His secret will under the pretense of mercy, love, kindness, charity, etc. It is a secret will so leave it be. I believe that there are some things so clear-cut that they are outside our bounds of prayer. God has clearly laid out that the majority of mankind will perish righteously and justly and we have no business asking for the undoing of that, since that plainly argues against it being righteous, just and holy, and places our judgment before His.

The idea of all men in this verse is all kinds of men, not every individual alive on the earth with you. Think of it like this, that if God will have mercy on you, why wouldn't He have mercy on anyone? Who isn't more deserving of His mercy than me? This is fundamentally about temporal matters that enable us to live peaceably with the men of the earth. Paul is teaching us through his exhortation to Timothy that we aren't only to pray for the members of the church or our family members, but there is to be place in our prayers for all men, for their peace and well-being including that His mercy be showered upon those that are His. Jesus explicitly says

"...I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine."
(John 17:9)

And so there is our example. We don't know who is or is not His in the way Jesus did, so we pray that whatever type of men they are, that His mercy would be known to them and their lives blessed. And so then it is utterly appropriate and necessary to seek peace for these men in our prayers, not knowing who is His, but also as an ultimate expression of David's argument

"I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war." (Psalms 120:7)

If we are truly for peace, should we not pray for it? Is that not an ultimate expression of our being for peace, this praying for it? I believe we have to include these things in our prayers, but I will say this again – I am not inciting you to a structure or a checklist in your prayers. This is about the spirit of the matter. This is about actually loving all men and actually being for peace and truly seeking God's mercy and for His will to be done in all things and to be content with it all. I'll be honest here, I'm not completely certain what the balance between praying for God's righteous judgment on a rebellious nation and praying for them to have peace is. At the same time, I don't believe there is a necessity of what you or I might perceive as balance. I believe that if we submit ourselves to God properly in this matter, then the Spirit will be put to work to help us with these things, and it will be a comfortable and easy thing for us each individually to

see and perform this necessary duty. This doesn't have to be hard or complicated. It is our lack of submission to God that makes it so.

I am also not encouraging you to take up praying with these people we walk amongst. There is a stark difference between you privately praying for peace from some hardship a person you work with or interact with regularly is suffering under, and standing around in a "prayer circle" with them. This might be a sticky point for some of us, so let me try to provide practical application. I've worked with a person off and on for almost a dozen years who went through a period of great difficulty with his mother's health awhile back, to the point he thought she was going to die. It was affecting him very, very deeply, affecting his work, affecting his home life, and affecting how we interacted with one another. It was utterly consuming him, and I absolutely prayed for him to be given some relief from that burden in some way, if for no other reason than it was affecting my ability to properly serve my masters in the workplace, but equally because I felt a great deal of empathy toward him. I never have and never will tell him I prayed for his relief, as I don't want to encourage him in his sins or make him think that I approve of his wanton, Catholic idolatry. I also don't want to encourage the trading card mentality many so-called Christians in this nation have toward prayer. The prayers for him were from a spirit of mercy toward him and deliverance from his distracted nature in the workplace creating a burden for both of us that was avoidable. I see no issue with those prayers. I am not always moved to make such supplications, but there is nothing wrong with them, friends. You should never feel angst toward trying to help a fellow human being. How can we claim to be merciful if when our spirits are moved in mercy toward someone we do not seek some help from the source of mercy? It would be the same as seeing a blind man dying of thirst in front of a water spigot and not turning it on for him. Again stressing this point, I am not exhorting you or telling you it is an absolute requirement that you look at the people in your workplace or school setting and include them in your continual prayers but you should never question your ability to do so and keep peace with God.

Our masters in the earth

"For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." (1 Timothy 2:2)

This verse of course provides context and additional meat to verse 1, and shows that praying for the spiritual good, salvation, etc., of all mankind is not what Paul is instructing Timothy to do. If you approach the Bible with any sense of scholarly and studious investigation you obviously can't take that view, but obviously there are many who do and we would do well not to follow in their path.

This can be a difficult thing for us to do, for from some of the types of men listed here contrive the greatest persecutions and afflictions we endure under. It is easier to do when we keep this in mind, I think

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” (Romans 13:1)

Even the rulers we have over us that we can't stand were put there by God Almighty to fulfill some purpose. We may not see or understand that purpose, but that doesn't make the purpose irrelevant. We must bring our flesh into subjection in this matter just as any other, even if we don't understand God's ways at any given time.

Now, before you panic and wonder if I'm going to suggest that we start praying for the saving of <insert evil tyrant's name here> soul, pay close attention to what Paul says to Timothy, because that isn't even close to what he instructs

“...that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.”

In other words, help us to be peaceable with these men by making them be peaceable with us and not persecute us within an inch of our lives. That might seem somewhat selfish to some, but not to me. Our purpose in life is to serve our God and defend His Truth in the earth. If we don't have to turn aside to fight some battle in a court or with some law enforcement agency or some foreign power trying to prevent us from preaching to their citizenry, how much more preaching can we do? If we aren't having to fight a battle for our livelihood in the workplace because some impudent minion of Satan seeks to destroy us, how much more can we focus our energies on our task at hand?

Think of it this way, too – what was the primary reason in Scripture a person in power got their backside handed to them by God? Here's a hint:

“Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.” (1 Chronicles 16:22)

By praying for these souls to live peaceably with us, we are doing them a great service, both them individually and all those over whom they have control or influence. Just like when you pray for rain and that prayer is answered, it falls on the just and the unjust, the supplication we make for those in power over us has positive effects for all those around us. It's not just a selfish thing here, unless you address the prayer in that manner to God, and that of course won't have the effect you wish it to have and is a waste of your energy.

Avoidance of hardship

“And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.” (Mark 13:18)

There is no sin in seeking from our King pre-emptive (if you will) deliverance. Here Christ shows us that there will be great tribulation, and He instructs us to seek the mercy of God when we know we are walking into some dark and foreboding place, full of evil and the potential for danger. We are fully invited to bring these petitions in the hope of finding strength and the ability to patiently endure the trial in faith.

We know it is His revealed will that there will be tribulation, there will be hardship, there will be persecution, etc. You know the verses. But this is not, or perhaps more appropriately should not be a kicking against those pricks and rebelling against that Will. If brought in the right spirit, it will not be received as a kicking against the pricks but a right request for aid and succor from The King. This is, as Christ did in the garden, the proper reminding of God of His promise to provide us a way out of temptation and trial, and prayer is the key way that He has provided to us at all times to seek such deliverance as this.

This is the right way to walk into a situation we know will strike us with fear and draw courage and boldness. I ask, if we can cry unto Him from the battle because we put our trust in Him (1 Chronicles 5:20), how could we **not** be justified in calling out to Him when we believe we're walking into trouble?

Deliverance from illness or other bodily affliction

“In those days Hezekiah was sick to the death, and prayed unto the LORD: and he spake unto him, and he gave him a sign.” (2 Chronicles 32:24)

There is no element of selfishness or impropriety in bringing prayers to God on our own behalf. While making intercession for others is a great kindness and we should endeavor always to do so, our petitions must look to our own concerns and only our own concerns sometimes. Hezekiah had been brought dire news from Isaiah that he should set his house in order, because he was going to succumb to the illness he was stricken with. Now, you might ask, if God's revealed will to Hezekiah was that he should die of this illness, what business did he have asking for God to reverse that decision? And that would be a good question.

“Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the LORD, And said, Remember now, O LORD, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.” (Isaiah 38:2-3)

It was indeed God's revealed will that Hezekiah should die. But I believe that Hezekiah's prayer for himself and his begging for the mercy of God, asking Him to remember his service and faithfulness is of drastic difference than praying for a general reversal of His revealed will, especially when you have that will revealed in so many ways and in so many places in Scripture, as we do the general depravity and certain destruction of most of mankind. You will also note that we are not told Isaiah prayed for that to be undone. You have Hezekiah turning to the wall and begging God for mercy – this was between Hezekiah and God. When we are in straits and think He has turned His face from us and is turning His wrath upon us, I cannot find a way to argue against turning to Him in prayer and seeking deliverance. You will notice also that He simply asked God to remember his service.

It was not an unrighteous thing for God to remember his walk and give Hezekiah a reprieve from death. God has been longsuffering with mankind for eons, and to generally pray for the salvation of all mankind defies the justice and righteousness of their general destruction, and if He were to grant that prayer, it would make Him unrighteous.

Here in Hezekiah's prayer we have a wonderful example of humbling ourselves before God's mighty hand. Hezekiah didn't ask to be reprieved from death, he asked for God to remember how he has served Him. There is a strong element of submission in this prayer. Hezekiah, though not prepared to die, since he has as yet no son, and so the line of the Messiah would be cut off from him, doesn't ask the Lord to save him, he asks Him to remember his walk, so that when he is taken in death He is rewarded accordingly.

This is similar to Christ's prayer in the garden, which I offer up as the second example of praying for the opposite of the revealed will of God.

“And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”
(Matthew 26:39)

Christ here prays from the abyss of distress, the likes of which no man has ever or will ever see. He feels the entire weight of the law, every sin of every one of His people known and understood by Him, the horrific nature of His sacrifice laid out in front of Him in excruciating detail, with terrific anticipation. It is more than a human frame or mind could possibly bear, and yet he submits to it willingly. It is a well understood element of God's revealed will that the Messiah would come to bear the sins of His people, and here we have Christ, that Messiah, that Lamb, praying that if it were possible, let the cup of bitter and painful trial pass from Him. He is separated from God in this state, fully exposed to His wrath and judgment with no hope of relief **except** by bringing this petition to Him. There was no path known to Him for removal of that cup of bitterness, just as there was no path known to Abraham to remove that bitter cup of sacrificing Isaac. But like Abraham, He sought an alternative way that might not be known to Him, because as we see in the Mark account “all things are possible with thee” (14:36). It is as if He were asking, “is there some secret will which has been hidden from me in this flesh that might remove this abject suffering and anguish?” But in it all, He is submissive to the will of the Father – “not as I will, but as thou wilt”.

That is the absolute key that must be the focal point of our prayer. In all things submissive to The King to whom we bring the petition. Not as we will, since we are clueless subjects of the realm, not fit to rule the daily breakfast menu, much less declare what is right and just and holy in the universe! When we ask for these things that are in apparent opposition to the revealed will of God, it is not from a demanding position, but a subservient position of pleading. We must be circumspect in presenting

a petition that is contrary to the declared, revealed will of God, and I submit to you it is a thing that should only be done in private prayer – between you and God.

These examples we have are private. Hezekiah turned his head to the wall, that is the wall his bed sat against so that no one could see his tears and hear or interrupt his prayer to God. Christ separated Himself from Peter, James and John and issued a very private, personal prayer to God with His face to the ground, seeking privacy and solitude in His supplication. There was no bombastic declaration to God what should be done. There is no example in Scripture I can find of anyone praying publicly for the revealed will of God toward mankind to be undone. Even when Moses is interceding for the children of Israel when God has told him to step aside while He destroys them, Moses makes private intercession and cries to the Lord.

Acceptance by God and His grace

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

Not only are we allowed to seek God’s grace for ourselves, we are encouraged to do so with boldness. The grace of God is freely given to us, because the debt required by our sin has been paid with Christ’s sacrifice. There is no expectation that when we approach the throne we would experience anything other than the mercy of God because of this, which is why we are told to approach boldly.

You can approach boldly as well as with humility. Our boldness is sourced from the well of our faith and the fact that we have been told to approach boldly, not with some toe shuffling the sand ‘aw shucks’ approach to things, but with strength of faith and understanding that God’s grace is limitless, He is defined by His mercy and He will not withhold it from those who ask it of Him. He does not just splash it around willy nilly, as it is reserved for His people.

We have a constant need of this mercy, and if we cannot expect it and ask for it boldly – not with a sense of entitlement, but a boldness knowing it is promised – we have no hope of help. We are allowed to make these prayers – “help me Lord” not because we deserve help but because He has promised it to those who ask in faith.

Healing

Of course this is not just a self-serving ability or tool, this is according to the Scriptural mandate

“Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:” (James 5:14)

We are directed here to use prayer in the service of others, to reach out and seek it when our own personal pleas are seeming ineffectual, or more pointedly, while in the

thrall of some affliction we do not have the strength, acuity or closeness to The King to make the petition in some way we believe will be pleasing or well received. This is clearly an appropriate use of prayer.

I caution against this modern day “power of prayer” mentality and language, however. Prayer in and of itself has no power. When not effectual or fervent, it is empty words. When delivered from the pit of iniquity it is insulting and offensive to God, and an abomination. I encourage you to put away the pseudo-Christian “power of prayer” talk or thinking. It lacks gravity and proper spirit. As I said previously, prayer is a petition brought before The King, and it is entirely His prerogative to hear it, acknowledge it and regard it.

When James says that the “[T]he effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16) he isn’t saying that the prayer itself does anything, it is the combination of 1) the prayer, 2) being issued by a righteous man, 3) in an effectual manner, 4) with fervency. I will also point out that James clearly instructs us that these prayers for one another are not strictly about healing from physical ailment (though the calling for the elders is given in that specific use case). The context is not just about physical healing, but spiritual. The first part of verse 16 makes the point for us

“[C]onfess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16)

We have an ability and a duty to pray for one another in our faults and our infirmities and putting those prayers forward in faith is our responsibility toward one another. These are the prayers of the servants of God for their fellow servants.

Those who spitefully use us

“But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you;” (Matthew 5:44)

This is another of those things we are clearly instructed to do that is contrary to our natural depravity and the general thoughts of men. How can it be that we should pray for those who are seeking to imprison us, take our livelihoods, our children, our lives? How is it fair to command us to pray for the very people who are declared the enemies of the God whom we serve? How can we possibly do such a thing?

Simple. Stop thinking this way. If you want fairness, expect hell.

This is the hardest prayer I think we can pray, and it requires the utmost of submission to God, and I again point back to the spirit with which we approach the throne. If we are approaching the Lord with a spirit of selfishness and raw vengeance in our heart, these prayers for those who spitefully use us seem impossible, hard and contrary to our reality. If, however, we approach Him in humility with the proper sense of our own

worthlessness, remembering that we are no less deserving of the fires of hell than those who persecute us, and perhaps most importantly, if it were not for the ceaseless grace of the God to whom we pray, we would be counted amongst those who despitefully use God's people, these prayers become simple. The Lord specifically calls out those who despitefully use us, which I believe points us to a particular prayer that we are able to and directed to bring, and that is from the bowels of persecution. Praying for those who are despitefully using us while they are actively doing so is the most loving and kind thing we can do, but it also helps us maintain a proper mindset. This praying for those who hate us and seek our lives is the only way to properly set our hearts to completely submit to God and be thankful to Him for His deliverance however it may come. These prayers for those who despitefully use us is not to bless their wickedness, but to, if it be His will, deliver us by delivering them from their bondage to sin. It is our natural propensity to only ask God for His vengeance and to rain down on those who abuse us His fire from Heaven. If we frame our hearts to ask His mercy upon them, it allows us to submit to the hardships of persecution more readily, as we can then see more clearly our own nearness to the depraved and thereby be more thankful for God's grace.

There are many things to pray for, and I could speak for hours upon hours listing, dissecting and encouraging study upon all of them. I believe that prayer is one of our primary responsibilities, an activity as vital to our existence as breathing, and the 'what' of prayer is almost endless.

I know that the 'what' occupies much of our energy, as it is a thing that we feel a reverent need to get right, since if we don't know what to pray for it is difficult to be fervent in the prayer. While I sincerely want to encourage each and every one of you in that pursuit, and encourage you in the use of those energies, seeking to perfect your prayers, I also want to discourage you from becoming despondent and falling into a state of lockdown, as it were, praying for nothing because you feel as though you simply don't have any idea what it is appropriate for you to pray for or that God won't hear your halting or unsure prayers.

We must work at not falling into that state, even making prayers about it when we feel those darker times coming upon us. By being in as close to a continuous state of prayer as possible, I believe we can exercise that sense and learn when we are approaching that state before we ever get there. And, by the grace of God, there is a ready and constant remedy for this lack of knowledge and understanding as it relates to prayer:

"Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." (Romans 8:26)

We know well that we all suffer from infirmities – whether they be infirmities of body, mind, or spirit – we are not creatures of strength. The Spirit is here brought to bear to address the infirmities of our hearts and our faith. We are full of groanings of spirit as we go through this life, caused by our circumstances, our enemies, our sins, our weaknesses. These groanings are heard by our God and responded to with intercession. Depending upon this intercession is an act of faith, and enables us to be stable in our worship. Being stable and constant in our worship is a thing we must work diligently toward, as James tells us

“But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” (James 1:6)

Those who waver in this act of faith and worship have a constant uneasiness of spirit and soul, they find no peace. The sea is in constant turmoil and a state of forever churning. To have a spirit in such a state is to have a person who goes from extreme highs to extreme lows and has exceeding difficulty in finding contentment and constantly fights against the crooks in their lot. The prayer of faith allows us to avoid such things, and if we work diligently not to waver, our faith strengthens. No man walks in a constant state of stability, but think about your personal experience. When you find yourself churning over a thing, in a state of distress over a thing, losing sleep, losing your sense of peace, what turns you away from that churning faster than well placed and diligent prayer? Prayer brought in faith is promised to bring that restoration.

My dearest friends, prayer must be in the forefront of our minds as a key element of our worship of God. He provides us this mechanism, and in it is our confidence in this life.

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.” (1 John 5:14-15)

I struggle to articulate the importance I feel toward prayer, our obligation to it and what we can fully derive from it if only our hearts are in the right way toward God as it relates to it, but as we see here in 1 John, anything is achievable via prayer.

Let us humble ourselves as we wake every day and start the day in supplication to our King, and as we close our eyes to take our rest, let us humble ourselves to thank Him for the blessings of His day. Let us fill every moment in between with humble service and worship of our God through prayer.

I encourage you to make much practice of prayer and endeavor to perfect it as we journey toward our final home.