

Romans: Paul's Prayer Report

Romans 1:8-10

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 1 and we'll look at verses 8 through 10. We began our study of this great gospel of Romans last week together, and even in Paul's words of greetings we found that they were chock full of the gospel and chock full of significance. We saw the authority of Paul's gospel, even as he introduces himself as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw how radical the gospel itself is. The gospel is about God first. It's about what He does, and especially about the person and work of His Son. It's the gospel concerning Christ, even as Paul speaks in this prayer report today, and it's a gospel that radically changes us. It changes us; it changes our purpose; it changes our priorities; it changes everything. No wonder Luther could say in his usual provocative way, "The chief purpose of this letter is to magnify sin and destroy all human wisdom and righteousness, to bring down all those who are proud and arrogant on account of their work. We need to break down our inner self-satisfaction. God does not want to redeem us through our own, but through external righteousness and wisdom; not through one that comes from us and grows in us, but through one that comes to us from the outside, not through one that originates here on earth, but through one that comes from heaven. And so Paul does in this great epistle. So let's turn today and see this prayer report that he gives in verse 8 and following. This is God's holy word:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you. Always in my prayers making requests, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Father, this is Your word. By the Spirit illumine our hearts to its truth. Teach us not only to be stirred by it, to love it, to be intrigued by it, or even gripped by it,

but to be changed by it that we might hear and do, trust and obey, in Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

The apostle Paul begins his letters almost uniformly with words of thanksgiving. If we were to turn to the Epistle to the Ephesians he would begin with a long praise to God, thanksgiving to God, which included the things which God had done for the Ephesians. And so we would see throughout his other letters, with one exception, the Epistle to the Galatians, he opens with no thanks. He opens only with the amazing declaration, I'm baffled by the fact that you would so quickly desert the one who has saved you. In all his other letters, however, he opens with words of thanksgiving. The urgency of the letter of the Galatians perhaps accounts for the lack of thanksgiving. And here in this very short thanksgiving, the apostle packs yet more gospel truth.

I. Paul teaches us about prayer, about theology and about our love for one another even in this prayer report.

And I'd like you to look at that truth for a few moments today. Two or three things I'd like you to see. First, in verse 8. Here you see Paul's report of his thanksgiving to God because of the Roman Christian churches' testimony. Here Paul is going to teach you about prayer, he's going to teach you a little theology, and he's going to teach you about the proper love that Christians ought to have for one another, all in the scope of one verse of a prayer report. I'd like you to see four or five things, even in this one verse.

First, notice that Paul begins this prayer report by speaking of thanksgiving. Thankfulness is an essential Christian grace. To be a believer is to be thankful, because to be a believer is to be a recipient of mercy. And those who have received mercy and forgiveness and grace are inherently thankful. It doesn't matter what circumstance they find themselves in. They may find themselves facing intractable health problems. They may find themselves in very difficult family situations. They may find themselves in situations at work that could cause anybody to pull their hair out. But they're thankful people because they know that no matter what they face, they have never gotten what they deserved. The Lord has always given them better than they deserved. They are inherently thankful people because they know what they are and they know what they deserve and they know what God has given them instead and they cannot help but be thankful. It doesn't mean that they don't go through times of struggle, of doubt and even spiritual depression, but fundamentally that thanksgiving never deserts them. They are thankful people, they are grateful people because they are people who fundamentally are people who are recipients of grace. And the apostle Paul in the midst of all his own challenges, in the midst of his own vocations, his labors, his struggles is a thankful man, and he cannot begin to report on his prayer without beginning with thanksgiving.

And doesn't that remind us of the missing component to so much of our prayer. Why is it that we fail to see sometimes the things that God is doing in us and for us. It's because we fail to thank Him for it and therefore we're not reminded of it even in the process of praying. And Paul begins with thanksgiving. You see a lack of thankfulness is a sign of gracelessness because those who are forgiven much, not only forgive much, but they thank much for that forgiveness even as Jesus said in the gospel. And so Paul begins by thanksgiving and that is a lesson to us. That's the first thing that I want you to see in this one little verse.

Then I'd like you to see a second thing. Paul, notice, Paul thanks God for the Romans' faith. Pause rewind. Paul thanks God for the Romans' faith. Now let me take some gentle issue with our Arminian friends for a moment. You see our Arminian friends can accept that salvation is a gift and that grace is a gift. But they are absolutely certain that faith is not a gift. No, faith is something that we do which prompts then God's grace and salvation. Well, then, let me ask you a question. If that is true, why is Paul thanking God for the Romans' faith? If the Romans' faith is entirely produced from within the Romans, shouldn't he be thanking the Romans for their faith? But he doesn't do that does he? I thank God for your faith. Why? Because God is the cause and the root and the source of their faith. Even their faith is a gift of God. Salvation is of sovereign grace, and even the faith and repentance which we manifest in response to the gospel message itself are works of the Holy Spirit in us. Paul thanks God for their faith, and that is proof that faith is a gift of God. It's not just that salvation in general is by grace, it's even that faith is a grace. And so he sees the root of their believing, of their trusting, in God Himself. That's the second thing we see in this little sentence.

Notice the third thing though. Paul, in his thanksgiving, is actually reflecting for you his love of these Christians. He is praying for them because he loves them. Now pause for a moment and think how astounding that is. A few years before Paul was writing these words, he was singularly devoted to extinguishing Christianity and ridding the world of Christians. There was one thing he hated more than anything else on earth and that was Christians. And now that same man, a different man now we have to say, is pausing to thank God for Christians. And it ought to cause us to pause right now and thank God for His work in Paul. That this man would now would be thanking God for Christians. He once hated Christians and did his best to extinguish them. And now he can't get out a prayer report without saying, "And friends I just want to say that I regularly thank God for you in my prayers." What a change of heart God has accomplished in Paul. And my friends, that is a hallmark of every believer. Even as we said in preparation for the service, special love to Christians is a part of our preparation for the Lord's table. And Paul here expresses his own special love for the Roman Christians. We're going to mention this in just a few moments and elaborate on it. But think of it. He's never met these people. He's never met them. He's wanted to meet them, but he's never met them. And yet, he still has a love for them.

And that's signal for us to pause and ask do we have this kind of love for one another? Does it manifest itself in our fellowship no matter what our differences are, no matter what our background distinctions are, no matter what our cultural bearers and boundaries are, our age differences and all the other things that separate us and make us different. Do we have an overarching and abiding real love? I don't just mean a sentimental love that we sort of like one another or that we can tolerate one another, but a real love which desires to share life, the good times and the bad times, to care about one another because we are Christians. I had the opportunity to speak briefly with Ken Canfield when he was here with us on Wednesday night, and we were talking about various things. And he said, "You know it's true that blood is thicker than water." But, "Thank God," he went on to say, "Thank God, the Spirit is thicker than blood." Well that's a profoundly Pauline sentiment. He's saying, "Yes, it may be true that relationship, blood relationship is thicker than some kinds of friendship, but the bond which the Spirit brings is thicker even than blood." And that is why we can say in truth with the writer of Proverbs that there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother because of a bond of the spirit. Now do we sense that kind of bond amongst ourselves? Are we growing in that kind of love for one another? The apostle Paul, this giant of truth, is not without that relational concern. He is not without a real and tangible love for the brethren, and so he provides us an exhortation even in this which he reports that he prays.

There's a fourth thing I'd like you to see in this one sentence. And you'll see it here. Paul is conscious in offering his thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ. Notice his words, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ." Paul prays confidently to the one who is now his heavenly Father, but because God is Paul's heavenly Father through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ he also lifts not just this intercession, but this thanksgiving to the heavenly Father at the throne of grace through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now there is a theological mouthful in that little phrase, through the Lord Jesus Christ. He's speaking of the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is saying, I lift up this prayer of thanksgiving to you in conscious dependence upon the One who is at the right hand of the Father so that the Father hears this prayer of thanksgiving through the lips of His Son. It's as if God is hearing the intercession of His own Son when I lift up an intercession. Or as Paul is saying here, it's as if Paul is hearing the thanksgiving of his own son as I lift up this thanksgiving.

Do you realize that when you pray as Jesus commanded you to pray, with the desire for the kingdom of God and in submission to the will of God, your prayers visit God the Father on the throne of grace as if they came from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ, because every prayer that goes to that place from God's people goes through the one who reigns at the right hand and who ever lives to intercede? And the apostle Paul is in the midst of this little prayer report to say, I thank God through the Lord Jesus Christ. But he's not done.

Paul in this little phrase tells us specifically what he's thankful for, and that's the fifth thing I'd like you to see. Paul here says here he is thankful for their faith and for the fact that their faith is proclaimed throughout the earth. You know what you're thankful for tells you a lot about you. Among other things it tells you what you think is really is important in life. Look what Paul is excited about. Paul is excited about the fact that these people are believing. They are believing in the gospel the Lord Jesus wrote. It thrills his heart to think that in Rome, the capital city of the world, there are believers huddled around the word, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that their faith is so clear that a testimony is being sent out not only in Rome, but throughout the known world. People are talking about boy have you heard about those Roman Christians? They really believe. They're right under the eyes, right in the shadow of the emperor, and they believe with all their hearts in the Lord Jesus Christ. Who would have thought that in the Roman capitol there would be those who would believe in the Jewish Messiah and they're right there. And it thrills Paul, not just because of the influence this church can have or claim throughout the world, but it thrills him because their faith encourages him.

When you look around you and you think of the things that encourage you about your brothers and sisters in Christ in this local body, is their faith one of the things that comes to mind that you thank God for? I can remember a time in my own doctoral studies where I was going through a difficult period of doubt, partly connected with some material that I was reading. I was required to read it for the course that I was doing. But it, very frankly, was soul-killing sort of stuff to read. And the way that God in His providence rescued me from those doubts was in a very simple and unexpected way. I had a meal with two Christian friends. A husband and a wife, one who was a young elder at a local congregation, and his wife who was a medical doctor. And we were eating Indian food in a restaurant in East London. And they didn't know it, but the reason God had them there for me that night was to speak to me of the reality of their faith in the midst of my doubt. And we didn't set out to have a spiritual or a theological conversation, but let me say that the reality of the Spirit's work in their lives that just shone through, and the things that they carried about and the way that they talked was so real that I could have reached out and touched it. And I was thankful to God for their faith. It excited me, and it comforted me and the apostle is thankful for the faith of the Romans.

But you know what rebukes me is that he's thankful for the faith of the Romans, and he's never even met them. He's heard about them, and he's already excited about it. Are you excited about the signs of your brothers and sisters here who are growing in their thirst and hunger for the word? They are growing and they're thirsting and they're hungering for righteousness. They're growing and they're hungering to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. They're growing and they're hungering for grace? Does that excite you? It excited the apostle Paul. And what causes you joy and thanksgiving tells you a lot about what you care about and a

lot about what you are. Our prayers, friends, ought to be shot through with thanksgiving and they ought to be shot through with thanksgiving and rejoicing over the truth and what the truth is accomplishing in the hearts of men and women.

II. Paul, with a divine oath, testifies to his constant intercession for the Romans.

Now there's a second thing I'd like you to see in this passage. You'll see it in verse 9 and the first part of verse 10. Here Paul reports of his faithfulness in intercession for the Roman church. Paul, with the divine oath, testifies of his constant intercession for the Roman. Paul says, God knows that I pray for you incessantly. I am constantly interceding for you. But Paul actually takes an oath here. Paul says, God is my witness. I pray for you constantly.

Now let me just pause there. There are some very well-meaning Christians who go to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount where He says let your yes be yes and your no be no. And they say, aha, Jesus is saying Christians ought never take an oath. They ought to just let their yes be yes and their no be no. The problem is, the apostle Paul takes oaths. And here's one of them right in front of you. God is my witness, he says. Oh, you'll find several places in the New Testament where the apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ take oaths. Jesus' point then being not that we are not to take oaths, but that we are not to use them frivolously. We are not to take them lightly, and we are to mean what we say when take them. We're not to use them to cover up a lie as so many people often do. I mean, you know immediately when the friend says, I swear. Hmmm. I wonder what he's covering up? But Paul doesn't use it that way. Think of what Paul is doing here is. He says God is my witness of how I constantly intercede for you. Why would it be significant for Paul to take an oath in this circumstance? Because he had never been to Rome and the Roman Christians had never been with him. They would have no way of knowing experientially first-hand that every time he prayed, he prayed for them. And so Paul says, you wouldn't know this from being with me, friends, because we haven't been with one another. But God knows. God is witness from heaven that every time I get down, you are on my heart. I am praying for you constantly. He's seen it. He can bear witness to the truth of what I am saying. Paul says, God is my witness. How incessantly I pray for you.

And he says this same God who can witness that I am faithful in prayer for you, this is the God that I serve from my heart. Paul is indicating the nature of his service here. I serve God in my spirit, from the inner-man, from the depths of my being. My service of God is not superficial, it's not external. I'm not serving God to try to get people to think boy, he's serving God a lot. I'm serving God from my heart. I love Him. And from my heart, in my spirit, I serve Him. And I serve in the gospel of His Son, the gospel concerning the good news about the person and

the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is showing us here a love for a group of people that he's never met. You know, sometimes when people survey the writings of the apostle Paul they characterize him as a introspective, doctrinal, abstract, philosophical, systematic and disconnected person. And the apostle Paul is anything but that. Here is a man who is in love with a group of Christians that he has never laid eyes on. What a rebuke that is to me. Why, sometimes it takes some warming up, doesn't it for us to like one another? I have a friend who did small-group Bible studies, and I remember her saying about this young woman who's now one of her dear friends. She said, you know, when we started that small-group bible study, I didn't even like her. Now she's one of my best friends. That's the way it is, friends. We don't start off just loving one another naturally in the body of Christ, in its local expression. Sometimes there are some obstacles to get over, but the apostle Paul is genuinely loving of these believers. Our prayers, friends, ought to reflect our love for the church, and our service of the Lord ought to be from the heart.

You know, Paul says to the Corinthians, a place from which he is writing this epistle, Paul says to the Corinthians that they are to discern the body when they come to the Lord's table. And he's not telling them that they need to discern some magical transformation of the elements into the actual body and blood of Christ when they come to the table. What is he saying, when he says discern the body, he means you need to discern the body of Christ. You are the body of Christ. When you were united to Him, you were united to His body. His body is His people. These people around you coming to the table, therefore, are your brothers and sisters. Do you discern them? Do you love them? Do you have a special love to them? Do you care for them? Are you a family with them? Or are you isolated from them? We ought to discern the body.

Young people, do you discern the body? Many young people here have already professed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Are the differences that you have amongst your friends who are Christians more significant to you than the commonality that you share in the spirit? Is the fact that you're at Jackson Academy or Jackson Prep more significant to you than the fact that you are one in the spirit with other believers. Is the fact that you come from a different socio-economic status more significant to you than the fact that you share in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ as part of His people. For all of us we need to pause and ask ourselves, are the things of God which unite us more significant than the temporal, ephemeral things which are so apparent to us but which will one day pass away in the fervent burning heat of the reconstruction of the world. Paul, with a divine oath, testifies to how constantly he intercedes for these brethren. And he intercedes for them because he loves them. What is our attitude?

III. Paul prayed according to the dominical principle and pattern: thy will be done.

Finally, if you look at verse 10 again, you'll see there that Paul prays according to the Lord's principle and the Lord's Prayer. We've been studying the Lord's Prayer on Wednesday night. I invite you all to come and continue that study with us. One of the sections of the Lord's prayer that we'll study is this prayer, "Thy will be done." Paul prays according to that principle here. Notice his words. "Always in my prayers making requests, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you." Paul is reporting here his desire to come to the Roman Christians and to be with the Roman Christians, but he does so in explicit submission to God's will. Paul makes it clear that he longs to be with these Roman Christians. And he prays that God would bring him to the Roman Christians. But he is entirely submissive to the will of God. He wants to get there by God's will.

Now let's pause again and think. Paul has no idea when he's writing these words, he has no idea how it's going to be that he is going to get to Rome. You remember how he got to Rome finally? At the end of his life as a prisoner in chains. As an imperial prisoner preparing, if he lost his trial, for execution. That is how Paul would get to Rome. And he was delighted. He was delighted because God had long before given him a burden of heart to be with those Roman Christians, and he was entirely submissive to the will of God. And I want to say to you here that Paul gives us a model here for submitting to the providence of God in life and in prayer, no matter what. Notice two or three things.

First of all, Paul does not question that God is in control. He knows that the only way he's getting to Rome is in accordance with the will of God. Secondly, notice that Paul, relying on God's will, does not lead him to be passive and to say, well, if I'm ever going to get to Rome, it's going to be up to God. In fact, in the remainder of this chapter we're going to see that Paul had on numerous occasions tried to get himself to Rome. It's just that the Lord had blocked those plans. I had a professor who once said, "You know, we talk about the Lord closing doors, and when we talk about the Lord closing doors, you know, a lot of times it's well, the Lord closed the door on that and we kind of mean that we rattled the knob and we decided that the door was closed." And he said, "You know, the apostle Paul didn't take that approach. When the apostle Paul came to a closed door, he tried to kick it down three or four times before he decided the Lord had closed that door." That's exactly what he did with the Romans. He tried to get to Rome numerous ways. He prayed continually that God would get him to Rome. And finally in the end the Lord got him there as a prisoner.

But you see that's the third thing that we need to learn from it. Not just that he trusted in God's providence, not just that he was active even though he trusted in God's providence, but also that he was entirely submissive to that providence. There are many of you in very difficult situations today. Maybe your personal health situation or maybe a family member. It may be bereavement, it may be a job, it may be a tremendous difficulty in your family life, your marriage, with your

children. And in that kind of circumstance it's very difficult to believe in both the goodness and the providence of God. And I can imagine with the apostle Paul that the thought might have flashed across his mind at some point, Lord, I've been waiting all my life to get to Rome, and here I am in chains. What in the world are you doing? You know there's a temptation to spend so much time on asking what in the world are you doing, Lord, that you forget the goodness and providence of God. Paul doesn't do that in this prayer. Lord, I want to be in Rome, but I want to be in Rome by Your will. What a model he gives for us, even in this little prayer report, friends, of how the gospel changes a man. Do you see a changed man here? This man was a Christian killer. And in these three little verses you see the heart of a person that the Holy Spirit has laid hold of. Not just an apostle, friends, but a Christian, just like you, or at least I pray so. Let's pray.

Lord God, as we come to the table today, make us mindful of the grace which is ours in Jesus Christ. We pray that you would truly set forth His death, and that this table would be a means of grace whereby our faith is strengthened and our assurance buttressed. And we pray, O God, that You would change our hearts by Your word and promise, in Jesus name, Amen.

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