Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote: 'To pray is to think about the meaning of life'. Wittgenstein wrote this while serving as a soldier in the Austrian Eleventh Army during the Russian offensive known as the Brusilov Offensive on the eastern front. The statement is one in a series that he offered in response to the question, 'What do I know about God and the purpose of life?' The question and his answers mark a shift in the Notebooks in which he began to combine his probes into the foundations of logic with more personal, ethical reflections. The statement is remarkable for several reasons. It reveals the ethically devout character and the intellectual orientation of the philosopher in a succinct but powerful way. It also invites us to think about the function of prayer. How is prayer a reflection on life?

At the end of the first century, a student of Paul’s used a number of the Apostle’s letters in an attempt to develop an understanding of the church that Paul had created. The disciple understood that his master’s letters had been community specific: they had not attempted to address the church as a whole. The disciple decided to use Paul’s letters as a base and extend their thought to the church that Paul had...
spent his life building. Ephesians, in this way, is a creative reading of Paul’s and some of his disciples’ letters.\(^5\)

It is striking that in a work that is not community specific, the author devoted more space to prayer than had the Apostle or any of his previous disciples. Was this simply a development of the epistolary tradition that the author inherited or did the author have a different understanding of prayer that led him to expand the tradition? We can consider the same question from a different perspective. The author placed prayers or comments about prayer in strategic positions within the letter: at the outset, at the transition of the two halves of the letter, and at the end. Does the letter simply follow the conventions of the Pauline tradition or does it reflect an attempt to create a new perspective on prayer? I suggest that the author of Ephesians thought of prayer as an avenue ‘to think about the meaning of life’ from a Pauline perspective. While this was not life in a trench or field with death all around, it represented a significant moment when a disciple attempted to make sense of what Paul had accomplished with his life and how he and his contemporaries could relate to it.

I will use a form of reader response criticism to examine the major prayers or references to prayer in this letter as a means of testing this hypothesis. We will ask how the text sets up the implied reader within the prayers in order to determine how prayer functions for the reader.\(^6\) Do the prayers create an interplay between the reader and the text so that prayer becomes a vehicle for understanding or are the prayers simply another part of the text? It is a pleasure to offer this analysis of the function of prayer in Ephesians to my friend and colleague, Pieter van der Horst, who has done so much to elucidate prayer in the ancient world.

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\(^5\) On the nature and purpose of Ephesians see my forthcoming article in \textit{ZNW}, ‘From Apostle to the Gentiles to Apostle to the Church: Images of Paul at the End of the First Century’.

\(^6\) I thus side with those critics who argue that the text has some control over the experience of the reader. The basic terminology was set out by S. Chatman, \textit{Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film}, Ithaca/London 1978, 149–50. W. Booth, \textit{The Rhetoric of Fiction}, Chicago/London 1983\(^2\), emphasized the importance of the text. For a summary of the different views of the reader see R.M. Fowler, ‘Who is “the Reader” in Reader Response Criticism?’, \textit{Semeia} 31 (1985), 5–23.