

# Prof Donald Macleod: Philippians 4:6

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[ 0 : 0 0 ] I want to reflect tonight on prayer. It's a key feature of our lives that believers in Christ and yet we want to find it very difficult to exercise and they're often embarrassed by our failures in that area. John Knox said that whenever there is faith there is prayer and there is no prayer, there is no faith. It's that important. It is the breath of our whole spiritual lives. And I want to focus first of all on the words of Paul, Philippians chapter 4 and the words particularly from verse 4 into verse 5. Philippians 4 and from verse 4 downwards. Rejoice the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice. Let your reason be drawn to everyone the Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything but everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving that you request be made known to God. In this passage Paul is describing prayer for us and making plain point he thinks that actually means for us as believers. We are turned often to be anxious about so much in our lives and also in the church's life as well and we spend so much energy and anxiety and worry. And

Paul is saying to us instead of that he said let's turn to God and ask him to help us cope with this particular situation. And I want to focus here on the four elements of prayer that Paul is emphasising. There is first of all thanksgiving. With thanksgiving Paul says whenever we turn to God there is always cause for thanksgiving and sometimes that's very difficult because of our situation. There are times when there is great pressure, there is great sorrow perhaps, there is great inward tension and stress and in our situation there makes thanksgiving so very very difficult. And then Paul is saying to us always when we come to God we come with thanksgiving because in all our darkness there is still light.

And you remember how he says in Ephesians for example that we give thanks to God always and in all things. They mention that. But again the psalmist says each day I rise I will bless you and place your name time without end. And some of those days it's very hard to bless God and some days it's hard to give thanks for an old situation. And yet Paul is saying to us on your knees always remember the cause for thankfulness today and in this situation. Remember at the most fundamental level that God is and how that itself lightens up an otherwise dark world. There is one control. There is a governor. There is a sovereign someone who reigns this world in wisdom. We plant our foot on that great rock. Remember too that Christ is praying for us. Not only for ourselves but he praying for us as well.

And remember too that sometimes so hard. Remember that God loves us. That's the great thing. The point where we start. That love is always a reality. And so always in this darkness there are factors which ought to prompt our gratitude to God himself and his love of his wisdom. But also almost always there are providential factors. There are evidences still of God's kindness in an on temporal situation. There are those who love us and those who care for us and those who support us. And so for them let's be thankful. Even in bereavement and in what is sometimes unimaginable loss. Remember the living as well as the dead. And clean to God's great hope and consolation that one day we shall be with the Lord together. And so this simple and yet fundamental principle in the darkness there is always light if only we had eyes to see it. I know how difficult it is and yet always this calls for thanksgiving.

[ 6 : 0 0 ] And then Paul gives us three great words of petition because for Paul and the Bible that's what prayer is. It's asking God for things. Sometimes we make it very, very fancy and complicated.

But fundamentally it is asking God for things. And yet these three great words here. First of all the word prayer itself. It's a word put us used in the Bible only of address to God.

Only of speaking to God. A reminder to us that on our knees here we are aware of being a very, very special presence, a presence of the Lord God Almighty, a creature speaking to his maker and his creator. And in that moment when we say our Father, which art in heaven, we are aware of that heaviness, that numinousness, that deity, that divineness of God, all that power, all that wisdom, all

that great omnipotence because that's what prayer is, its impotence, its impotence, reaching out sometimes desperation towards omnipotence. So where am I? And who am I talking to? I realize your Father in heaven, that heaviness, that numinousness, that divineness is so hugely important. This God who can do whatever he wants to do. And sometimes we ask

God for limited things, limited prayers. For example somewhere as soon, maybe terminally so and so we say to God, Lord help them to cope. And forget yes, God can help them to cope.

But God can also heal them. And so why stop with help them to cope when God can't do there so much more? And I count the point where I say to God so often, Lord do what you can for them.

[ 8 : 37 ] Because I can't ask for anything greater in the presence of our heavenly Father. But also this grasp of course too that he is our Father, not only heavenly but also our Father.

And we have lost this assurance of God's love. And I know that you can convert that term and say love is God because it's not. And when we defy love it becomes demonic, as someone has said. Because sometimes love is invoked to justify anything and everything. And so love is not God. But yet our faith as believers is in the love of God. Those great reformers Luther and Calvin, they so stress this assurance of God's love. And they so needed it. And Calvin said, you cannot pray, you cannot pray unless you know that God is your Father. You can't pray in faith unless you know that God is your

Father. We need that assurance. Let's not underplay it or count it something we can do without. We need to know that the one we pray to actually cares. Every human child needs to know that is or her parents love them. We need that same assurance. When God adopts us, God sends into her heart this bit of an option whereby we cry, Abba, Abba Father. And so here we have this prayer talk, this talk with deity. And we know divine power and Godness. But we know too, his fatherly, tender love and his care there on our knees before him that he can and he loves us and he will do what is for our good. And so we come and we pray and we come to Paul says with supplications.

And in that word there is great emotional content because it's a soul asking for something that she really, really wants. There is urgency here. There is real need, real desire, real longing, a real wanting of this particular blessing. And so we wrestle with God. And that is so, so important that we do wrestle. Remember Hannah, she prayed. She prayed with her heart, but her lips weren't moving. Not a sound was heard. Nothing could be heard. Her lips moved, but nothing audible. But her heart was engaged fully in this prayer of near desperation. Paul too, and that passage were read. He prayed not once, not twice, but thrice. The Lord in Gethsemane again three times in that agony of earnestness. You know, sometimes our prayers don't express our real desires. James says to us at one point, you know, I say sometimes you fall into trials and testings. You don't go seeking for them, but you fall into them. They come unsought, unsolvable, or expected. And then he says, you need wisdom. And then go and ask God for that wisdom to cope with the situation, this test, this trial. If you lack it, ask God who loves giving.

But he said, beware, beware of double-mindedness, lest you pray for one thing, but you want something different. Need I explain that? You know, so often the words pass through lips, or lips. And he asks, perhaps we think we want this, we want to be holy. There's a famous prayer of Sid Nugustin, where he prayed, Lord, make me chaste, but not now. He didn't want it.

[ 13 : 56 ] And sometimes we pray for things, but insincerely, we don't want them. And that prayer is a prayer of a double-minded person, the one who pretends to want and pretends to ask, but if it doesn't.

There is often a constant answered prayer, often a sacrifice involved, often a certain aisle involved. And so we pray for single-mindedness, and so this earnestness, we pray for holiness, we pray to conquer sin, we pray for revival, for conversion for those we know and those we love, for the well-being of God's cause, we pray for God's blessing upon an enemy.

Do we pray with that urgency we have here in this word? Remarkably, the same word is used by Paul in Etoch. 5 of evangelism, where he says, we pray you in Christ's dead, be reconciled to God, with the great pictures of our youth, the Messiah and elsewhere, and they wrestled with us in the pews, and they besought, and they pled and expostulated and urged and pressed upon them, often with tears that they would turn to Christ for their salvation. That's what this kind of word, what this word means, the prayer of urgent, important desire for what we really want for our own souls and for those for whom we plead. And so that we are before God, perhaps in a difficult situation and yet giving thanks to God. And we know we're here in God's own presence, in all His divine glory, in all His parental love and care. And we know we've a need that must be supplied, and so we are

praying with urgency we want it. And then there's other word we have here, like to request we may know to God, and it's very specific, I want, I want. And I know that today there's a kind of reluctance to define prayer in those terms. We want to elevate it to perhaps its its its communion with God, or its immersing yourselves in God, or whatever. But your kindness will say to you, it's the offering up of your desires unto God. Prayer is petitionary, it's asking, it's needing, it's wanting, and doing so with urgency. And it has requests, and a specific request, it wants from God. I want to speak of a kind of shopping list. I heard God can say to us on our knees, what do you want my child? What is your request? What are you here for? What are you asking? Let your requests be made known to God. And I want to pause on this request issue there for just a moment. Because there is this great question, how do we know what to ask for?

That's an urgent question. And sometimes we can simply say, well, would God give us whatever we ask? Doesn't God say to us, ask, shall we see? The Lord says, you ask in my name, whatever you ask, I will give it to you. And sometimes we build on that the doctrine that whatever I ask, God is going to give me. And sometimes when it doesn't, we get all upset. We think there's something wrong between ourselves and God when it doesn't give us what he asked for.

I read some weeks ago, a comment by a distinguished Annika scholar on this issue, Alex Boteer. And he said this, and I felt it very sobering. If I were sure, he said that God will promise me whatever I asked, I would never pray again. Because I don't have enough confidence in my own wisdom to know what to ask. Isn't that a sobering thought? If God said to me unconditionally, I should remember, Herod said in that faithful moment, and he said, what do you want? And she said, I want the Baptist head on a plate. Does God say to us, whatever you want, whatever you ask, I will give it to you? Someone else said in response to that, that would mean, she said, there she said, being ruined by my own hand. God has discretion. It's what you ask in my name.

[ 20 : 09 ] And that my discretion, you see my wisdom, my love, my power, I will answer as I see your need. You see that in some great moments in the Bible. Remember David, when machine was child became ill. And he prayed and prayed in the full meaning of this word, supplication, in the verse we're looking at here for the moment. He was so fortunate, so urgently fasted. He didn't sleep. He lay on the ground in a torment and an anguish of earnestness.

And the child died. Remember then how he rose. And how his circuitiers were so appalled. While the child lived, they said he was so distraught. And now he's dead. And he's putting himself together again. They couldn't understand. But he said he knew there was no more he could do. But he had prayed. And God had granted his request. Now I'm not sure if I know the wise of God wisdom there and I know that Solomon's birth comes after that. But God didn't tell David why he hadn't saved that child. And some parents, perhaps even here, know that same anguish. In some ways, the most awful anguish we can know are human beings, the loss of a child. And we prayed. And God has an answer and perhaps it's disturbed and upset or faith.

That was David's situation. God said no for his own reasons. Or see the Apostle Paul again with that thorn in the flesh. And he was saying to God, Lord, this thorn is such an impediment to my ministry. It's holding me back. And it's hurt you ever so much better if it didn't have it.

[ 22 : 27 ] And so he prays and prays and prays and prays to God, taking away. The Lord says no to him. The Lord says, stop asking. Because my grace is efficient for you. And that thorn has an important part to play in your ministry. Now remember, all of us are ministry. Not only ministers, elders and so on, but every single one of us of you, you all have your own ministry.

Parents, society, whatever. And maybe if there's something holding you back in your ministry. And you think you'll be so much more efficient and more effective without it. And so you pray.

I have my thorns, my impediments. I know what they are. I've got to negotiate them every day. I start praying about them. And Paul, you see, learned this great lesson that God was made perfect in his weakness. God said to him, Paul, that thorn keeps you dependent.

Keeps you from self-sufficiency. Keeps you feeling that you saw need, my grace. Keeps you humble. And that's why it's there. And Paul rises after his third prayer and says, I will glory my weakness. I'll glory in this thorn. Because it's the ideal context for God's grace to operate in. And so he prays, this man of God was such earnestness and God has a grandest prayer. And then turned to an even more eminent and glorious figure than St Paul himself to her Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. And the cup, that cup that terrifies him, it fills him with all that makes him tremble. And he prays to his father, he'll let this cup pass.

And did he want it really? Most certainly. There is such earnestness there too, isn't there?

[ 24 : 59 ] The three-fold prayer, the angry and bloody sweat, throwing himself to the ground. Abba, there must be some other way. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. And of course, there was no other way, consistent with God's plan for the salvation of the world, that a man had to suffer, that cup had to be drunk. And that cup, that dying on Christ's part, was part of God's great eternal plan of salvation. In fact, it was the key and pivotal moment in that plan of salvation. For all we know sometimes, those things we want not to be are pivotal somewhere in God's plan for us. And so that if you prayed and God has granted you a request, then remember David, remember Paul, and remember the Lord Himself. God has his own reasons for not always granting us what we request often in prayer. How then shall we know what to pray for? In my name, we can pray for whatever God has promised. And I think especially those unconditional promises, those guaranteed promises that God has made to us.

The Edward Irving said once that the best preparation of prayer he said is a knowledge of the scriptures. Why? Because they contain all the promises of God. And on your knees you're asking, what has God promised? And asking, are the things he's promised I haven't yet asked for, but I need. It's not a promise for this situation. A promise here for me and my people and God's people as a whole. I pray, remember Knox again, prayer is the breath of faith. And faith always rests on the promises of God. What promises might these be that God guarantees always to answer?

Well, first of all, there is this, the promise implicit for us, the Lord's prayer, that thy kingdom come. That is a command, but it's also a promise, a promise that this, this small mustard seed will grow to be a huge tree that God, King will expand. And here before God, before our Father in heaven, our first, first thought is not for ourselves and for our needs.

And I find that so hard because very often you pray in urgency, and your first word is a word about your own need, like Lord, I'm mercy. Lord, help me. And it's yourself you see that's there. And of course in the Lord's prayer, your needs are there, your daily bread, what you need this morning for the rest of the day, and what you need tonight for tomorrow. And that's about the limit of it, not guarantees for my retirement, but daily bread to live at that level of dependence upon God, to a challenging that is. I remember you're some gobbling in the Northeast Indian, seeing the moralist group of believers in that part of the word in the Burmese border. And there were women there, and every day they enter air enough money by collecting firewood and other such stuff to allow the purchase of enough rice for that particular day. They were that close to the bread line, or to the rice line, a survival economy, vibrant in their faith, walking miles to church services every evening of the week. And yet living there gave us today their daily rice.

[ 30 : 04 ] Nothing beyond that. That was all. Well, yes, we have a right to ask God for that temporal provision, but it doesn't come first. On my knees, first of all, I remember God's kingdom, and God's name, and the doing of God's will. And so I go to a wrestle over that, am I?

I'm going to supplicate, go to plead, as I plead with the unconverted, to turn to Christ. Lord, remember your name, remember your kingdom, under such attack from forces human and superhuman, from forces demonic, and from within itself as well. And so Lord, please have mercy on your name, not just on me, but on your name, on your kingdom, and on your will. And that is, I think, a categorical promise God has made. How it implemented, I'm not always clear, perhaps very seldom clear, but I'm asking, is that what you mean by praying? Pray for God's kingdom to come, to come in your own heart. Lord, come and reign ever more and more in my heart, and ever more and more in the hearts of my family, and of my church and community.

In your kingdom, come, Lord, here and come there and come to the ends of the earth. Pray for the coming of God's kingdom. That is, God's all great promise.

And then, coming to what I was this morning earlier, if we confess our sins, use faithful unjust to forgive us our sins. Lord, you have promised it. You know, when you know yourself, it is the most incredible thing that God can be reconciled to you, and God can forgive what you are and what you do. Every convict sinner knows the wonder of mercy, never taken for granted or presumed upon, but this too begged for supplication on the basis of God's promise.

I read just a few days ago a remarkable comment by Donnie Martin Lloyd-Jones related to this particular theme. It's in his book on spiritual depression, a splendid work of pastoral theology, and there's a sermon there it's called, That One Sin.

[ 33 : 18 ] Something in our lives that hinders us, that we think is unforgivable and leaves us in a state of constant spiritual depression. The doctor had made many in that condition in his own long ministry. Many had come and he would say, well, there's this comfort and this and that, certification

by faith alone, etc, etc, etc, but always this, ah yes doctor, but that one sin, that one sin. And sometimes it's kept people from Christ altogether, and some are meant to those who have come in such a sin go on limping throughout their lives. The doctor says a remarkable thing, stop praying about it. And I found it shocking in many ways, but he meant this, he said, all you're doing is bringing it back and back and back and back and back. And it's there every day, and you're forgetting, God has cast it in the depths of the sea, God has blotted out that sin.

And we almost say at that point, what the Lord said to Martha, when it told her that those who died in him were alive, even though they died, and he said, believe us now this, and he said it twice. Do you believe that? That those who believe in me though they die, yet they live, do you believe that? And I'm saying do you believe with respect to your own sin, that God has, God can, God will bury it, and God will obliterate its memory, believe us now this. And so rather than that sin fester, take your peace, the joy of salvation from us, to take you to God, and to leave it there with him. And this promise confess, and he forgives, and he cleanses. How often does the psalmist say that? I've acknowledged my sin, and you forgave my guilt, and gave me a token of that forgiveness, that such rejoicing follows that great moment, and that great insight into God's grace.

[ 36 : 21 ] And again there is this other promise, my grace, which only Hebrews, he says to us, ask God for grace to help in time of need. We have this great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God.

And so we come with boldness, and what do we ask for? What he says, you ask for mercy to cover the past, because that's all that can be done with the past. And what an insight that is. Ask God, Lord, cover it, cover it from yourself. But am I also to say, Lord, cover it from me too, because I hate looking at it. Perhaps you say we never forgive ourselves. That may be a kind of orthodoxy, this is biblical teaching, I'm not so sure. But there's more than the past to be covered, the grace to help, to help in time of need. And here we are, perhaps, in a time of need, in our own particular lives, some time of need. And we say to God, Lord, there's that great promise, grace to help. And that word help, it's again a very precise and technical term. And it's used in Acts of a moment, the impulse voyage to Rome. When the sailors in the storm, they bind the ship, they have these great specialist ropes with which they bound the ship. And they wrap the hull, the raffles from the hull, to prevent the hull breaking up in the storm. And grace to help gives to that kind of image, where we are in danger of breaking up, the ship would fall apart. And so those special helps would be round and round and round the hull to save it from breaking up.

And sometimes you've been, perhaps, we are in danger of breaking up, of going to pieces. Lord, grace to help in time of need, that God will give us that grace to help in time of need.

And then again, there is this promise that God gives us to, we are kept by the power of God unto salvation, by His power unto salvation. And how important that is to our to whom, says Judas, able to keep us from falling, from falling, from declension, from backsliding, from apostasy, from final falling away. Oh yes, God has promised to keep us.

Yet we can't, we don't take advantage of that, do we? Yet we know that grace in our hearts is a very tender plant in a very hostile soil. As her brother said in his prayer, unless we are kept, we cannot keep ourselves. Oh, shall I go forth and trembling every day?

[ 40 : 36 ] Shall I make it, shall I make it, shall I make it? Or shall I cast myself with the grace of God, as said, that when it begins good work, he perfects it unto the day of Jesus Christ.

How conscious we are of an unfrailty, of an unfragility in the face of those mighty forces of hostility and of destruction. No man, sir Jesus, can pluck them out of my hand.

But of my hand. And then again, no man can pluck them out of my father's hand. Two great hands, my hands, and my father's hands. Remember the hymn of John Newton, Amazing Grace you all know it, and she better than I do. It was grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace shall lead me home. No man of what age we are, what's left of this journey is still perilous, and we are still ourselves vulnerable. But grace will lead me home. Believe us though this.