

CHAPTER 102 ZECHARIAH'S PRAYERS

The priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were righteous people who followed God (Luke 1:6). They had no children, which was shameful in Israel (it was seen as punishment for sins). Zechariah had prayed for a child. One day he was serving in the temple and the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, “*Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard.*” (Luke 1: 3).

The angel tells him that his wife will have a child and that they should call him John. He will bring joy to many. He will be full of the Holy Ghost and will bring many back to the Lord and to repentance. Zechariah asks how he can be sure, as he and his wife are already quite old. The angel causes him to be mute because he would not believe immediately. He is unable to speak until the child John is born. Then Zechariah leaves the temple to send the people home but can only communicate with gestures.

A prayer for a child can be answered in an amazing manner. John is born (Luke 1:57-61). Zechariah's speech is restored and he bursts forth in a prophetic prayer of praise (Luke 1:68-79) “*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.*” (Luke 1:68). This prophetic prayer continues and Zechariah tells of his son being a prophet who will prepare the way.

John becomes a great prophet. He was the Elijah' who was coming before the Messiah was revealed. Jesus also mentions a couple of times that John was this 'Elijah'. John's life ends in the tradition of many of the Old Testament prophets: he is executed. The Old Testament really ends with John (Matthew 11:11-15).

The amazing 'explosion' of Zechariah's praise of praise is reminiscent of the emotions we go through at the birth of our own first child.

CHAPTER 103 MARY'S PRAISE OF PRAISE

The angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38) visits Mary and announces that she will be the mother of Jesus. Gabriel also tells her that her old relative Elizabeth is pregnant, as well. Mary journeys to visit Elizabeth and to help at John's birth. When she enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Elizabeth loudly speaks out a prophetic prayer of praise over Mary: “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear....*”

(Luke 1:42-45). Mary answer with the well-known prayer of praise:

“My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers.” (Luke 1:46-55).

Millions are still encouraged today by that prayer.

CHAPTER 104 THE SHEPHERDS' PRAYER

Imagine being busy herding sheep somewhere in a field. Suddenly an angel appears telling you something wonderful about the birth of the Saviour and heaven opens and hosts of angels appear, praising God. . . .

Their amusing reaction: we'd better go and have a look. After visiting the new mother and baby, the shepherds return *'glorifying and praising God'* (Luke 2:20).

In those days, the shepherds were not of the same calibre as the shepherd David around 1000 years earlier. The shepherds at the time of Jesus' birth might be of the lowest social class; often hired hands. When real danger lurked they would be the first to run off. It is of great significance that the angels announce God's salvation to the lowest social class. This should encourage us to dedication and prayer for every 'class' and 'caste'. We also find that the Kingdom of God has a place for everyone (even the least) and that everyone can pray and magnify God (again, including the least). They were all present at the birth of Jesus: the wise, the rich, the poor, the outcasts and the animals. . . .

Everyone can equally come to Jesus, the Saviour.

CHAPTER 105 UNLOCK YOUR TREASURES

We all know the story of the wise men from the east, who were looking for the newly born 'king of the Jews' and eventually brought homage to 'baby Jesus' in a stable near Bethlehem. *'And they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they unlocked their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.'* (Matthew 2:11)

Bringing homage is a special prayer of adoration. We show in attitude and action that we want to magnify the King of kings and Lord of lords, that we want to serve him. The emphasis is on his kingship and reign, for one only brings homage to a king with absolute power.

A second interesting observation is what they brought to give substance to that homage. 'They opened their treasures' (gold, frankincense and myrrh). This should encourage us to consider what we 'open' in our worship. Don't we often bring a lot of moaning and groaning? Of course, there is nothing wrong with expressing our genuine concerns. But these wise men brought their treasures. What are treasures? Are they not, for example, all the talents we can get busy with? And we bring honour to God by developing those talents. (See the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30). Isn't it great to be able to say at the end of the day: 'Lord, I have had a really good go at practising on my instrument, that was for your glory', or 'Lord, I read a fantastic book', or 'Lord, my English test went well, that was for your glory'. And so on.

Our treasures could be our dreams, deepest thoughts and feelings. We can bring those before the Lord, too. In our prayer we may bring glory to the great King and unlock our treasures.

CHAPTER 106 SIMEON'S PRAYER

Simeon, a righteous and devout man, lived in Jerusalem. He knew that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. One day he felt compelled to go to the temple, where Joseph and Mary were bringing an offering. Simeon takes the child in his arms and says the following prayer:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you can now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Then Simeon blesses Joseph and Mary, the parents.

We should hold on to, and keep expecting, the fulfilment of prayers and prophecies. So often we would like it all today or tomorrow. Simeon's prayer and expectation were fulfilled at the end of a whole lifetime. This story encourages us to keep hoping, keep praying and not to give up.

CHAPTER 107 OLD LADIES' PRAYER

When Jesus was brought to the temple, there was an old woman, Hannah. She was 84 years old and, since she was a widow, she continuously served God in the temple, by fasting and praying, night and day. She, too, praises God and prophesies, because she has seen the Messiah (Luke 2:36-38).

We quite often see old ladies in all kinds of churches, who only seem to be there to pray, especially if the church is open on weekdays. Some people look down their noses at these old ladies. But these old ladies could be very important in the Kingdom of God, especially if they pray. Their prayers are like incense before face of the Eternal One.

CHAPTER 108 PRAYER AT THE BAPTISM

John baptised many people in the Jordan. It was a baptism of repentance and becoming serious with God. Jesus was also baptised by John. *"When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased'."* (Luke 2:21-22).

The other gospels give some extra details, like a conversation between John and Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; John 1:32-34). But in this version by Luke an interesting detail is mentioned: after the baptism (after Jesus came up out of the water) there was a moment of prayer. And then the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and God confirms who Jesus is.

It is a beautiful and blessed tradition if at a person's baptism there is a moment of prayer for, or by, the baptismal candidate.

It is edifying and encouraging to impart God's spirit at that moment to the baptismal candidate, so that he/she receives power and strength for a new and sanctified life.

CHAPTER 109 WHOM DO WE WORSHIP?

Worship is a type of prayer. In worship we declare who or what God means to us. Mammon (money, possessions) can be our god, self-centredness can be our god, etc. What is the most important thing in our life? That is what we worship.

After his remarkable spiritual experience, Jesus is led to the desert to be tempted by the devil. The first big test to see if Jesus stands up to the temptations he will have to face.

- After 40 days of prayer and fasting Jesus is hungry. The devil comes and says: 'If you are God's son, just do the trick of turning this stone into bread'. Jesus could have done it, of course, but that is not the way to go about proving who we are. Jesus rightly says that we should live by 'every word that proceeds out of God's mouth'. So let's first ask God what to do, and let's not rely on our instincts or desires.
- Secondly the devil takes Jesus to the roof of the temple. 'If you are God's son, prove it with a miracle (throw yourself off and let the angels catch you). A double temptation:
- Prove that you are God's son, and
- Show who you are, now that you are in the heart of religion; claim your rightful position now, instead of showing it through a life-long struggle. Jesus rightly says that we must not force God in order to 'prove' ourselves. Jesus does not give in to the temptation to impress.
- Then we find the situation where the devil shows Jesus all kingdoms and civilisations, with all their beauties and peculiarities. Jesus can have it all if only he will worship the devil. This is not so much about whether or not the Devil had the right to offer all that (does he own the world after the Fall, or has he only got 'borrowed time'). This is about the fact that the devil offered him a quick short route to success, to victory, without years of struggle, without suffering, hardship or death. Let's not fall for that kind of false promise. Jesus rightly says that we should only worship God.

Besides the profound lesson we can find in the three temptations, it is THE lesson in having the last word: we should worship God and serve Him only (which is in fact a summary of the ten commandments). Real life is to believe in God, pray to him and worship him, and to serve him by following and living out his example in our daily life. (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13).

CHAPTER 110 PRAYER BEFOREHAND

One of Jesus' most impressive speeches is the 'Beatitudes'. It is like a prayer, like a political programme, like a prophecy, like poetry.....

In Luke 6:20 we find what goes before this fantastic speech: "*Looking at his disciples, he said...*" What happened there? He was moved. He saw a multitude of people, who were looking for an answer and for security. He saw the need and the misery. He saw social and structural evil, the greed. He saw the hardness. '*Looking*'. He looked, he saw through it all. He may well have prayed at the moment he looked at the disciples, something like: 'Oh God, help these poor people.' And then he starts speaking: "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,*" etc. (Luke 6:20-26).

Before we achieve something, we need, just like in the above-mentioned situation, to touch base with God and the people: 'Oh Lord, help me to be a blessing in this situation.'

(NB – It is worth reading through the beatitudes. The best version is found in Matthew 5:1-16).

CHAPTER 111 JUST LEAVE IT

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." (Matth. 5,23-24)

Offering a gift is a form of prayer, as we saw in the Old Testament. Sacrificing animals served to bring reconciliation and the accompanying prayer was a prayer for reconciliation and forgiveness. People also confessed their guilt.

Why does Jesus say this: if you remember that your brother has something against you...? It could mean: if you did something to someone, if you've offended someone deeply, if you hurt someone terribly, if you damaged someone, if you treated someone unjustly... put that right first. And then come into the presence of God to ask for forgiveness for your sin. Then come to God to pray.

CHAPTER 112 THIS ISN'T EASY

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you." (Luke 6,27-28)

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." (Matth. 5,44-45)

This obviously doesn't mean that you should just accept everything and let yourself be walked all over. It is all about feelings of revenge, blood feuds, bitterness and embitterment. By praying for people who have done something terrible to you, you yourself are no longer trapped in this experience or memory and you become open to a new beginning.

Sometimes things happen that cause you lifelong trauma. How can you pray then? You may not yet get any further than a prayer such as 'Lord, my trauma calls for redress'. And maybe the moment will come, some time, that you will be able to pray, 'Lord, I put these people, who have done this to me, in your hands.'

However right Jesus may be with what he says in the above verses, doing so is not always easy. And sometimes it takes a lifetime to grow towards doing it.

CHAPTER 113 WHAT IS IN YOU?

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6,43-45)

What is it our heart flows over with? What is it our mouth speaks? Is it prayers? In that case our heart is devoted to God. Or is it lies, gossip, indecent proposals... Then things are not in order with our hearts and if we pray we should not expect it to do any good.

Jesus explains it elsewhere as follows, *"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'."* (Matth. 15,19)

So we clearly need a new heart and a new Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

In his letter to the Galatians (5,19-22) Paul comes back to this too. He contrasts the works of the flesh (sin) with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control. If we are filled with God's Spirit, this fruit will eventually become visible. This goes hand in hand with prayer, for the Holy Spirit is the spirit of grace and prayers (Zach. 12,10).

CHAPTER 114 HOW TO PRAY?

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matth. 6,5-8)
This bible fragment comes just before the 'Lord's Prayer' (vs. 9-13).

You sometimes see it in prayer meetings, that one person tries to say even more beautiful prayers than the other. Or that someone tries to pray even more 'powerfully' than the other. What nonsense. If we pray, it must be honest, sincere, true, and it may never have anything to do with trying to impress people.

It is probably best to pray in your room most of the time. That is where you can freely pour out your heart to God.

CHAPTER 115 ANSWERED PRAYERS

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matth. 7,7-12)

Does this mean that you just get what you pray for? No. The sentence 'seek and you will find' just shows that these things may take time and effort. And sometimes you may have to knock for a long time before the door is opened. Abraham prayed to have children for his whole life and they took some 100 years to arrive. So we have to forget about any Santa Claus expectations. That's not what God is like and that's not how it works. If your prayer is not self-centered (for example for your private well-being and prosperity), just keep praying and knocking on God's door. In the end justice will be done.

CHAPTER 116 PRAY AND DO

"Not everyone who says (=prays) to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you.'" (Matth. 7,21-23)

Prayer alone does not cause us to end up in the eternal Kingdom of God. Billions of people pray, but will it eventually help? There are also millions of Christians who pray, and will they get there? The answer is 'no, unless...'. Unless people put God's will into practice (i.e. by living it out). The end is even more interesting, for just how many Christians go for what impresses people: prophecies, miracles, driving out powers, special experiences... Well, none of it will prove to be of any use or added value to get you into the Kingdom of God. Just do God's will in your daily life. It means doing God's will in your family, your neighbourhood, your work, your friends, the sports club, at school. What you are like says something about who you are (just read the passage on the 'fruit of the Spirit' again). So it is: pray and work, ora et labora.

CHAPTER 117 PRAYER FOR WORKERS

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matth. 9,36-38)

There is plenty to harvest, also today. Perhaps today there's more than ever. Only, there are too few workers: we have to pray for more workers, people who are willing to make an effort. Why are there so few workers?

- Because people don't see the harvest. They can be completely absorbed by other and at times trivial matters. This is a call to see further than the end of your nose and beyond the little circle of people you live with.
- Because people don't see how harassed and helpless others are.
- Because people don't ask why others are so harassed and helpless. That means you should open your eyes to the structural problems that present themselves in society, politics and the economy.
- Because there is no compassion and no mercy. That is what God wanted more than anything else: our compassion, our personal involvement.

Let us pray for these things. Let us pray that many will go through the stages just mentioned, so that there will be more workers, co-workers, and supporters who will have a heart for the harvest, and have real compassion for people.

CHAPTER 118 PRAYER OF PEACE

"Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you." (Matth. 10,11-12)

The greeting referred to was a prayer of peace: 'Peace be with this house'. You should actually pray this every time you enter someone's house, an office or any other kind of building. In our prayer we share God's peace with all those who are in that house or building. Let's just see what effect this 'prayer of peace', this blessing will have.

CHAPTER 119 NOT HIDDEN

"At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.'" (Matth. 11,25-26)

Jesus puts a few deep thoughts into words in this prayer. Does it mean Jesus is against wisdom and intellect? Of course not. It is absolutely God's will that you go to university if you are good at studying.

This is about attitude. As a child trusts its parents, we may trust God, share everything with him, and tell him everything. We don't have to put on a brave face for God or hide ourselves.

But if we try to explain God with our ratio or try to grasp him with reason, we will get stuck somewhere. The attitude of a child: to continue having faith in God, trusting God, even though there may seem to be contradictions. It will be revealed to little children: a sudden insight that surpasses the ratio.

And how beautiful is the next passage from the Bible: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Matth. 11,28-29)

Just a footnote: becoming like children is quite different from being naïve or childish!

CHAPTER 120 THE FIRST FEEDING

"And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied."

(Matth. 14,19; see too Mark 6,41, Luke 9,16, John 6,11)

Five thousand people were fed in this miraculous way. Why did these people go there in the first place? All those people had followed Jesus to listen to him. His presence, his words gave hope. And Jesus had compassion on them (Matth. 14,14).

And then, when evening came, they had to have something to eat, otherwise they might collapse. And it is moving to see that Jesus was so concerned about them, and that included such practical matters like food.

He prayed and blessed the loaves and fish and a great miracle took place. What happened just shows how prayers and blessings can have great and unexpected results.

CHAPTER 121 QUIET TIME

"After he had dismissed the crowd, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone."

(Matth. 14,23)

Jesus occasionally needed some 'quiet time' to come to himself without being disturbed, to be able to talk to God without being disturbed, to be able to pour out his heart and receive new courage and energy. Some people go as far as prescribing a 'quiet time' method, for example every morning or evening. Perhaps you should have a 'quiet time' when you feel you need it. But if you do it, do it with conviction. It will be very beneficial.

(It is significant that after such quiet times Jesus was ready to do something special again: walking on the lake, making Peter walk on the lake, rebuke a storm...)

Bonus: some time later another miraculous feeding took place

(Matth. 15,32-37, compare Mark 8,1-10).

This time Jesus was equally filled with compassion for the masses; he prayed and blessed the food and the miracle took place. But the disciples didn't learn anything from it (Matth. 16,5-12).

CHAPTER 122 ON THE MOUNTAIN

"And Jesus took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning."

(Luke 9,28-29)

Sometimes very special things happen in your time of prayer. The time when Jesus almost became radiant is very similar to the time when Moses had a meeting with God; he became radiant too. Let our meetings with God turn us into 'radiant personalities'. Times of prayer can often be so boring, almost sour and full of whinging prayers. Let us strive for this radiance, that is like a 'flash of lightning'.

(Another interesting point about the meeting on the mountain is that Jesus had special visitors: Moses and Elija. Also, God again confirmed who Jesus really was, in verses 30-36. The disciples wanted the experience and the meeting to last, so they said 'shall we put up tents for you'. Yet after a special experience you will have to get on. You can't stay on the mountain forever.)

CHAPTER 123 MOVING MOUNTAINS

When Jesus returned after the meeting on the mountain, someone asked him to heal his 'lunatic' son. The disciples had not been able to do so. Jesus drove the evil spirit out and healed the boy completely. Afterwards the disciples asked Jesus why they had not been able to do this.

"Jesus replied, 'Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'" (Matth. 17,20)

Faith in God, faith in God's power in you, is apparently very important. But it isn't the only determining factor.

Luke (9,29) adds another detail to his account of this episode: *"And He said to them: this kind can not go out except by prayer."* Matthew says, as a kind of afterthought: *"But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."* (Matth. 17,21)

Prayer is just as important for 'moving mountains' as having faith.

CHAPTER 124 AUTHORITY

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

(Matth. 18,19-20)

Where does this authority to bind or loose come from? It comes from prayer, and the authority becomes stronger when a number of people agree to pray for something together. How do we know that what we intend to pray for together is the right thing? We will know by the Holy Spirit, who will lead us on the subject or the wish.

Even if you pray for something with just two people, God is with you. So these 'two' are in fact the smallest 'church' you can think of.

CHAPTER 125 CHILDREN

"Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them." (Matth. 19,13)

Can you imagine anything more wonderful than asking Jesus to pray for children and bless them? There are people who think that such a thing is not appropriate in the world of large-scale interests and grown-up people. Yet with God it is the little one that counts.

"When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them." (Mark 10,14-16)

CHAPTER 126 TEACH US TO PRAY

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'" (Luke 11,1)

After this question Jesus taught the disciples the 'Lord's Prayer' and gave them some more useful suggestions about praying.

But what is said at the beginning of the episode is striking: 'Lord, teach us, teach me to pray.'

There are times when you can't find words any more. There are times when you can't see head or tail in a problem, and there are times when you just don't know what to do any more. Then the only thing we have is the sigh or the cry: 'Lord, help me to pray, for I don't know what I should pray'. And God will come to your aid with insight and new words.

CHAPTER 127 WORRY

You may at times be very worried, for instance about food, clothes and such like. This may occupy your mind most of the time and this worry may automatically take up a large part of your prayer. If that's happening to you it may be a good idea to read Luke 12,22-34. Jesus says a number of worthwhile things here:

- a. Do not worry about what you will eat, for life is more than food. Do not worry about what you will wear, for the body is more than clothes.
- b. Do not set your heart on food and drink and clothes, for God knows you need these things.
- c. Do not be afraid, for God gives you the Kingdom of heaven.

And then we are called to seek the Kingdom FIRST; and God will give us the rest.

Matthew adds something to this: Seek first the Kingdom and his righteousness (Matth. 6,33).

What use are these remarks for our prayer? It has to do with prayer and your life. What are your priorities? Only the here and now? Is it all about your personal wellbeing? Or do you see the bigger picture and do you want to go for God's priorities? And this makes it very concrete again: what are you going to pray for now?

CHAPTER 128 DON'T GIVE UP

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said, 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

'For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18,1-8)

Pray and don't give up. Even though you don't see immediate result with all your prayers answered: keep praying, keep believing, keep expecting. Some people in the Bible had to wait for years before their prayers were answered, but the moment did come: just read the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Daniel, Elija, Elisa, etc.

So keep praying and don't give up.

CHAPTER 129 LAZARUS

Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, had died. You'll find the whole story in John 11,1-44. By the time Jesus arrived Lazarus had already been buried in a cave. What to do? After all, dead is dead!

"So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11,41-43)

What happened here is of course an incredible miracle. Nobody should repeat it in a kind of bizar overconfidence. We should commit the dying to God's hands and leave them in peace. Yet this passage may serve as an example for other situations in life. If at times you have to face an impossible situation, then you can pray for it and God will show you what to do. Isn't it so that in every prayer we say for someone else, we actually say, 'In Jesus' name, live...; receive the blessing of God...'

CHAPTER 130

WHEN IT'S GETTING OVERWHELMING

"When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19,37-40)

This is a little episode from the entry into Jerusalem that we remember when we celebrate Palm Sunday. The disciples burst out in praise, a prayer of praise and a prayer of thanks. At times it can all be so overwhelming and so meaningful – why not burst out in a prayer of praise to give all honour to God. And God rejoices in this.

CHAPTER 131 HOUSE OF PRAYER

After Jesus' entry into Jerusalem he went to the temple and cleared it. All sorts of things were going on in the temple: there were stands for selling things, money changers etc. Why did Jesus do that?

"And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?' But you have made it 'a den of robbers'." (Mark 11,17)

It's surprisingly easy for religion and commerce to go hand in hand. In this case it had run out of hand completely. In reality it was by then only about commerce and, to make matters worse, people were treated dishonestly; they were ripped off and robbed, and this happened in the name of God. This was obviously unacceptable. Jesus was right in making a clean sweep. This event can encourage everyone who works in a Christian or church organisation to keep their priorities right: is it a place to find God or is it all in fact simply about commerce, to make a great deal of money out of people's faith or under the disguise of faith?

CHAPTER 132 AT A VERY DIFFICULT MOMENT

During the days after the entry into Jerusalem and just before Passover, Jesus gave a few more speeches and he spoke with people a few more times. At some instance he announced that he would die. Then it all became a bit too much for him and he prayed the following:

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'" Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again'." (John 12,27-28)

At that difficult time Jesus started to pray and give God all the glory. He knew he had to go through those difficult hours. And God answered. Difficult times yield glorification and purification, and God can come very close to us on those occasions.

CHAPTER 133 OUTWARD APPEARANCES

"As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market-places, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely." (Mark 12,38-40).

This is one of the last lessons Jesus gave just before the last Passover. In religion things can go horribly wrong: people may fall into the trap of outward appearances and even begin to pray lengthy and beautiful prayers. Jesus attacks this hypocrisy of the heart. If you join in with religious activities, this should never be for the sake of status, outward appearance and such like. So never use religion to impress others with your virtues or even with your prayers.

CHAPTER 134 GIANTS

During the days between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and Passover, he passed a figtree somewhere. Unfortunately, there was no fig on the tree and Jesus rebuked the figtree. The next day they walked past this figtree again and it appeared to have withered (you will find the story in Mark 11,11-26). This surprised Peter, and Jesus replied that you should not doubt but believe, and then it will be yours.

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." (Mark 11,24-25)

The first part of this passage has given rise to a theology in itself, a kind of 'pray and claim' behaviour. There are people who, using this text, try to get cars, houses, partners or esteem from God. And when all this doesn't materialise they get angry. But, as said before, God's Kingdom is not about greed, egocentricity etc. So never be impressed by 'spiritual giants' who want to tell you about everything they extracted from God by prayer. The second part of this quote from the Bible immediately puts it all in the correct perspective: 'Forgive the other for what you might hold against him.' And let's be honest, this is at times very difficult. If we still have difficulty with this kind of practical behaviour, then we should be even more careful with our claiming prayers. Why should we expect God to hear our prayers as long as we haven't done away with those barriers.

CHAPTER 135 THE LAST SUPPER

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

(Matth. 26,26-28)

And in Luke Jesus added: *"Do this in remembrance of me."*

(Luke 22,19b)

Following the tradition, Jesus prayed at each stage of the Passover feast. But he added a deeper meaning by starting a new tradition, that of the 'Last Supper'. In our celebration of 'Communion' today we may join in prayers and blessings. And by saying these prayers and blessings we remember all the things the Lord has done for us.

CHAPTER 136 AT THE LAST SUPPER

The last supper wasn't a quiet, austere ceremony. In fact, there were quite a number of discussions and speeches.

You will find them in John 13,21-17,26.

In the context of these studies on prayer, Jesus said a few more memorable things:

- *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14,6)
- *"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."* (John 14,12-14)
- *"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."* (John 14,15-17)
- *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other."* (John 15,16-17)
- *"I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."* (John 16,23-24)

These Bible verses again are no grounds for triumphant claiming behaviour. The main thing that is prayed for is to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus personally prays that we may receive it. Why is this Holy Spirit so impor-

tant? Because this Spirit will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement. And it is the Spirit of truth that will show us the way to the full truth and teach us about the future. Also, this Spirit will bring glory to Jesus and the Father (John 16,5-15).

So if we want to see these wonderful promises about prayers being heard come true, we should first receive the Holy Spirit which will lead us in our prayer and makes clear to us what we may pray for. And that prayer will be answered.

CHAPTER 137 THE HIGH-PRIESTLY PRAYER

At the end of the 'last supper' Jesus prayed. It was a very impressive prayer. A prayer from a high priest, who gave his all for his flock. You will find this very special prayer in John 17. Take your bible, look it up, and read it a few times. Which passages do you find particularly compelling? Why? Why not write it down and date it. Read it again in a year's time. What impresses you this time and why? To many people this prayer has gained ever deeper meaning over the years. We wonder what impact it will have on you.

CHAPTER 138 GETHSEMANE

"They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.' Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Simon,' he said to Peter, 'are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.' Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!'" (Marc. 14:32-42)

Lucas voegt nog een detail toe, dat Hij zo bang was en zo vurig bad, dat zijn zweet in bloeddroppels veranderde (Luc. 22:44); een engel kwam om Hem kracht te geven.

Uit deze episode blijkt, dat Jezus volkomen mens was en dat de komende kruisiging niet zomaar een 'kunstje' was, dat je als god maar even kon ondergaan.

Wat doet een mens in doodsangst? Ja, je gaat bidden, vurig bidden.

Je vraagt anderen om mee te bidden en te strijden, maar als het erop aan komt, ben jij degene, die toch die weg moet gaan. Je lijkt alleen, maar je bent niet alleen. Denk maar even aan de troostvolle woorden van Psalm 23: al ga ik door een dal van diepe duisternis... God loopt met je mee.

En soms kruist 'een engel' even je pad om je kracht te geven je weg tot het einde toe af te leggen.

CHAPTER 139 THE CROSS

The crucifixion of Jesus is narrated a few times in the bible, including in Luke 23,33-43. When Jesus was just hanging on the cross, he prayed: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (vs. 34)

At the end Jesus cried out: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (You won't find this cry or prayer in Luke, but Mark (15,34) and Matthew (27,46) do tell about it). Then Jesus called out: *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit"*, and he died (Luke 23,46).

Three outcries to God and God remained silent. As a human being Jesus died. Alone. The irrevocable had to happen.

We know what happened next: Jesus arose from the dead victoriously.

Let's return to these cries to God and a God who remains silent.

Sometimes it's surprising, that there could be times in your life when God remains silent. Yet such a time does bring you further.

God can also remain silent if there is serious sin or idolatry in your life. This is what happened in the Old Testament during the times when the people ran away from God. If God begins to remain silent for such reasons, it is time to convert fully and quickly.

CHAPTER 140 EMMAUS

To some people, dead is dead. All hope is gone. After Jesus' death two disciples returned home to Emmaus, totally disillusioned. That Jesus went to these two people just shows his tremendous love and compassion. During their journey, Jesus explained it all once more to them. You can find the story in Luke 24,13-35. Once they had arrived home, the two men asked their fellow traveller to have a meal at their house and stay for the night. Then they had dinner. *"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him."* (vs. 30-31)

What hope this situation gives, and how special was this prayer that suddenly opened their eyes. And the result? Their hearts were again burning within them and they returned to Jerusalem.

Let us hope that if we get so close to people, the way we are and our prayer may have the same results, so that their heart will 'burn within them' and they will find new hope.

CHAPTER 141 BETWEEN ASCENSION DAY AND PENTECOST

After Jesus' ascension the disciples stayed together to pray, for Jesus had promised them the Holy Spirit (Acts 1,5-8).

"They all joined together constantly in prayer." (Acts 1,14)

It shows that it may at times be a good idea for a group of people to pray together for a promise. And God answered by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2,1-41).

On a managerial level, too, things were sorted out. Now that Judas had died, a twelfth apostle was needed to replace him. They first selected two people. Once this preparation was finished, they started praying: *"Then they prayed, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.'"* (Acts 1,24)

And so a certain Matthew became the 12th apostle.

Prayer for leadership and prayer for choices are important, as we can learn from this episode.

CHAPTER 142 DEVOTION

Following the descent of the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost and Peter's speech, some 3000 people got converted. What about their new lifestyle? *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* (Acts 2,42)

It's interesting to see how this first congregation lived: they made time and space for teaching and for all kinds of social contacts, and they made sure everyone received food (this refers to agape meals, but it certainly included care for the needy). Significant was the time and space for prayer. This is understood to include the ritual morning and evening prayer as well as many more prayers: if you wanted to pray, you just did. These four aspects of life as a community were given shape with devotion. Apparently, they were important to the believers.

CHAPTER 143 CALL FOR HELP

It was to be expected: the leaders of the first church soon found themselves at loggerheads with the 'spiritual leaders' of the time. So Peter and John were arrested. They were produced before the Council. The priests were surprised to hear these simple people speaking so impressively and to see that they had done a miracle (see Acts 3). They were threatened with severe punishment if they'd continue talking about Jesus. Then they were released. Peter and John immediately went to their groups, told everything and the whole congregation joined in a prayer:

"When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. 'Sovereign God,' they said, 'you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.'" (Acts 4,24-31)

Whilst they were praying like this, the whole place was moved, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke freely about God.

Great, such a moving communal prayer.

CHAPTER 144 REORGANISATION

As long as an organisation is small, everything is easy to manage. But the fact is that this first church grew very fast. At some point people at the bottom of the organisation protested because those speaking Greek (the foreigners) found that, compared to the widows of the Jews, their widows were neglected when it came to the daily handouts. This passage shows that this church had set up an entire welfare network. Only, it did not function properly. Was the problem swept under the carpet? No, it wasn't. Did they form all sorts of study groups and workshops, pushing the problem forward? No, they didn't. The 12 disciples called a meeting of the whole church, and said they couldn't do everything themselves. If they wanted to give more time to this practical social care, the teaching of God's Word would suffer, so the solution was to appoint a special management team. *"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."* (Acts 6,3)

And what will the 12 disciples do? *"We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."* (vs. 4)

And this is how it was done, by specialising and setting priorities. So it did not become an either-or situation, but an and-and situation. It shows that social care is important, AS is good biblical teaching, AS is prayer.

CHAPTER 145 MURDER

One of the people who had been chosen during the reorganisation was Stephan. He was very active in caring, but also in preaching, and miracles and signs were done by his hand as well. This was a recipe for disaster. Stephan was arrested. The Jewish Council did not know what to do with him, the religious conflict escalated, the leaders dragged him out of the city in rage and Stephan was stoned. It was a religious murder of a believer and it unleashed the persecution of followers of Jesus. Stephens last words are worth noting: *"While they were stoning him, Stephan prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'"* (Acts 7,59-60)

It is remarkable how similar these words are to those of Jesus at the cross. This gives food for thought: what is someone's, or your, last prayer? And why?

CHAPTER 146 INTERCESSIONS

The Book of Acts shows that prayer was normal and took place in all kinds of forms and situations. A follower of Jesus was 'on the way' (this was what believers were first called: they were not called Christians until later) and so he or she personally prayed for everything, as well as took part in prayer meetings. On a number of occasions special moments of prayer are mentioned in Acts.

- When Samaria accepted God's word, the apostles sent Peter and John from Jerusalem: *"When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 8,14-17)
- Saul was persecuting the Christians, for which purpose he went to Damascus: he had a meeting with Jesus in glaring light, and ended up blind in Damascus. A Christian, Ananias, was given order by God to pray for Saul. *"Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 9,17)
Saul regained his sight, became a believer, stopped his persecutions and started to spread the gospel of Jesus (and, consequently, got persecuted himself).
- Peter visited the village of Joppe. A woman called Dorcas lived there. She did a lot of good, but fell ill and died. Peter was brought to the scene. *"Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed."* (Acts 9,40) Dorcas got up, alive.
- Peter was arrested by Herod and thrown into prison. *"So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him."* (Acts 12,5)
An angel set him free. Deep in the night he arrived at the house where people were just praying for him. At first they couldn't believe their prayers had already been heard.

- In Lystra Paul performed a miracle (Acts 14,8-11), so the people thought Paul was a god. He explained that he wasn't, but that this was about the real God. It all resulted in a riot and Paul was stoned and dragged outside the city. It looked as if he was dead. *"But after the disciples had gathered round him, he got up."* (Acts 14,20)
Standing around someone and praying for him or her can lead to a most 'uplifting' result.
- Paul was shipwrecked on Malta. The father of the governor of this island was ill. *"Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him."* (Acts 28,8)

Why are these special incidents mentioned? Because God sometimes does great miracles in answer to our prayer for people. But why don't these miracles happen every time we pray? We don't know. And this will remain a reason to pray and ask God.

CHAPTER 147 BEYOND SEGREGATION

As a religious Jew you did not associate with non-Jewish people. This segregation was meant to keep the people 'clean'. It was a consequence of some of the rules for living that were laid down in the Law of Moses. It did not occur at all to the Jews who came to believe in Jesus that the Message was meant for the entire world, although Jesus had told them a few times. How to break through a system of segregation? What follows is Acts 10 and 11, which tell the story of Cornelius, a Roman army officer based in Caesarea. This man believed in God, but he wasn't aware of Jesus or the Holy Spirit at all. An angel appeared to him in answer to his prayers (Acts 10,4) and told him to send for Peter. Peter was in prayer (Acts 9,9) and had a special vision that shows that there is in fact no difference between ritually clean and unclean. Then he heard a knock on the door and two men from the gentiles asked Peter to come with them. Because of this vision Peter dared to do so and dared to cross the threshold of the house of this 'gentile' officer. Peter is given the opportunity to explain the Good News; the officer and all who were present came to faith and were filled with the Holy Spirit. Seeing these signs Peter said, *"Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."* So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10,47-48)

Later, when Peter told it in Jerusalem, it caused great commotion among the Jewish Christians. But after Peter had thoroughly explained and clarified the situation, the Christian Jews accepted that 'gentiles' now belonged to them as well. *"When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."* (Acts 11,18)

And so it ended, with a prayer of praise and thanks. They had passed a crucial point: God's salvation includes the gentiles, i.e. non-Jewish people. This is THE turning point in the development of Christianity.

CHAPTER 148

PRAYER BEFORE A TASK AND A MISSION

You may ask yourself at times where the habit of praying for someone comes from, if you see that someone is prayed for and the person receives a blessing before starting a certain task. You can find a clear example of this in Acts: *"In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."* (Acts 13,1-3)

It appears to be a proper biblical custom to pray for people and situations in this sort of cases and to 'bless' and send them off to fulfil a task.

Another example can be found in Acts 14,23: *"Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."*

CHAPTER 149 PLACE OF PRAYER

Sometimes people did not have enough money for their own place of worship. The solution was usually that believers went outside the city and chose a quiet place to meet for prayer. This seems to have been the done thing, as Acts 16,12-13 shows. *"And we stayed there (in Philippi) several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there."*

A fixed place of prayer apparently is of great value, as is the fact that you go there for prayer regularly. In the above example this meant at least once a week. The question is: what or where is your place of prayer and when do you pray? Interesting and challenging questions to follow up on.

CHAPTER 150 PRISON AS A PLACE TO PRAY

Whereas the belly of a big fish (Jonah's story) is the most unusual place to pray in the Old Testament, in the New Testament it is a prison.

Paul and Silas were arrested and thrown into prison.

"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose." (Acts 16,25-26)

Eventually this led to Paul and Silas' release and the prison guard's conversion. Apart from being an interesting story, we can learn from it that no matter how difficult and impossible a situation is, there is always reason to pray and sing God's praise.

CHAPTER 151 THE UNKNOWN GOD

When Paul is in the city of Athens, he is struck by the fact that there are so many statues of gods. His speech shows that he didn't brand all this as stupidity and backwardness. He dealt with it wisely: *"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god."* (Acts 17,23)

Paul didn't embark on a lengthy argument about art or idol worship, but focused on what it is about: to whom do you direct your prayers; who is God? The Greeks had left some room for an unknown god in addition to all known gods, which together formed the Pantheon of Greek mythology as we call it now.

This altar also prompts us to think about whether we know God or not. Do you really know God? Or does He remain a stranger in your prayers? God wants to be known. You may call Him by name and He wants to know you. If you are not entirely sure about all this yet, this may be the time to take the plunge. It is an adventure to get to know God. It starts with honest prayers.

CHAPTER 152 NO HEARSAY

"Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.'" (Acts 19,13)

This of course didn't work and these people who drove out evil spirits even got injured in the process. Why is that?

Apparently, you either know Jesus personally and personally received the Holy Spirit, and then you can act on the basis of this authority.

Otherwise you can't.

So if you don't know the Lord personally and haven't received the Holy Spirit in this personal way, you also won't have this spiritual authority. Spiritual forces and powers will not submit. It is very dangerous to act in spiritual dimensions if you act on hearsay. It's better to keep a safe distance from the invisible world, for you won't have any command over it.

You can only call on God's authority if you know Him directly.

CHAPTER 153 A FAREWELL PRAYER

"When Paul had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship." (Acts 20,36-38)

This was the farewell at Milete.

Then the group continues on its way to Tyre.

"But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray and said goodbye to each other." (Acts 21,5)

Paul knew that this journey would not end well; he would be taken prisoner in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit gave revelations about this in every city. Nevertheless, Paul knew that he did have to make this journey. Therefore, wherever he goes it ends with prayers of farewell and sadness. Farewell prayers and 'prayers in tears' are real prayers that are a normal part of our lives. In those tragic moments, prayers make the sadness lighter to bear.

CHAPTER 154 COURAGE

Paul had been taken prisoner and was led before King Agrippa and governor Festus in Caesarea.

"Paul replied, "Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." (Acts 26,29)

You need guts to dare and say or pray something like this. You can only do it if you're pretty sure about what you have received from God and if you know who you are in Jesus Christ. Then appearances and status no longer count, only who you are on the inside. The situation pictured can give you courage, strength and the trust that if ever it is you who is standing before people in power, you can be yourself and you can be a witness to God.

CHAPTER 155 A SHINING EXAMPLE

Paul was transported to Rome when the ship they were on almost went under in a storm. Everybody was terrified and they could hardly eat. Then something happened. Paul stood up before them and said: *"Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head."* After he had said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. " (Acts 27,34-36)

This must have been a bizar moment. Imagine you were with them, mortally afraid in the hold of that ship. Yet you can see the effect of the prayer and the personal example.

And how did it end? They ran aground on Malta and everyone was saved.

CHAPTER 156 BE ENCOURAGED

Paul was on the last part of his journey as a prisoner on his way to Rome. This part of the journey went from Puteoli over land.

"And so we came to Rome. The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged." (Acts 28,15)

It is a precious and very important experience when you are in a stressful situation and people come to encourage you. It can fill your heart with a prayer of thanksgiving and you can pluck up courage again. Just try to remember whether you have ever been in such a situation: that you were encouraged by such an encounter and had the courage to pray. And think of the people for whom you have been such an encouragement, so that someone else plucked up courage and could pray again.

CHAPTER 157 THE PEACE AS PAUL GAVE IT

Paul has written quite a number of letters. He wrote to believers in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica, etc., and through his letters to them he has written to all of us. It is striking that he starts every letter with a blessing:

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. 1,7; see too 1 Cor. 1,3, 2 Cor. 1,2, Eph. 1,2, Philip. 1,2, Col. 1,2, 1 Thess. 1,1, 2 Thess. 1,2, Titus 1,4, Philemon 1,3)

The blessing in his letters to Timothy is a bit longer:

"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." (1 Tim. 1,2, 2 Tim. 1,2)

It is beautiful that the letters begin like this and the reader is addressed like this. The question that springs to mind is: how do we address other people? In fact, we should approach each person and every group like this: with the wish and the prayer that God would give this person or group His shalom, and that God would have mercy on this person or group.

This doesn't mean that that's where it ends and there is nothing to discuss any more. Just look at the rest of the letters. Paul mentioned everything: the good things and the evil, and the sins, but also the way out of problems.

CHAPTER 158 PAUL'S PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Apart from the blessing, there is also a prayer of thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter to the Romans.

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you." (Rom. 1,8-10)

These verses show how involved Paul was with the ups and downs of the Christians in Rome. *"...that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."* (Rom. 1,12)

This prayer and this commitment are good examples of how you can encourage each other.

CHAPTER 159 WHO DO YOU WORSHIP?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul gives a very clear outline of the most fundamental considerations and choices people are faced with. Do you take the way of God and His grace or do you take the way of man, the flesh and sin? So people will have to weigh up and think about who or what they worship, and who or what has their highest priority. For that is in fact what you worship.

"They (people) exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised. Amen." (Rom. 1,25)

"Furthermore, since they did not think it worth while to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-baters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless."

(Rom. 1,28-31)

This passage continues on the thought that if God isn't No. 1, the door is opened to all sorts of despicable things. But if you do know God, highly principled ethical and social behaviour may be expected. *"To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life."* (Rom. 2,7)

Do you seek yourself or do you seek God? Do you serve yourself or do you serve God? Do you worship your own interests or do you worship God and serve others? Serious questions, which we have to weigh up in our personal prayers and give an honest answer to.

CHAPTER 160 HELP

Paul argues very consistently in the Letter to the Romans: who do you serve, what is this battle between our flesh (your egocentric desires) and the spirit (God's purposes), and what about sin and grace? How is it possible that I want to do what is good, and yet I choose so easily what is evil, and do that? Help, I'm getting stuck in this conflict, for I feel a prisoner of sin, which apparently reigns over my body.

And then Paul cried out the following prayer for help: *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Rom. 7,24)

So it is possible to escape, to be saved and changed. God's Spirit is part of this process. "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, *"Abba, Father."* (Rom. 8,15)

Our prayer for help changes into a real talk with God, who is our Father. What a great new relationship are we going to get with the Eternal. And if we have even the tiniest doubt about whether this relationship with God is there to stay, we will be given mighty support: *"Christ Jesus, who died, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."* (Rom. 8,34) Nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus, whatever life will bring (you can read it in Rom. 8,35-39). With these certainties I know I can pray and may pray.

CHAPTER 161 TALKING BACK TO GOD

But who are you, o man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"

(Rom. 9,20)

Sometimes God reveals things to you, in prayer or otherwise. But what do we do with it then? God has also given very clear guidelines in the Bible, and what do we do with those? Talking back to God or being counterproductive by not following these guidelines will lead to nothing.

Sometimes we also blame God and say that it's all his fault: 'If you hadn't created me like this, then...' This reproach was made as early as in the Garden of Eden: 'If you hadn't created Eve, this problem wouldn't have occurred'. Thin and lame excuses, used to deny your own responsibility. The start of a true life and the beginning of real communication with God starts by accepting who you are and what you are.

CHAPTER 162 CONFESSING IS PRAYING

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Rom. 10,9-10+12-13)

Confessing is a form of prayer, as is calling on God. It is important to apply this to the cornerstones of our faith and salvation. It is good to say this to God. *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen."* (Rom. 11,36)

Our worries and concerns come second.

CHAPTER 163 PRACTICAL

In Romans 12,9-21 Paul makes a number of very practical remarks about how we should live and act as children of God. This list is still very relevant. It would be good for everyone to read it once a month. One of the sudden striking points in this list is *"be faithful in prayer"* (vs. 12b).

This shows that prayer belongs amid all the things that are so extremely important in daily life. Daily prayer is like a necessary vitamin that you need to take every day.

The fact that it is said that you should be faithful in prayer shows that it is apparently not always easy. Yet: do it anyway.

CHAPTER 164 PROSPECT

"It is written: 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" (Rom. 14,11)

Some time in the future everyone will assume this position to pray; there will be a day when everybody will share the same aims and motivation. In a society that is torn apart by divisions and diversity and very contrasting aims, this verse from the Bible is a beacon of hope. There will be a day when everybody will recognise God as God. There will be a day when we will worship and praise this God. And as He will then be THE priority, the beginning and the end, there will be an end to all conflicts, wars, violence and destruction. Finally there will be peace, finally justice, finally rest, finally a positive attitude, finally creativity, and finally development.

Does this mean we have to sit still and don't move until that time? No: everyone is called to put their hands to the plough: *"So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God."* (vs. 12)

CHAPTER 165 STRUGGLE

"I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there." (Rom. 15,30-31)

Paul was supposed to go to Jerusalem, where he expected much opposition. One of the things he was worried about was that he had to give account to the leaders of the church. He was struggling with these matters. Therefore he asked the believers in Rome to pray for him and to join him in his struggle.

If this kind of important matters lie ahead and you're worried, it is very sensible to make this known, so that others may support you in your struggle in their prayers.

CHAPTER 166

ANOTHER PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING BY PAUL

"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed." (1 Cor. 1,4-7)

Are we also able to thank God for grace, blessings, gifts, ministries, prosperity, position etc. that God has given to someone else? This presents us with an interesting challenge, for how easy it is for us to feel envious or put into second place. So let us thank God if He uses or blesses someone else in a special way.

CHAPTER 167 CONCENTRATION

Not everything went like clockwork in the church of Corinth. There were mistakes and misunderstandings. Some very pious people, for example, looked down their nose at sexuality.

"Do not deprive each other (of sex) except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again (i.e. have sex)." (1 Cor. 7,5)

This verse from the Bible should not be used to suggest that prayer and sexuality mutually exclude each other. That would not be true. Only, at times someone was praying for a particular matter in such a committed and involved way (which often included fasting) that this person wanted to concentrate on it fully. Not just sex, but also other things were set aside for a time. If you're married, you can only do this if your partner agrees, and only for a limited period of time. Paul gives a practical guideline, which also serves to put a stop to false piety. Sex is good and praying is good, but there is a time for everything.

CHAPTER 168 TO COVER YOUR HEAD OR NOT TO COVER YOUR HEAD?

"And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head- it is just as though her head were shaven." (1 Cor. 11,5)

So now all Christian women must wear a hat or a scarf to church? There are traditional churches that demand this, and there are very conservative evangelical or pentecostal churches that do the same. So what do you do if you sincerely want to follow the Lord and want your prayers to be answered - wear a scarf?

The answer is no. You may but you don't have to. This is shown in the following verses from Paul's letter to the Corinthians,

- *"If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off." (vs. 6)* Well, most women have short hair anyway these days.
- *"And if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head (with a scarf or a hat)."*
In our culture it is no disgrace for a woman to wear short hair and not wearing a scarf or hat in church isn't a disgrace for anyone.
- *"Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?" (vs. 13)*

Here it says that you may judge for yourself, and the actual practice in a culture determines whether this is good and allowed or not. In practically every church women can choose to wear their hair long or short, and to wear a headscarf or hat or not. Both are proper. So there is no argument to make it obligatory for women to wear headscarfs or hats. Similarly, discussions on long or short hair are pointless. It has nothing to do with your relationship with God, it is simply a matter of taste or what is customary in a certain period. Never argue about it. The sisters can pray the way they are and the way they want to dress themselves, and God will hear their prayers.

CHAPTER 169

IS PRAYING IN TONGUES MORE 'SPIRITUAL'?

Certain groups place great importance on the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing wrong with this, particularly not if equal attention is paid to the fruit of the Holy Spirit and if people are encouraged to develop their gifts. But to say that you are better or have more than some other Christian if you have 'spiritual gifts' (implying that the other is not 'that far' yet), amounts to pure arrogance and spiritual pride. Let us read what the letter to the Corinthians precisely says about this, for people had become totally mixed up on this subject in Corinth:

- *"For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no-one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit."* (1 Cor. 14,2)
- *"He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself."* (vs. 4)
- *"So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?"* (vs. 9)
- *"So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church."* (vs. 12)
- *"For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says."* (vs. 13, this concerns speaking in tongues in the congregation)
- *"For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind."* (vs. 14-15)

All these texts show that no antithesis is created. The one (praying in 'tongues') is not better than the other (praying in understandable sentences). Both serve different purposes. It appears that praying in 'tongues' has a clear function for personal growth (in the faith). For the rest the determining factor is to be whether what happens edifies and builds up the church. These texts also tell us not to put too much value on all kinds of

spiritual phenomena. Paul puts a check on these 'phenomena' in the following texts:

- *"If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three - should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."* (vs. 27-29, 32)
- *"But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."* (vs. 40)

All these spiritual gifts can also result in a complete pandemonium, or they can give rise to terrible manipulation of people. Therefore everything should be done in good order, it should be understandable and accessible and subject to clear judgement. This means that the 'spiritual' is not to be seen as opposite to the mind. Both are needed to pray to God and to serve the church.

CHAPTER 170 COMFORT

The second letter to the Corinthians starts with a blessing, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving that includes a prayer for comfort.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (2 Cor. 1,3-4)

There is good reason for this 'prayer of comfort': Paul is under great pressure, there is struggle and he is in trouble. There is no denying this. On the other hand, we aren't going to leave it at that. The way out of these troubles is by comfort. This comfort is something you receive from God, but it has a rippling effect, extending from one person to the other. By comforting others we show our solidarity with them.

Paul, the writer of this letter, was in great trouble: he was in mortal danger. That is how he learned to trust in God only. Paul trusted God to continue delivering him (vs. 10). The prayers of others for him were an extra encouragement to him:

"...as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour granted us in answer to the prayers of many." (vs. 11)

We too may draw comfort and courage from these situations. We too may ask ourselves the question for whom we are an encouragement and comfort.

CHAPTER 171 FRAGRANCE

"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him." (2 Cor. 2,14)

This prayer of thanksgiving is also a cry of victory: it lets us know that the final victory in Jesus Christ is a fact. This doesn't mean that you are 'invulnerable' and that you will never be faced with disaster or illness, but it does mean that our point of view and our outlook have changed. This gives peace, courage, certainty and strength. It changes the atmosphere and the air: we are spreading the fragrance of Christ. That is a beautiful image, but beware, there are always odour-eaters around. Just don't let them rob your certainty and your blessing from you.

CHAPTER 172 REFLECTING

By praying you establish contact with God. This contact deepens and starts changing you. We can even become 'radiant' personalities, just as happened to Moses. He literally radiated when he had been near God.

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Cor. 2,18)

In the world of theatre people often speak about someone's 'charisma': the stronger someone's charisma, the better he or she 'comes across'. But more important than this kind of charisma is to reflect the presence of God. It would be great if every Christian would reflect God and not his or her own ego.

How does this process of reflecting God get going? By prayer, by starting to talk and walk with God.

CHAPTER 173 LET THERE BE LIGHT

In your life with God you may have sudden moments of enlightenment, when it feels as if a curtain is drawn.

"For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor. 4,6)

Sometimes people talk about Christians being a light. Before anything can happen we in fact have to light up other people's darkness. And once this light is shining in you it will start shining in your attitude. This way light will begin to shine in all the darkness around you and your light may mean something to the many people who are wandering and trying to feel their way blindly. Pray and make the light that is God's glory shine in you.

CHAPTER 174 PRACTICAL AID

"Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor. 9,13-15)

There was dire poverty and need in Jerusalem. For that reason the people in Corinth had organised a special collection to support the church in Jerusalem. These verses from the Bible show the connection between prayer, practical aid and the important spiritual and social consequences. The situation demonstrates that prayer not only brings you close to God in heaven, but it also makes you take very practical action on earth.

CHAPTER 175 MAKE PEACE WITH SOMETHING

Paul was without any doubt an ace. He survived many persecutions and God used him to perform astonishing miracles. And yet he had a 'thorn in the flesh'.

"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it (i.e. this thorn, this torment) away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12,8-9)

Many have philosophised about what this thorn that tormented Paul might be, but it is not what we should focus on. Paul prayed about it and God gave an answer. Paul made peace with it, the situation kept him close to God and kept a check on his human arrogance and pride (vs. 7b). We translate our faith all too easily and readily into an assurance of well-being, but this is of course not to be expected. So let us pray about the things that happen to us. And sometimes you simply have to accept them and make peace with them, just like Paul. We can for example even keep certain situations in place by our prayer, although we should actually allow them to take their course. Many people even keep dying people alive for too long by their prayers, but in our prayer we could rather carry a dying person with courage and peace through death into eternity.

CHAPTER 176 PERFECTION

"Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection." (2 Cor. 13,7-9)

It all sounds a bit mysterious, but a lot of things had gone horribly wrong in the church at Corinth. For this reason Paul prays that they will not do anything wrong any more but only what is right. It's not about Paul having stood the test of trustworthiness, but that this church will again become strong in the Lord and full of truth. Our prayer for others should be like this: for their 'perfection' and for their doing what is right.

CHAPTER 177 COMING HOME

"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"." (Gal. 4,6)

By God's Spirit in us we can suddenly start seeing God as our Father in our prayer. This is not fictitious, but absolute reality. He is there, puts His arms around us, blesses you, walks with you... 'Yes, Lord, You are my Father...' As if you finally come home.

CHAPTER 178 FREE

"But now that you know God - or rather are known by God - how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?" (Gal. 4,9)

You get to know God by talking to Him. By your prayers God knows you too. Once this wonderful contact has begun to gain pace, why turn back to the 'world'? Do you actually know God? Turn to Him and don't let go of Him. He is the absolute, true, real life.

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." (Gal. 5,1)

Free to live. Free to become who you are. Free to enjoy life. Free to relax. Free to love. Free to serve your neighbour. Free to pray.

CHAPTER 179 BLESSED

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." (Eph. 1,3)

Paul's letter to the church of Ephesus starts with a prayer of thanksgiving that deals with blessing and being blessed. Reading it makes you glad. If you write to someone, it may for a change be a good idea to start by listing God's blessings as you see them in the other. Start with a prayer of thanksgiving - and why not?

CHAPTER 180 TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY

"Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory." (Eph. 1,13b-14)

We are His people.

We have been marked with a seal.

We have been given the Holy Spirit.

We have an inheritance.

We are to the praise of his glory.

Let us hope that the people around us notice these wonderful facts.

CHAPTER 181 REMEMBERING YOU

"I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." (Eph. 1,16)

What a great beginning do we see in this short fragment. I have not stopped giving thanks for you. I have not stopped praying for you. I have not stopped thinking of you. I have not stopped seeking God for you. I have not stopped blessing you. I have not stopped

CHAPTER 182 IMMEASURABLY MORE

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Eph. 3,20-21)

Just a short prayer of praise, halfway the letter to the Ephesians. But what a special prayer. There is a power at work within us, it is God's power. God will do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Some time God will show his glory in groups and churches, despite all the divisions there are now. God is involved with humanity, with the generations, with you as well, with your family in the past and present. God will do immeasurably more, also in your generation. What comfort, hope, faith, and expectation this gives us. There is so much we can pray for now!

CHAPTER 183 FULL OF SOMETHING NEW

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Eph. 5,19-20)

Singing, being jubilant, thanking, praying... all these are ways to come to God. He likes to see this new attitude in us. By doing these things, the cheap, shallow, banal and immoral matters disappear.

CHAPTER 184 MAKE USE OF EVERY OCCASION

"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me." (Eph. 6,18)

This verse is written at the end of the passage explaining the spiritual armour, for we are involved in spiritual warfare (vs. 10-17). Even though we have this spiritual armour, we are nevertheless called, whenever the occasion arises, to pray. This demands perseverance, for it isn't always easy to pray. Do it anyway. For whom should you keep on praying? For the brothers and sisters, the people you know, leaders, situations, etc. etc.

CHAPTER 185 PRAYING WITH JOY

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." (Phil. 1,3-4)

Sometimes our prayers are more like lamentations, for example if you're thinking about all the burdens you have to carry, or if a situation is not getting anywhere. But in this passage Paul thanks and prays with joy when he thinks of the people in Philippi. A few lines further Paul said: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best."* (Phil. 1,9)

This can make you glad too: that love may abound more and more in knowledge and insight. We do need this, for let's be honest, don't we all too easily act like a bull in a china shop? We don't always display subtle insight in situations. So there is every reason for prayer, but it can be prayer with joy: we may grow in love and depth of insight.

CHAPTER 186 HELP

"For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." (Phil. 1,19)

This verse from the Bible shows that the prayers and help given by the Spirit of Jesus (the Holy Spirit) have an effect on each other and apparently increase each other. This is a promising thought: if I pray, God's Spirit will help me.

CHAPTER 187 BOW

...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2,10-11)

All the living and the dead, all angels, powers and authorities will recognise Jesus as Lord, the Victor, the Saviour and Redeemer. One day everybody will take part in this prayer of recognition and respect. It is great that we may pray this already and bow our knees for the Lord of lords and the King of kings.

CHAPTER 188 PRESENT YOUR REQUESTS TO GOD

"The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4,6-7)

First of all we are encouraged by the remark that God is always near and that we may openly and honestly tell everything to God. Not that this can be used as a trick, as in 'we just start thanking for what we want and then we'll get it'. This Bible verse does not suggest that we assume any calculating or claiming behaviour. It suggests a different attitude. And eventually our prayers will be fulfilled by the peace of God, despite any difficult situations. God's peace in your struggle: what strength and certainty may we draw from this.

CHAPTER 189 A PRAYER OF HOPE

Paul begins his letter to the Colossians with a prayer of thanksgiving too, *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints - the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven."* (Col. 1,3-5)

Paul sketches a few things in broad outlines: you can be encouraged by the faith and love of others; you can be encouraged by how people deal with each other, for example in what they do for each other and in their solidarity. You can also be encouraged by the certainty of the hope that is stored up for us in eternity. All these things can give your prayer wings.

CHAPTER 190 PRAYING FOR SOMEONE ELSE

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

Note that Paul doesn't pray this for himself, but for others. So if you notice lack of wisdom, lack of knowledge or insight, or lack of a walk with God in other people, those are the things to pray for. Pray that the other person may receive those things, for that will generate results that will spread joy: knowing God, dignity, good works, a godly life...

CHAPTER 191 AN INHERITANCE

"And give thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." (Col. 1,12)

This prayer of thanksgiving is given a special dimension. We may know that we have received an inheritance in eternity. We won't be left empty-handed in eternity later and we won't be alone in eternity. There will be many 'saints', i.e. people who followed the Lord and have been saved, and therefore live in eternity now. God has even qualified us to share in this inheritance, so we now have an aim to look forward and reach out for. That means we have every reason to say a prayer of thanksgiving.

CHAPTER 192 OVERFLOWING

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." (Col. 2,6-7)

Overflowing with thankfulness ... Count your blessings... Look at what you have received in Jesus... He builds you up, He strengthens you and keeps you... He's got the whole world in His hands... Thank you Lord, that you are my Lord, thank you Lord, that ...

CHAPTER 193 WHAT DO YOU SET YOUR MIND ON?

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Col. 3,2)

It happens so easily: we let our prayers get tarnished by western well-being; or by Hollywood expectations; or by egocentrism or greed. The Bible calls us to 'set our minds on the things above'. When we pray, we should take this as a starting point.

CHAPTER 194

YOUR LIFE AS A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."
(Col. 3,16-17)

Giving thanks to God. These prayers of thanksgiving can take many shapes: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can be a great help in doing so. Not to achieve an emotional high, but to thank God from the heart. This way, everything you do can turn into a prayer of thanksgiving. All your actions, your whole life: a tribute to God.

CHAPTER 195 STAY WATCHFUL

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too..." (Kolos. 4:2)

I always thought that I was the only one whose thoughts sometimes wandered off during prayer. Before I realised it, my prayer had changed into a holiday vision or work-related stress or something else.

Paul is hitting the nail on the head. When you are praying you sometimes need a bit of devotion and at times you have to be watchful, so that you keep praying. And if you pray, don't just pray for yourself; pray for others as well.

CHAPTER 196 EPAPHRAS' PRAYER

"Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured."

(Col. 4,12)

In all my life I've never heard a sermon about this man and his prayer. Nobody knows anything about him. His name appears and disappears. But what a great example for your prayer: for this man prays that others will be strong, that they will stand firm, mature and fully assured in their walk with God. What an example is this Epaphras, what a prayer.

CHAPTER 197 A SHORT PS

"I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you." (Col. 4,18)

This was Paul's PS to his letter to the Colossians. It is striking that he clearly asked for prayer for his imprisonment. This final cry shows that things were not easy. For a moment this enormous giant Paul shows his vulnerability and we unexpectedly glance his emotions. People don't often show their heart of hearts, but if this happens, it is precious. It is not a weakness, but something for which we may pray. 'Lord, remember...'; 'Lord, I am thinking of...'.

CHAPTER 198 THANKING GOD FOR THE OTHER

"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thes. 1,2-3)

Think about the people you know for a while. What do you look at if you do so? Their negative sides or their positive sides? At the start of his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul thinks about their special contributions: their work produced by faith, their efforts made by love, and their endurance. Paul not only wants to think about these great personal features, but he also wants to mention them to God and thank God for these personal contributions. If you think about it, what do you tell God about other people? Is it all complaints, or can we easily list all the good sides of the other? Doing this is very liberating.

CHAPTER 199 STRENGTHENING

"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith." (1 Thes. 3,9-10)

Sometimes you can long terribly for certain people and you would very much like to see them again. Paul felt this too and prayed most earnestly to see his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica again. He also prayed fervently to serve them and strengthen their faith, and to be able to increase their knowledge of the faith and of God. Having said this, he wrote down his prayer,

"Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (1 Thes. 3,11-12)

What a beautiful prayer and blessing is this and what gladness it can bring to you.

CHAPTER 200 RECIPE FOR A HEALTHY LIFE

"Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18)

At the end of this letter, Paul makes a few useful and brief remarks. We could call these three bits of advice the recipe for a healthy life:

- Be joyful always (even in the face of adversity);
- Pray continually (remember the old children's song: take it to Jesus)
- Give thanks in all circumstances (this sets us free and avoids bitterness).

The best advice is to put all this into practice.

CHAPTER 201 OVERWHELMED BY A PRAYER OF BLESSING

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Brothers, pray for us." (1 Thess 5:23-25)

Paul ends his letter with a prayer of blessing, in which he expresses that he hopes that the brothers and sisters will stand with him before the throne of God. He hopes to meet them there, when things here have come to an end. He leaves them with a wonderful wish. We, too, should leave each other with such prayers of blessing - that will give so much encouragement. For it is certain that God will fulfil that prayer. Once we shower others with our prayers and our blessing, we can also ask for prayer for ourselves.

CHAPTER 202 AN EXAMPLE

"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring." (2 Thess 1:3-4)

What a contradiction: becoming stronger through trial. And what a trial: persecution and oppression. That seems quite remote from our lives. And yet in the world of today some Christians are persecuted. They must surely ask themselves from time to time: 'If there is a God who loves me, how come this happens?' We know that nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus. And His love is not dependent on effort, trials or even worse. But is it worse? Paul saw it all as a reason to thank God for the people in Thessaloniki and all they endured. He thanked God because he saw that their trouble increased, rather than decreased, their faith, he saw that the love and care grew rather than lessened. It is quite remarkable that Paul tells of it everywhere: they are an example of comfort and strength. And that still applies today.

CHAPTER 203 HONOUR WHERE HONOUR IS DUE

"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you." (2 Thess 1:11-12a)

Do we ever pray for someone to be worthy of God's calling in a special way? A special calling from God: it concerns power, doing the right thing, faith at work. Not for the glory of it – the person is a means not an end. All the glory eventually goes to Jesus. For it brings glory to Jesus if we are used to bring about beautiful or wonderful things: deo gloria: all honour to God. And we need to be aware of that, whether we do our deeds in secret, or whether everyone knows what we do: all honour to God.

CHAPTER 204 CERTAINTY

"But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth."
(2 Thess 2:13)

This prayer of thanks shows that it was clear to Paul that these believers in Thessaloniki were saved. What a certainty to be thankful for. How does this process of salvation work? Through 'sanctification by the Holy Spirit' and through 'belief in the truth'. These two concepts fit into one another: God's work (the Holy Spirit) and our faith in Jesus (He is THE truth).

Beside this call to thankfulness, Paul leads us in prayer: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." (Thess 2:16-17). That prayer still encourages us today: to receive comfort and to be strong and do what is right.

CHAPTER 205 PROGRESS

"Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith." (2 Thess 3:1-2)

Progress can invoke obstruction, or people who just come along for the ride. Something special can be countered with spirits of confusion. Paul, remarkably, prays to be spared from such people. Why? Because they are a drain on time and energy. Time and energy that could be better spent: in the spreading of the gospel. So, just like Paul, we need to pray for discernment, for what is good and right can still attract spirits of confusion and evil people today.

CHAPTER 206 PEACE

"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all." (2 Thess 3:16)

This wish for peace, this prayer for peace is very interesting. For it does not only concern peace with God, but peace in every aspect including social peace. It is easy to pray for peace with God. But just as much prayer for peace is needed in society, peace instead of war, peace instead of violence, peace at work, peace in the street, peace in politics.....

CHAPTER 207 REPENTANCE

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service, even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.."

(1 Tim 1:12-13a)

In this prayer of thanks Paul poses two opposing issues. In spite of his very disreputable past God wanted to use him. God gave him the strength to fulfil a special service and purpose. Do we thank God, when we see how much someone's conversion changes him/her? Do we thank God when he wants to use such a person? From persecutor to evangelist, who ended up suffering many trials. God's Kingdom is unpredictable. But we need to believe that prayer and repentance avails much.

CHAPTER 208 THE PUBLIC REALM

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." (1 Tim 2:1-2)

This is a much forgotten passage in the Bible. We've been so scared off by the so-called separation between church and the state, that we often only pray for what goes on in the Christian arena. But that concept is faulty. There is no separation between the secular and the sacral. All of it is God's territory, and we are at liberty to pray for the public sector, for politics, for people in high places, for the government, for local council, for the police, for the cabinet, for elections, etc.

And what should we expect as the outcome of all that praying? Peace and quiet, dignity, a society in which solidarity and neighbourly love can function.... This Bible verse is an amazing call to prayer.

CHAPTER 209 ATTITUDE

"I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing." (1 Tim 2:8)

Lifting up holy hands is a sign of blessing and surrender. It is a much better way to pray than with a clenched fist, which also happens. The latter part of this verse refers to it: pray 'without anger or disputing'. Why? Because we are not open to the Holy Spirit's inspiration, because anger consumes us, and hinders our prayer. The bible verse really refers to dispute between people. But that does not mean that we cannot express our anger before God – have a read in the Psalms.

CHAPTER 210 SCOPE

"For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Tim 4: 4-5)

What does that mean? In the previous verses Paul warns of false teachings that dishonour marriage, or food. They often speak of 'higher knowledge' (gnosis), but watch out that we are not deceived. We may, with thanksgiving, enjoy everything. That gives us scope to relax. Some Christians feel that it is sinful to enjoy something... But enjoyment is allowed, it is part of God's blessings.

CHAPTER 211 PRIORITIES

"The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives." (1 tim 5:5-6)

That seems a bit harsh. But let's put it into the context of its time. Widows were supported by their children or other relatives. In return for this bed and board, widows helped in the household, with the bringing up of the children, with the laundry and the gardening (food). So they were very busy. Widows who lived alone became a liability, so the church took care of the support for the people who had nobody - a noble act of neighbourly love. The result was that these people suddenly had too much time on their hand and began to gossip, distract others from their work, or lead an immoral life. Especially the latter was very unacceptable, as it abused the system of provision. So if they really could not think of anything useful to do, they had better pray all day and all night.

CHAPTER 212 LIFE-LONG BONDS

"I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers."

(2 Tim 1:3)

There was an special bond between Paul and Timothy who was like a son to him. He expresses this bond in prayer. These two people sometimes missed each other. Timothy had often travelled with Paul. Everyone who has travelled with the Continentals, knows that life-long bonds can develop. Such experiences are very precious.

Time came that Paul did not see Timothy anymore. They wrote, they continued to pray for each other. And without any ulterior motive: pure, through Jesus and their service to God.

CHAPTER 213 BE SENSIBLE

"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart." (2 Tim 2:22)

Timothy was quite young. Paul gives him wise counsel. Much can appear captivating or interesting when one is young. But courage is needed to look beyond what are but temporary and exciting desires. Eternal desires are far, far more desirable: justice, faithfulness, love, peace, prayer, a pure heart. Much more can be experienced there than on the superficial road of temporal gratification.

CHAPTER 214

THANKFUL FOR WHAT GOD DOES IN OTHERS

"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (Philemon 4)

An encouraging verse showing how we can thank and pray to God, when wonderful things are happening in someone's life. A great way to encourage each other.

CHAPTER 215 PRAYER FOR RELEASE

"And one thing more: prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers." (Philemon: 22)

Prayer can have amazing results. In this case prayer brought about Paul's release. Prayer can have an impact on all kinds of situations, but we should not expect prayer to be answered if we express self-centred fairy tale wishes.

CHAPTER 216 DON'T ALIENATE YOURSELF

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."
(Heb 4:7)

Another Bible verse that tells us not to shut God out, if he answers our prayers. Don't get hardened in your own desires, your own ways, or in evil or detestable practices.

CHAPTER 217 WE MAY STAND BEFORE GOD

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."
(Heb 4:16)

Approaching the throne of grace and approaching God is like praying. Do make sure that you realise where you are when you pray: before God's throne. Is that a moment to be afraid because of a misdemeanour, a sin? No, it is the throne of grace. We may appear before God and speak with Him. And do be aware that help comes in God's timing.

CHAPTER 218 RELEASED FROM FEAR

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and once made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (Heb 5:7-9)

This can be a great stumbling block: why do certain things happen? In this bible text we see that Jesus was released from fear as an answer to his prayer, but he had to continue on to the bitter end, that is, death. God could have let him walk a path without suffering, but that would not have saved mankind. We can draw comfort from this situation: what is the ultimate purpose of an awful situation in which we find ourselves? Often we don't find out until afterwards. Jesus' struggles can comfort us: he, too was afraid, he, too, struggled in his prayers and called on God. . . . A notion that can bring us great comfort.

CHAPTER 219 FIRST AND FINAL CONTACT

"Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."
(Heb 7:25).

We can come to God, we can get to know God, we can meet with God. Prayer is the way to do that, which runs via Jesus. For we as humans are imperfect and fall short of the glory of God. But thanks to Jesus we can still come before God. He pleads for us, he is our connection. Thanks to him we have 'first and final contact'.

CHAPTER 220 PRAYER IS FOR EVERYONE

"Because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." (Heb 8:11b).

Such a small sentence can say so much. Knowing God, talking with God is no longer for a chosen few who are especially educated, neither does it require particular qualifications. Everyone can know God, everyone can pray: large or small, young or old, it does not make any difference who you are. No-one is too insignificant, too poor, or too miserable. (For example, we can read in Heb 10:19-22 how we can freely come before God.)

CHAPTER 221 REVERENCE AND AWE

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Heb 12:28)

Worshipping God, talking to God, praying with reverence and awe. In some prayer meetings we can hear people pray as if they 'were at school with God'. They are telling God what he should do. Of course that is not how it works. God is God. He gives us eternal life, a new heaven, a new earth, a new city, a new kingdom based on love and justice. Wonderful, for that is what it's all about. Let us approach God who is the Lord of lords with reverence and awe in this life.

CHAPTER 222 PRAYER AS FRUIT

"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name." (Heb 13:15)

God likes to hear from us. That is much appreciated fruit. He likes to hear us talk, pray, sing,

CHAPTER 223 A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

"Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way." (Heb 13:18)

It's wonderful to be able to pray for each other, which can be done in all frankness if we know that the other person desires to live honourably. For how can we pray for dishonourable concerns? Living honourably results in a clear conscience; walking honourably leaves scope and security for prayer. Some people struggle with their conscience. The answer to that comes from considering whether we are living honourably.

CHAPTER 224 PRAYER FOR WISDOM

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt." (James 1: 5-6)

Everyone lacks wisdom, if truth were told. But we may approach God for more wisdom. And God will give it to us. We receive if we don't doubt. Wisdom is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in fact the Holy Spirit is a kind of 'tool box' with 9 gifts (tools) – see 1 Cor 12:4-11. We may receive God's Spirit as a motivating power, energy on the path with God.

CHAPTER 225 IS OUR MOUTH A FRIEND OR A FOE?

"But no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing." (James 3:8-10)

Something to think about. In meetings, while on tour, in congregations and churches we praise wholeheartedly and abundantly, but shortly afterwards we might murder someone with our words. How can we control our tongue? Not by removing it, but by disciplining it. And the Holy Spirit will provide us with the power to do so. Sometimes we need to acquire different attitudes (like not immediately calling someone names). If all kinds of thoughts fight inside us, let's tune in to God, and ask for love and wisdom before answering.

Which does not exclude the potential of honest and open dialogue. But dialogue is quite different from blasting someone with our mouth. There's a bit of wisdom to consider in our prayers.

CHAPTER 226 HONESTY

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you ask on your pleasures."

"Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

(James 4: 1-3, 8)

This bible passage shows that God does not listen when we pray selfish prayers. So it is good to check ourselves: what am I praying, why am I praying, what am I asking for, for what purpose am I praying? Some people think that they can claim racing cars and even horses in their prayers. God does not honour luxuries. If you have the money, you should buy it yourself. God is not concerned with such matters. Let's guard our passions, our greed and our self-centredness, for they can easily infiltrate our prayers. And let's cleanse ourselves from such concerns so that we can approach God honestly.

CHAPTER 227 MENTAL HEALTH

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." (James 5:13)

James gives us a very practical prescription for mental health in two short sentences. A particular experience warrants a particular expression. We keep the balance by observing that.

CHAPTER 228 PHYSICAL HEALTH

"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." (James 5:14-18)

If we take these texts out of context, we could be too quick to pray for the sick with disastrous results, because they would not get better. Body, spirit and soul are intimately connected, so we need to consider carefully what exactly the causes of a sickness symptom are. Many sicknesses have a psychological origin, which may need to be addressed first. Spirit and soul need to be made whole first. The greatest cause of many complaints is sin. We need to confess our sin, and the damage done to others needs to be healed as much as possible before we are 'righteous' in the biblical sense. After that we can consider the aspects of physical sickness, for the lack of spiritual restoration can block the physical healing.

Obviously, some sicknesses have a completely different origin. So it is sensible and wise not to have too simple an approach to sickness, prayer and healing.

CHAPTER 229 LIVING HOPE

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you.."

(1Pe 1:3-4)

Peter's prayer of praise expresses a number of wonderful provisions for which we can be very joyous and thankful. In a few words Peter sketches the purposes of our lives: to be a living hope. We are that hope, we show that hope, we are the living proof.

CHAPTER 230 SERIOUS

"Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." (1 Pe 1:17)

We sometimes hide behind the expressive words of our prayers. Don't play hide and seek with God, don't try to twist his arm to get what you want, for he sees through all that, and judges everything honestly without respect for the person (we cannot earn 'Brownie points'). So let's not live, speak, act, or pray superficially while we are here on earth.

CHAPTER 231 HUSBANDS, PAY ATTENTION

"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." (1 Pe 3:7)

Sometimes husbands look down on women in general, or on their own wife in particular. Don't make the mistake of basing that on the bible. There is no room for male arrogance or superiority. God expects men to respect women, and husbands to respect and honour their wife. If they don't, their prayers are hindered; in other words: God does not listen to such men. This is an interesting passage and provides us with food for thought, for there is much from which men exclude the ladies: equal pay, equal rights, equal job opportunities. Let's not fail to pay attention to what God says.

CHAPTER 232 REFLECTION

"The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." (1 Pe 4:7)

Reflection could be the key. People, including believers, are so easily swept along by waves of new emotion, or a 'teaching'. Be moderate in your expression - for fanaticism is a great enemy (it blinds us to the discernment and whisperings of the Holy Spirit) - respect other people's opinions about texts and themes. Love your neighbour, even if he/she thinks very differently.

CHAPTER 233 CONFESSION (1)

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn 1:9)

There is confession to each other and there is confession to God. Confession is a type of prayer. In all our calling on God and asking of God it is important to confess our sins to God regularly. No-one is perfect, and that means that we need to be honest about our failures and our faults. God's forgiveness is based on that honesty: confession.

CHAPTER 234 CONFESSION (2)

"If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God." (1 Jn 4:15)

This is a different type of confession: this is acknowledging, admitting, testifying. The person who clearly states (acknowledges) that Jesus is the Son of God – God will live in this person and he/she in God. And this dialogue is the basis for prayer. So be certain that God is in you and you in him. Acknowledge that Jesus is God's son and your Lord. Then you can be sure that you can talk to God.

CHAPTER 235 FREEDOM TO PRAY

"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The man who fears is not made perfect in love." (1 Jn 4: 16b,18)

Many people are very afraid of God. The question is: why? Sometimes the term 'fear of God' is replaced by being afraid. But the 'fear of God' is nothing more than great respect for God, communing with Him honestly and openly, and obeying Him. We don't need to be afraid of God. We are free to approach Him, free to commune with Him, free to speak with God. Perfect love – that is, Jesus Christ – releases us from fear, punishment and judgement. Even more: if we open our heart to Him, Jesus will fill our lives with His love. And thanks to that love we can love others, and act out of love and compassion, which is a life-long process and the basis for communication: prayer to God, love for God, and God's love for us are fundamental.

CHAPTER 236 PRAYING ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL

"This is the assurance we have in approaching God, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him." (1 Jn 5:14-15)

It seems like a bit of algebra, reading it like that. But what it comes down to is this: if your prayer is answered, you know that the prayer was according to God's will. If it is not answered, it was not according to God's will. And the latter creates a tension between how we ourselves view prayer and what we pray. Sometimes we just babble on and on and pile our experiences, wishes, etc. onto God. Of course there is nothing wrong with unloading it all. But on occasion we might prefer to see answered prayer. And there is a fundamental question. For if, before praying, we considered how God might view our subject/request, there might be far fewer believers frustratedly wondering why their prayers are not answered. Let's question ourselves: is this according to God's will? Is it selfless or selfish? Do I want control or do I want to serve. Is this according to God's will?

CHAPTER 237 GREAT

"Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well." (3 Jn:2)

John sends a kind of 'postcard' to someone called Gaius. The above is the opening sentence. Isn't that great? Remarks to make a person warm, joyful and thankful. That can teach us something on how we approach others: I pray that things will go well with you, I pray that your life may be blessed and successful, I pray that you will achieve your objective, I pray It is so easy to do the opposite: we can so easily be critical, and undermine what people are trying to achieve. Let's learn from this wonderful example, and pray the best for others, whether we completely understand them or not, even if we don't entirely agree with them.

CHAPTER 238 UPBUILDING

"But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life." (Jude 20-21)

Loving Continually is not an easy thing to do. Disappointments, unpleasant experiences and trauma can cross our path. How do we handle those? The above is a useful approach:

- Build yourselves up in your faith: for example by reading the bible, walking in nature and searching for contact with creation and with God, etc
- Pray in the Holy Ghost. Prayer helps to stay in the love of God.
- Keep hold of expectations, hold on to the bigger picture of ideals and purposes
- Keep believing in God's care, in what is good
- Expect eternal life, that will help you to rise above it all, for another world is coming, a kingdom of justice.

We can remain in God's love by observing all these things.

CHAPTER 239 JUDE'S PRAYER

No, this is not the Judas who betrayed Jesus, but the Judas who was the brother of James (disciple and apostle). This Judas does not come with a traitor's kiss, but with a wonderful closing prayer at the end of his letter - Jude 24-25:

"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore. Amen!"

He prays a wonderful promise for us: to stand without fault, without falling, glory, joy ... What a wonderful prayer.

CHAPTER 240 JOHN'S PRAYER

John, the last apostle still alive, is imprisoned on the Island of Patmos. He receives a unique vision of what will happen in the future. We can read this in 'Revelation', the last book of the Bible. John opens with the following prayer of blessing:

"Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." (Rev 1:4-6)

CHAPTER 241 MEALTIME PRAYER

At the beginning of Revelation John writes 7 letters to 7 well-known churches. These letters possibly typify seven eras in church history. According to some bible teachers the last letter to Laodicea refers to our own era. In this letter to Laodicea we read the following (Rev 3:20):

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me"

When we eat, we often speak openly and honestly and talking can clearly be seen as prayer. Isn't it hard to believe, wonderful, precious, and amazing that the Eternal One wants to come in and closely and friendly relate with us? Sometimes we have to stop making our own noise to even hear the knock on the door. That God wants to come in, not force his way in, not break the door down - only burglars do that.

Hard to believe though it may seem, the Almighty God loves us and respects us and waits and knocks: waits to speak with us, to eat with us, in our own home, so to speak.

CHAPTER 242 EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE PRAISES

When reading 'Revelation', we see a quick succession of scenarios in which we notice an ever increasing adoration for God:

- 24 elders on thrones, around the throne of God, falling down before him in worship (4:4,10, 5:8,14, 11:16, 19:4)
 - four living creatures before God's throne, worshipping God (4:6-9)
 - huge numbers of angels adoring God (5:11, 7:11)
 - all creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea worshipping
 - a multitude too great to count, adoring (7:9).
- Note what is specifically mentioned: "from every nation, tribe, people and language"; so even the ethnic conflict is finally resolved: unity in diversity. Another great multitude is mentioned in 19:1, 6
- martyrs adoring (7:13-17)

It would be an interesting exercise to read up on exactly what they all pray, when they kneel, or fall down. In fact, everything and everyone comes in adoration: literally the whole of creation. Whether we want to or not, everything and everyone will one day praise God, which is an interesting thought if one finds a particular people group less congenial, or doesn't particularly care for birds, or animals, or fish. Personally, I am looking forward to being part of that great multitude, won't that be amazing!

CHAPTER 243 INCENSE AS PRAYER

"..and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." (Rev 5:8)

In the Old Testament incense has a clear function in the temple service, with specific guidelines for use. But if that whole temple service is a former shadow of what is to come in the New Testament, we might wonder about the significance of the incense and it's the prayers. Prayers have a special essence for God, sweet smelling, wonderful, lighting up eternity.

It is mentioned again: *"Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand."* (Rev 8:3-4).

Lastly: about the prayers of the saints. Who are those saints? The big names from church history? Yes, it includes them, but every person who wants to follow the Lord is sanctified; that means, set apart for a special purpose. The blood of Jesus Christ sanctifies them, they get new garments in eternity and will serve God and 'reign' with him. So you and I are saints, rather than 'holy Joe's' (hypocritical pretend Christians).

CHAPTER 244 MARTYRS' PRAYER

"..I saw under the alter the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood? Then they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed." (Rev 6:10-11)

That seems an easy response. But the prayer of the martyrs is very meaningful. God's revenge for the blood of the martyrs will come upon the godless people on earth. And the martyrs will get special treatment:

"These (the ones in white robes) are those who have come out of tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:14-17)

They get a special place and a special treatment – how comforting and just.

CHAPTER 245 PRAYING TO IDOLS REQUIRES REPENTANCE

"The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands, they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood – idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts." (Rev 9:20-21).

We sometimes hear: 'if there is a God, why doesn't he deal with ...' But it isn't as simple as that. The day is coming when anger and evil will end, and a time of judgement will come. We repeatedly observe a pause to see if people will repent and return to God. And when that doesn't happen, another judgement follows. Sadly, many will die. What kind of people worship evil spirits/idols? Voodooism comes to mind, or other weird spiritual practices and that is partly correct. But anything can become an idol if we give in to selfish lusts. For example: greed can become an idol: desiring possessions and money above all else. What idols might people have in their lives? It often starts with something small, something that gradually gets out of control, and eventually it takes us over to the exclusion of all else or other values: it has become an idol, and will rule the person like an obsession.

- Murder: consider also economic murder, for example where thousands of people are laid off without social provision, for the sake of shareholders benefits.
- Magic: including the lies in public relations, the power of spin doctors, manipulations of public opinion, etc.
- Prostitution: lack of business ethics or moral boundaries for the sake of making money, including betraying one's business partner – it's all considered fair game.
- Theft: including all manner of fraud, robbery, financial trickery, etc.
- Justice, judgement, faithfulness, care – all fail to be leading principles any longer.

Back to prayer: who or what do you worship?

CHAPTER 246 .. NOT RIGHT IN THE HEAD?

"Then I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water." (Rev 14:6-7)

Here, too, we see the call to worship God. There are no other gods. How amazing, to relate to creation: when we look at it all, surely we can only come to the conclusion that there must be a creator (see also Romans 1:18-23). Every objective scientist says that evolution has never been proven. And in fact it is much more absurd to believe in evolution than in a Creator. But if there really is a Creator, we have to take responsibility, for that makes us no more than stewards. But 'autonomous' people reject even that thought. Imagine that: a God, what nonsense, surely that is from the middle ages? People who believe in God, and pray to him, can't be right in the head. But the day is coming when these blind people will be faced with the call to acknowledge God, for judgement is surely coming.

CHAPTER 247 DON'T WORSHIP FALSE GODS

In the end time - spoken of in the book of Revelation – one could worship a false god. A 'beast, an anti-christ, will take world power, and will claim to be some kind of messiah. His followers will receive a mark, and no-one can do any trading without such a mark. The people, who agree to such a mark, worship their leader. An angel predicts (Rev 14:9-11), that all the followers (i.e. the worshippers) of the beast (which commits unspeakable acts) will come to a dreadful judgement.

"And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who received the mark of his name." (Rev 14:11).

Watch out: being a follower of someone or something comes under the heading of 'worship'. So let's examine ourselves: are we followers of a person, or a trend.. and has it any consequences? Are we sure that God comes number one rather than in second place behind someone or something else?

CHAPTER 248 THE BIGGEST PRAYER

"And I saw ... those who had been victorious over the beast ... with harps given them by God and they sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb. "Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, oh Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Rev 15:3-4)

This huge multitude sings a prayer: they worship God. This kind of bible verse is often at the base of the misapprehension that we will all sit on clouds, playing harps for all eternity, when we die. Fortunately that is not so, which is a great relief for many of us. We do, however, all sing this prayer. We are called to 'reign with Christ' for all eternity. But there are also moments that we all worship God, as mentioned above, and in this case even with accompaniment.

CHAPTER 249 NO MORE PRAYERS OF LAMENTATION

When God has finally dealt with the anti-christ, and with evil, he gives us a 'new heaven and a new earth'. There will be a wonderful new city: the new Jerusalem, a fantastic work of art, and all believers may live there, including people who have suffered great hardship. God has wonderfully specific attention for these people:

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new." (Rev 21:3-5)

There is nothing so normal and human as praying prayers of lamentation. But even that will come to an end in this final scenario. God so wonderfully, sensitively and tenderly deals with all the trouble and pain people have suffered. Finally there is rest, peace, justice, and comfort.

CHAPTER 250 SERVING GOD, AN ETERNAL PRAYER

The new Jerusalem, God's wonderful capital of the new heaven and the new earth, is where we will be.

"...and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads....the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." (Rev 22:3b-5)

Serving is also a form of prayer. What exactly is serving? Having respect, following and honouring what is the highest. Our deeds show whom we serve, which is very important, as we will 'reign for ever and ever'. We honour and respect God and we are his servants.

CHAPTER 251 FINAL PRAYER

At the end of John's Revelation we find the following verse:

"He (Jesus) who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." And John who has just written everything down so faithfully, answers this promise of God with the following short prayer: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev 22:20).

In this world we can justifiably be very concerned about many cares and situations. God calls us to act and walk as followers of Jesus, thus being salting salt and lighting light. But where should we do this? Everywhere in life: society, the economy, politics, church, etc. Even though we are working for his kingdom now, in the 'here and now' it will not become perfect, for that perfect kingdom will be established by the Lord himself. We longingly look forward to that kingdom, with the Lord as the boss, for there is so much trouble and pain in this world. And we can wholeheartedly agree with the final prayer in the bible: "Come, Lord Jesus".

CHAPTER 252 WHAT NOW?

Psalms

When you have put all those chapters on prayer into practice, I suggest you read the Psalms. Start with Psalm 1 and read one every day. Make notes of what you notice regarding the form of the worship, prayer, expression, words used, praise, moans, etc, etc. Recognising all those emotions and situations will enrich your prayer life and your life. It teaches empathy, and it also teaches us that there are not always simple solutions.

Discipleship

From prayer you move on to discipleship. You will begin to follow the Lord, Jesus Christ, and being to put things into practice. There is a useful book called 'The Way', obtainable from Continental Sound, P O Box 81065, 3009 GB Rotterdam).

The message

It will be useful to study the message and intentions of Jesus Christ. Jesus often talked about the Kingdom of God. What does that mean? It is extensively explained in two booklets, 'The Kingdom in Deed' and 'The Kingdom of Justice'. Both (in one volume) can be obtained from Continental Sound (P O Box 81065, 3009 GB Rotterdam, The Netherlands).

The parables

Jesus often brought his message in the form of stories, parables. If you'd like to study this further, we recommend the booklet 'Mega stories' (Also obtainable from Continental Sound)

Praise

Prayer leads us almost automatically to praise and worship. If you'd like to focus in on this, we recommend that you read 'Worship' by Graham Kendrick. **And/or read the book Praise and Worshippers (an in depth study, including historical data) by Leen La Rivière**

Personal contact

If reading this book resulted in a desire to write or talk to someone, please contact Leen La Rivière, P O Box 81065, 3009 GB Rotterdam.

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