THE *WORK* OF PRAYER

Bible Study by Major Lynn Whittaker

AIM:

This study is designed to assist Seniors see that the ministry of prayer is not 'something we do because we're older and unable to be involved in the more 'active' ministries of the corps'.

Prayer is 'active'. It has purpose. It does and has to underpin everything that takes place within the church.

What we need to ask ourselves is:

- how do we pray?
- what are our motives?
- what is the depth of our prayers?

Physically we may not be able to participate in ministry like we used to but the ministry we can undertake anywhere, at anytime, is the vital ministry of prayer.

As you undertake this study you are invited to go slowly. Reflect deeply. Listen to God and what He wants to say to you. Your ministry of prayer may be affirmed. You may be challenged. You may be called to another way of praying. Stay open to the Spirit of God, listen and pray.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

I'm sure we're all familiar with teaching on prayer. Teaching that gives us the how, why, when and buts of prayer. Teaching that tells us that prayer is easy. Teaching that says prayer should be as easy as breathing.

I'm not sure about you but I find maintaining a consistent prayer life is not easy. How often I've said to someone 'I'll pray for you' - only to find weeks later that I either haven't remembered to pray or prayed nowhere near as much as I had intended. Then, I feel so guilty. Has that happened to you? Prayer is work – it takes energy, time, effort and commitment. Not surprising that it is called a '*spiritual discipline*'.

Do you set aside time for prayer? Why or why not?

- Be honest with your reflection. You don't have to share this with anyone if you don't want to. It is not meant to be an exercise in condemnation but to help us either keep working with the discipline we have, regain a discipline lost or begin a new discipline.

What are some of the things that keep us from spending time in prayer?

- Don't rush reflecting on this question. Time spent in honest reflection may reveal some startling insights.

I hope that you enjoy the Senior Adult Discipleship material that we have produced. This has been done in response to requests from older adults in The Australia Territory. Seniors from the Australia Territory have written these studies and we are happy to produce this series.

The topics *Seniors - 'Agents of Change', 'Let Eternity Shape Your Future' & 'Going Deeper, Getting Right'*, have been chosen to speak to the adult generations. These Bible Studies are designed to be used individually, but can equally be used in the group or corps setting. Individuals/ Groups that like to forge ahead and get a whole study done in one sitting can do that, but you can also work at a slower pace just using one of the sub-heading per day/week.

Jennifer Cloke (Major)

Lyn Daines (Major)

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- It may be family, work, health, technology etc. There are all sorts of distractions around us that take our time without us realising. They are not all bad, or bad for us. Whatever the reasons, we can often find ourselves at the end of a day or a week and realise that we did not pray - unless there was a crisis that caught our attention and called us to prayer.

Acknowledging that we could all spend more time in prayer, the question comes, 'What do we pray?'

Many people have prayer lists or forms of prayer that include thanksgiving, praise, and requests for those who have specific needs, but is there more?

Spend some time now in reading Philippians 1:3-11. You might like to use the following suggested method to sink into the Word and hear what God wants to reveal to us. Please adapt this to your particular situation and what will work for you.

> Take time to become still. We cannot savour all God has to say to us if we come with minds and hearts full of the happenings in our day because there will be no room for God.
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> Be still...take some deep breaths in and out. As you breathe, breathe in what you need and want from this time of study (it could be new insight, peace, awareness) and breathe out what is crowding your mind and soul (stress, busyness, dryness). They will still be there at the end of this time of study or this study may resolve some of those issues. Allow yourself to be in the presence of Jesus. Make this time an offering to Him. Allow Him to hold all that is concerning you now.
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> Read Philippians 1:3-11. Try to read from several translations.
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> Read the passage at least three times.
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> As each person reads – slowly, reverently – let the other group members sit with eyes closed, hearing the words and allowing them to sink into their being. Take note of the words and of any words or phrases that are 'speaking' to you.
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> After each reading share in the group, without explanation, which word or phrase 'spoke' to you. There is no judgement with this. No right or wrong. Each is a word given by God. You may hear the same word or phrase each time or different ones may reveal themselves to you.
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> After the third reading write down which words or phrases stand out to you. Take some time to reflect on what God might be saying to you through this word.

The Apostle Paul in his letters has much to teach us about prayer and the discipline of prayer. Many of his letters begin with a prayer. He usually introduces himself and then prays for those he's writing too. Paul is a man of prayer. When it comes to the church at Philippi he begins his letter by telling them that every time he thinks of them he thanks God for them.

What are some of the things that stand out to you about this prayer?

The first half of the prayer is dedicated to what has been taking place in this church. Paul commends the Philippians for their passion and heart for the

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gospel. He sees this church as a living gospel in their city. They are sharing the gospel and living it in their lives.

Paul sees that the Philippians are 'partners' with him. Partnership is a joint participation in a common interest or activity. The Greek word here is *koinonia*, which can also be translated as *fellowship*. *Koinonia* was also the Greek word for a business partnership or a community. Although it develops particular Christian meanings – including the delightful sharing of worship, prayer, and mutual support and friendship – in Paul's world it was the normal word for a business partnership, in which all involved would share in doing the work on the one hand and the financial responsibilities on the other.

What do you consider to be a fellowship? What do you consider to be a partnership? Would you say there is a difference between a fellowship and a partnership?

For Paul there appears to be an intimacy in the relationship he has with this church as they share ministry together. This connection leads him to pray for their continued growth and development in their faith. The rest of the letter is an encouragement on how to continue in the faith and to press on (3:14). One author has suggested that this is Paul's way of being a cheerleader.

I don't know about you but I love being 'cheered on' and I'm sure you do too. Why do you think it is important to us?

Encouragement is a powerful motivator. It can help the most insecure person to believe in themselves. It can help the hardest of hearts to soften. Paul understands this and encourages this church as he shares what he is praying for them.

Paul does this from love. Read verses 9 – 11 again. Why is love so important to our spiritual growth?

It was because of love that God sent His Son into this world so all may receive salvation from sin (John 3:16), and it is love that shows our devotion to Him. Paul prays that the Philippians' love will 'overflow more and more' (vs 9 NLT) and that they will keep 'growing in knowledge and understanding' (vs 9 NLT). This love is not exclusionary and it is directed through spiritual knowledge and moral decisions.

Why is it important to have guidelines on love?

Unbound love can lead to poor decisions and misunderstanding. You only have to look at 'romantic' love in a human relationship to see how far off base it can take us. Love needs to be guided by our continual study of God and our constant commitment to live morally.

When love is guided by bible study and living morally, it becomes passionate and powerful in God's hands. Love guided by knowledge and moral decisions leads to an ability to discern what is excellent. The English translation again does not do full justice to the meaning of the original Greek. The word used here for excellent carries with it the idea of something worthy of our time. In other words, Paul is praying that love will cause us to use our time in a way that furthers the Kingdom of God – confirmed by Paul's use of the adjectives sincere, blameless and complete.

What do the words sincere and blameless mean to you?

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Paul is very particular with the words he uses. His meaning behind sincere is to live a life that is transparent to God and others. Do you find that scary? Paul wants the Philippians to live lives that are an open book, an easy to read testimony. It is often said that the way we live speaks louder than any words we speak.

Paul wants the Philippians to live blameless lives. He wants them to have a love that doesn't cause others to stumble in their faith walk. How pure are our motives? Can you think of the last time you did something out of a selfish motive? None of us have to give this too much thought I'm sure.

And finally Paul wants the Philippians to be filled with the fruit of their salvation or be filled with the fruit of righteousness. This is living with the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5). But take careful notice that the fruit is always an end product. Fruit cannot grow apart from the tree. The fruit we bear will depend on what tree we are growing from. This is why Paul reminds us in this prayer that the fruit of righteousness that others see was given birth in our hearts as a result of the presence of Jesus Christ.

Putting it all together.

Paul's prayer is a thanksgiving to God for the testimony and partnership of the Philippians. This thanksgiving compels him to pray for a continued work in their lives. This growth is based on love and guided by spiritual knowledge and morally right decision making. This love gives them the ability to live lives that are sincere, blameless and righteous.

Does this speak to you about how we are to pray? For ourselves? For our fellow believers? For our Army? Can you feel a fire burning in you to put aside what hinders (i.e. our own human desires and feelings) and pray, really pray, for all those partner/fellowships within our place of worship?

Paul finishes this prayer with a reminder of what or who this is all about. The single passion of Paul is to know Christ and reflect Him. He wants our lives to be living testimonies of the love of Christ for the glory of God.

Paul prays with passion. He prays with conviction. He prays with extreme focus. Paul prays as a man who continues to desire to be radically changed by communion with Christ.

Can this be your focus too?

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