

Tuckingmill Baptist Church, Camborne



June 2020

A few weeks back, Tim Jenkin asked me to put together a few thoughts about “navigating through the ‘new normal’” for the PGP weekly mailing. I hope you don’t think it’s too cheeky of me to copy my thoughts in here, too.

Some of this stuff you may remember me saying last time. We’re certainly now past the initial-panic-response phase of the Virus outbreak. Different churches will have come up their own individual responses, each with some advantages and some drawbacks.

But, just like the Australian outback travel advice: “choose your rut carefully: you’ll be in it for

the next 300 miles”. So my suspicion is that whatever format a church has already opted for, *that* will be their “rut” for much of the rest of the year. But ... where do we go from *here*, our current and chosen “rut”? That is a question that we have rather more time to consider.

Every church around the country now has introduced stop-gap measures. We clearly need to invest our time wisely over these next few months, picking and choosing from the various digital technologies we’ve been forced to adopt,

“test[ing] everything; hold[ing] fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).



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Through a glass ... darkly!

Thoughts on progressing to a "new normal"

So we've managed, by hook or by crook, to get through the initial response to the Coronavirus lockdown. Most churches have established some electronic means of communication and fellowship. But will "normal service(s) be resumed as soon as possible" ... or should we look, even with some excitement, to emerge into a changed church landscape? I think there are three major questions to start addressing now, thinking that whatever "new normal" we settle for, it might not be established until maybe even some time into next year.

1) Maintaining "cyber church" over several more months

- How can ensure that our people continue to be spiritually fed and practically cared for while social distancing continues to be required?

- What about those without any internet connection - and perhaps only a landline?

- What about one-to-one counselling? Isn't that going to be way more difficult to conduct over screen technology, when some people really do need a hug?

- Can (or how can) Holy Communion still be celebrated in line with Scriptural principles when the church cannot gather together? Is physical co-location (and a literal "one bread") necessary?

- How can we promote evangelism, when currently our people do not need even to emerge from their homes to "do church"? Aren't we currently in danger of becoming even more introverted?

- What about "open air" church?

- What about those neighbours we're finally speaking to after Thursdays' "clap for carers"?



- Finally, the youngsters have an excuse to be glued to their screens during church! But what will our youth and children's work look like once this novelty has worn

off (and the youngsters have instructed the leaders how to work the tech)?

2) Handling the backlog

- Funerals, particularly, have already been conducted under strict lockdown conditions, with only minimal attendance. Baptisms, weddings and dedications are typically being postponed - but do they need to be?

- Would it be better for engaged couples to proceed with civil registration of marriages as soon as possible? (Are we putting too much stress on "the big day"?)

- Do baptisms have to be whole-church events? If there is water, "what hinders me from being baptised?" - is it just the lack of PPE, and getting the event live-streamed?

- Will there be a backlog of "thanksgivings-for-the-life-of" to provide closure for bereavements? And of legally-married newlyweds coming to celebrate that new status in church (and with the expected "bit of a do")? And will churches recognise new believers baptised in less usual settings as being properly initiated into the Christian life?



3) Determining what should resume as before, and what should emerge from the lockdown changed for the better

- If it's so much easier "doing church" from our armchairs ... how do we encourage people back to the "real thing"? Have we worked out what we are missing most?

- Or are people (for a while, at least) going to appreciate in person fellowship a whole lot more? Could we capture that?

- Could evening meetings during the cold, dark winter nights be done better (or at least with fuller attendance and participation) using the new technologies?

- So does our having had to re-think "doing church" on the fly, over these last few weeks, give us some pointers as to how our previously normal arrangements could be improved on?

- What meetings might we now prefer to not re-start ... but perhaps substitute with something better?

- If so many extra people have been accessing "online church" during the lockdown ... should we be doing something to encourage that to continue when we're back in our buildings?

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Zoom meetings - "online church":
Still seeking to improve on this,
but we've now settled on weekly meetings as follows:

Sundays: 10.30 and 6.30
Thursdays 7.00

	10.30 a.m.	6.30 p.m. (cafe church)
7 th June	Matthew 15:1-9	Following on from a.m.
14 th June	Matthew 15:10-20	Following on from a.m.
21 st June (Fathers' Day)	Matthew 15:21-39	Following on from a.m.
28 th June	Phil Heaps	TBA
5 th July	Matthew 16:1-12	Following on from a.m.

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How to pray for those you love

Marshall Segal, from *Desiring God Ministries*

(Just note that quite a bit of this presumes these people are already believers
... which won't necessarily be the case for many of us with all of our loved ones.
But ... can these prayers be tweaked slightly for these people? Aren't their needs the same?)

What do you pray most often for the people you love most? The question reveals an uncomfortable amount about us (and our prayers).

First, do we pray for those we love? Prayer is one of the most powerful, thoughtful, loving ways we can love anyone we love. Yet we still often struggle to persevere in prayer for others. With countless compelling reasons to pray — to ask the God of infinite power, wisdom, and love to move in the lives of our friends, family, and neighbours — we find a thousand excuses not to. What some of us need to hear most is simply a reminder to stop and pray for the ones we love.

But if we do pray for them, what we pray really matters. And we often ask God for less than we should. At least I know that I myself have sometimes asked for less than I should — for my wife, my son, my parents, my church family. When we think to pray for others we love, our minds can default to practical, earthly concerns — that God would guard or improve their health and safety, or that he would prosper what they do at work, or that he would protect our relationship with them, or for whatever other daily or weekly needs that immediately come to mind.

Prayers like these, while good and even important, fall short of the mountain-moving prayers we might pray — prayers like the apostle Paul prayed. If we prayed more like he did, and God answered, we wouldn't be able to keep ourselves from praying more for the ones we love.

Why We Pray for Less

Tim Keller observes, "It is remarkable that in all of his writings Paul's prayers for his friends contain no appeals for changes in circumstances" (Prayer, 20). Think about that. From his thirteen letters, we know literally dozens of ways Paul prayed for Christians, and yet he never asks God to change their circumstances. Yet that is what many of us pray for most.

Why do we default to smaller prayers for circumstances, rather than praying for the bigger, deeper, longer-lasting spiritual realities under what we see and experience? For many reasons, of course, but we can try to isolate a couple.

First, smaller prayers come easier. We naturally, even apart from knowing Christ, think (and worry) about health, work, safe travel, and relational conflict. It doesn't take spiritual sensitivity to want a sick person

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to get well (or a healthy person to stay healthy). Even those who hate God may wish a good life for one another. Big, Paul-like prayers, however, do not come naturally. God-hating people do not stumble into prayers like these. To pray these prayers with real focus, desperation, and hope requires the Spirit to work that focus, desperation, and hope in us. He opens our eyes to the awesome and terrifying realities below our everyday circumstances.

Second, God's answers to our biggest prayers are often slow and less visible. If we pray for someone to heal, they may get better in just days or weeks. If we pray for someone to travel safely, we know how God answered in a matter of hours. If we pray for a successful interview, we can find out very soon how it went. But if we pray for God to make a brother more like Jesus, we may not see real, reliable fruit for years. If we pray for God to protect our child from Satan and all his temptations, we likely will not witness thousands of ways he has done it. If we pray for God to keep our pastor faithful through to the end, we will not know for sure if, or how, he has done it until that man finally hears, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23).

Big prayers require more grace, more faith, and more effort because spiritual realities do not naturally come to mind, and because the answers to bigger prayers are often harder to recognize — at least for now. For hundreds of thousands of years to come, though, we will taste and see and witness the preciousness of the big prayers we prayed — prayers that moved mountains in people's hearts, causing earthquakes at their spiritual cores, and changing the course of their eternities.

Seven Daily Prayers

Because Paul wrote to churches, almost all of the prayers we have in his letters are for believers. We can be sure he prayed persistently and passionately, with many tears, for the lost (Romans 9:2–3; Philippians 3:18–19). But most of what we know about Paul's prayer life centres on what he prayed for his brothers and sisters in the faith, including these seven big prayers — prayers we can regularly pray for the followers of Christ we love most.



Open their eyes even wider to you.

Prayer is one of the most powerful, most thoughtful, most loving things we can do for those we love. And the most powerful, thoughtful, and loving prayer we can pray for others is that they would enjoy more of God. Again, Keller writes, "Paul does not see prayer as merely a way to get things from God but as a way to get more of God himself" (Prayer, 21). Paul prays,

Because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened. (Ephesians 1:15–18)

Because he had heard of their faith, he prayed for them to see God. Do you pray like that for believers you love? Paul knew that we need supernatural inner strength to experience the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for us in Christ (Ephesians 3:16–19) — not just to receive it, but to experience it, and grow in experiencing it. We need fresh grace to enjoy God again today.



Fill their hearts with love for others.

If God has answered our first prayer for those we love, that grace will begin to show in their love for people.

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9–11)

Paul appeals to God for this kind of extraordinary, contagious, full-to-overflowing love elsewhere as well (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13; Romans 15:5–6). He did not assume that followers of Christ would love one another well. He asked God to make them more and more loving.

It should be no surprise that these first two prayers echo Jesus's two great commandments to love God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37–39). When we go to pray for our spouse, our children, our church family, our neighbours, these are two great pillar prayers: God, open their eyes wider and wider to you, and fill their hearts to overflowing with love for people.



Teach them the wisdom of your will.

Our prayers for one another should begin with a growing love for God, and an overflowing love for people, but Paul does not settle for those two great prayers. He climbs other mountains in prayer for those he loves. He prays for spiritual wisdom and understanding:

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9–10)

We will not walk in a manner worthy of God merely because we want to. We need God to teach us how. That we want to and why we want to matter massively to God, but we still have to learn to walk. No matter how long we've been walking, we all are somewhere along the path to "fully pleasing," encountering new opportunities and challenges each new day. However far along we are, the next steps require spiritual wisdom and insight, not just human discipline and resolve, so we pray and ask God for what we need to know now.



Give them boldness to speak about Jesus.

The commission Jesus left for us could not have been clearer (Matthew 28:19–20). We may forget it or neglect it in seasons of our lives, but it will not be because the charge is ambiguous. God calls every follower of Jesus to win followers for Jesus, and teach them to obey all that Jesus has said. To this end, Paul writes,

Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison — that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. (Colossians 4:2–4)

And he asks for prayer elsewhere "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak" (Ephesians 6:19–20).

God acts in three miraculous ways to answer prayers like these. He first gives us words to say, then boldness to say them when we might be rejected (or worse), and lastly he opens the spiritual eyes of our hearers to see and understand the gospel of his Son. When we pray for fellow believers today, we can pray for the same gifts of grace to witness well.



Send them good friends in the faith.

Over and over again in his letters, Paul prays that God would allow him to be with other followers of Christ. For example:

What thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thessalonians 3:9–10; also Romans 1:9–10; 15:30–33)

Many of us, in the context of healthy churches, have never been so desperate for fellowship, never lingered late into the night praying earnestly to finally see believers face to face. We're so used to seeing our church family Sunday after Sunday (and more), we may have forgotten just how vital fellowship is to the Christian life.

Apart from the mercy of God and the prayers of others, however, any of us could "be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13) and wander off in love with this world (2 Timothy 4:10). So, one of the most important prayers we can pray for those we love is that God would give them a healthy, faithful church and a few godly, steadfast friends.



Protect them from enemies of their soul.

When we pray for God to grow our loved ones' joy in him, and deepen their love for others, and embolden their words about Jesus, we need to know that they will meet resistance and hostility. Paul faced that kind of opposition everywhere he went, so he asked for prayer:

Brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. (2 Thessalonians 3:1–2)

As we pray for one another, we remember that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Satan and his armies do not attack randomly and sporadically, but specifically and relentlessly. One of the most effective ways to pray for our loved ones is to pray against the enemies of their souls.

We pray with Jesus, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). Not just me but us. Jesus teaches us to pray not only for our own interests — our own temptations, our own struggles, our own besetting sins — but to pray regularly and passionately for the interests of others, to count others even more significant than ourselves (Philippians 2:3) in our war against evil.



Make Jesus look good with their life.

Finally, pray that Jesus would be glorified in all that they do.

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12)

Paul wraps three great prayers in one. First, ask God to focus and purify their ambitions. These are not just any resolves, but resolves for good, and not just any work, but works of faith. Our prayers will help guard them from bad resolves and works of self.

Second, we ask God to give them not just strength for their work, but his strength for their work. If these resolves and works are going to glorify God, they must be “by his power,” not their own. We want divine energy and ability pouring through them while they work and serve.

Lastly, and most clearly, we need God to fulfil his work through them — to complete it and make it fruitful (Philippians 1:6, 11). In short, we need him to glorify himself in all that they (and we) do.

Thank God for Grace You See

If God answers these prayers, we will see the fruit over time — and we should thank him as often as we see it. One of the best ways to stoke the fires of our big prayers for others is to praise God for what we see him doing in and through them.

This is the prayer Paul wrote as often as any other: “I thank my God for you.” Because your faith is growing (2 Thessalonians 1:3). Because you have loved the saints well (Ephesians 1:15–16). Because of your partnership in the gospel (Philippians 1:3–5). Because he has gifted you and given you greater knowledge of himself (1 Corinthians 1:4–7). Because the gospel is spreading through you (Romans 1:8). Because you have not lost your hope in Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:2–3).

How often do we take evidence of spiritual fruit for granted, thanking God instead for smaller, more-circumstantial blessings? The greater, more valuable, more lasting works of God (like the seven above) do not fit neatly into a day or week. To notice them, we have to be looking more closely and over months and years. But when we see, really see, the hands of God at work in the heart of someone we love, few realities will inspire our faith, intensify our joy, and strengthen our prayer lives like these answers to prayer.

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