

Romans: A Call to Prayer

Romans 15:30-33

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We come to the end of this great chapter and this section of the book of Romans, and in verses 30-33, what we find is a prayer request from Paul to the Roman Christians. And, as you know, Paul very frequently requests prayers in his letters. For instance, in Ephesians chapter six, verses 19 and 20, he'll say to the Ephesians, *"Pray on my behalf that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it, I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak."* Or in Colossians, chapter four, verses two through four, Paul will say to the Colossians, *"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving, praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ for which I have been imprisoned, that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak."* And in I Thessalonians 5:25, he simply says, "Brethren, pray for us." And in II Thessalonians, chapter three, verses one and two, he says, *"Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you, and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men, for not all have faith."*

Well, like those passages, the passage that we're about to read tonight is a prayer request from Paul, and he outlines three petitions in particular that he wants the Roman Christians to pray for him. And then fourthly, he pronounces a benediction himself. So let's attend to God's word here in Romans 15:30.

Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints, so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God, and find refreshing rest in your company. Now, the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word; may He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we do thank You for this word, and we ask again that You would open our hearts to be filled with petitions for one another and especially for ministry, and we pray that we would learn from this, Your word, and that we would be changed by Your word applied by the Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul is writing this letter, it's coming to a conclusion, and he knows that before him are some great responsibilities and some great opportunities, and some great opposition and, frankly, a lot of potential peril. And so, Paul asks these Christians in Rome to pray for three things: he asks that they would join his mission by praying with and for him; secondly, he asks that they would pray specifically for his safety and his service; thirdly, he asks that they would pray that he would be able to return to them encouraged, and to be refreshed by their fellowship. And then he pronounces a peculiarly appropriate word of blessing on them, and in so doing he supplies us with an outline of prayer for ministers. He supplies us with the matter, or substance, of prayers for ministers and missionaries and church planters and campus ministers. And I'd like to look at this passage with you very briefly tonight in four parts.

I. An appeal for prayer.

First, in verse 30, I want you to see this earnest appeal for urgent prayer that the apostle makes to the Roman Christians. Paul is telling us here in verse 30 that wrestling in prayer for ministers of the word is like joining in their struggle for the Lord's work. When we join our hearts in prayer for the ministry of the word, we ourselves are joining in that ministry of the word. Notice what he says: *"I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me."* Notice that Paul doesn't just ask for prayer here, he begs for it. He urges that the Roman Christians would strive with him in prayer. It was clearly important to him that they would join him in prayer. He knows that he's got challenges to face, and there are dangers ahead, and so he knows that he needs prayer, and he's importunate in asking for it. He begs that they would pray.

And if you look at verse 30, you'll see that he makes his appeal to the Roman Christians on two bases. He says, *"...first, I urge you by our Lord Jesus Christ."* That is, he appeals to us on the basis of our regard for the Lord Jesus Christ. If you regard the Lord Jesus Christ, he said, please pray for me.

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say, *"...and by the love of the Spirit."* In other words, he appeals to the Spirit's work of love within our hearts. It's as if he's saying, "if you have any regard for the Lord Jesus Christ, or if the Holy Spirit has wrought any love in you at all for your fellow believers and for ministers of the Gospel, and for the word of God, then please, please, I beseech you, pray for me." And so Paul calls for these believers on these two bases to join with him in his ministry by prayer. In fact, he sees believers' prayers as actually co-laboring

or co-striving with him in the work of ministry. *“I urge you to strive together with me in prayer,”* he says. Now there are a number of observations I'd like to make about this one statement for a few moments with you.

First of all, remember that Paul's visit to Judea was not going to be without hazard. We know the end of the Book of Acts. It hadn't happened by this time, though. But we do know that by Acts 20 the Holy Spirit had burdened Paul with the sense that he was facing serious danger when he went back to Judea. But he was determined to go back anyway, for the sake of ministry. So he's asking prayer in light of this burden that the Spirit has placed on him, knowing that troubles are coming. But even Paul doesn't know the kind of troubles that are going to face him! You remember, he's going to get to Judea, and he's going to be assaulted by some of the unbelieving Jews; he's going to be imprisoned by the Roman governor; as he is eventually transported back towards Rome, he's going to be shipwrecked; he's going to be bitten by a viper; he's almost going to be killed by a mob; and he's eventually going to get back to Rome, but he's going to get back to Rome in chains.

So when Paul has this sense of danger impending, he is not suffering from hypochondria! He is, in fact, being utterly realistic about what he's up against, and so he's begging these Christians to pray for him.

Secondly, isn't it interesting that this prayer request begins with Paul asking the Roman Christians to “strive, to “wrestle,” to “labor” —fight with him in prayer...but it ends with a blessing about the peace of God, or the God of peace. So the prayer request begins with a request for co-striving, and it ends with a blessing about peace.

Thirdly, have you noticed that Luke's account of Paul's arrest and deliverance might have read differently without the prayers of these Roman Christians? God uses prayers as the instrument of His divine providence. And who knows how the Book of Acts might have read had these Christians and others like them not prayed for Paul in his dangerous journeys. In fact, Paul calls attention to this in II Corinthians 1:8-11. Listen to his words: *“We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia; that we were burdened excessively beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, Who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us-- He on whom we have set our hope, and He will yet deliver us. You also, joining in helping u through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.”* Paul is acknowledging that God's favor came to him, as it were, through the prayers of the saints. He knows that the success in ministry that he's had, and the protection in ministry that he has had, is in large measure due to the faithful praying of the saints. No wonder he wants these Roman Christians to pray for him!

And one other thing: have you noticed how Luke emphasizes in the Book of Acts the great peace that Paul had even after he was taken prisoner? Paul desperately wanted to go to Rome and beyond to preach the Gospel. Surely it would have been frustrating to him to have been imprisoned, and thus thwarted in some of his desires, and yet Luke makes it clear that Paul had a tremendous peace about God's purposes. Could it be, my friends, that that was one of the specific results of the faithful praying of these Christians for Paul? That he was able to have peace because these Christians were interceding for him to the God of peace.

Well, Paul is calling for us to join in to co-labor and to strive for ministry in prayer. And if we need to pray, if Paul needed prayers for himself as an inspired, Spirit-empowered apostle, Heaven knows that we poor ministers today need prayer as we minister the Gospel! If Paul needed prayer, how much more the minister of today.

Leon Morris says "There is a very real struggle going on between the forces of good and evil, and a most significant part of that struggle is in prayer." Paul knows that, and so he begs for prayer in ministry.

II. A petition for safety and service.

Now there's a second thing I want you to see, as well. Look at verse 31. Here we see a petition for safety and service. "*Pray...*", Paul says, "*...that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.*" Paul's prayer here, his prayer request here, is a prayer request for prayer for ministry. And prayer for ministry has in view God's goals for ministry. Not just the comfort of the minister, but it always has in view God's goals for ministry. And I want you to understand that Paul's prayer here, in both verse 31 and verse 32, is not a selfish prayer. It may seem to be at certain points, but it's not a selfish prayer. Paul reels off two petitions in verses 31 and 32, followed by a desired result, each of them beginning with "that." Look at verse 31: "*...that I may be rescued...that my service may prove acceptable...*" (verse 32): "*...that I may come to you in joy.*"

So there are the three parts. The first two are the main petitions; the third "that" is the result of the first two petitions having been answered by the Lord. So let's look at verse 31. Paul first asks that he would be spared from the designs of the non-Christian Jews in Judea. This is not a self-serving request for security, it's a petition that he would be kept safe in order to do ministry. Paul, you remember, was willing to be beaten--as long as he could do ministry. He was willing to be threatened--as long as he could do ministry. He was willing to die--as long as he could do ministry. And he's praying that he would be kept safe from these non-believing Jews not because he was concerned for his own security, but because

he was desirous of doing ministry.

Secondly, in verse 31, he asks that the Jerusalem church would accept his ministry and the collection he was bringing. Remember, friends, there were some Jewish Christians that weren't real sure about Paul. There were Jewish Christian believers in Jerusalem who thought that Paul was just a little on the edge, and they weren't sure they liked what Paul was doing in Asia Minor and in Rome. And yet, Paul has been going all around the churches of Asia Minor raising money to help those poor Jerusalem Jewish Christians. And you know what he asks these Gentile Christians to pray? He says, "would you pray that when I get there to take them this collection for the relief of their needs, and when I get there to minister to them, would you just pray that they would accept it."

Now, I don't think I need to point out to you the tremendous humility of this. Paul, the inspired apostle to the Gentiles, begging prayers of Gentiles that Jewish Christians who are suspicious of him will simply accept his ministry. If that is not a great heart wrought by the work of the Holy Spirit in love, then I've never seen one. Here's the apostle, begging for just the acceptance of his ministry with people who are a little suspicious of him. What a tremendous testimony to Paul's humility and his heart for service.

And Paul had a good reason to be concerned about both of these things. Indeed, Luke will tell us that it is those non-believing Jews that will stir up the rabble of the mob against Paul and will wind up being a cause for him being taken under house arrest by the Roman government. And of course, though James and the other apostles received Paul's ministry, after his arrest there were many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were a little bit suspicious about the Apostle Paul.

And I want to point out again that these prayers were answered, but they were not answered, perhaps, in the way that Paul was expecting them. Paul was kept safe from the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, but he was kept safe by being locked up by the Romans for two years. Paul's ministry was accepted, and the offering, as far as we know, was accepted by the Jewish Christians. But his subsequent arrest in the temple precincts must have raised some more suspicions about him. Paul did get to Rome, but he got to Rome in chains. We pray, we propose, God answers, He disposes. And God does not always answer our prayers in the way that we pray them, or in the way that we expect those prayers to be answered. But Paul's basic prayer, I want you to see, for ministerial protection and usefulness, was answered. Just not in a way that Paul could ever have foreseen or conceived himself. So, in accordance with God's will, this prayer was answered.

III. Paul's desire for encouragement and fellowship.

Thirdly, if you look at verse 32, you'll see Paul express a desire for

encouragement and fellowship. You know, prayer ought to reflect our chief desires, and Paul's prayer request here clearly reflects a chief desire of his. He wants these first two requests to be answered so that (verse 32) *"...I may come to you in joy by the will of God, and find refreshing rest in your company."* These first two petitions in verse 31 have another goal and purpose in view. And that goal and purpose would be that Paul would be able to come back to the Romans in joy, that he would be able to come back encouraged that his ministry had been accepted in Judea, and that he would be able to rest in the company of the Romans. Paul wants protection, and he wants ministry acceptance in order that when he comes back to the Romans, he comes back encouraged. He doesn't come back downcast, he doesn't come back discouraged because the fellowship of the believers in Jerusalem have rejected him.

Ministerial discouragement is a powerful thing. And the Apostle Paul himself is saying. "I'm wanting you to pray that I'd be protected from ministerial discouragement, because when I come back I want to be encouraged when I'm in your midst." But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that he longs for fellowship with the Romans. He feeds on their company, and he desires to be refreshed by them. Rome, you see, was a place, apparently, for Paul, of ministry refuge. He felt encouraged and challenged and strengthened by his fellowship with these Roman Christians. And again, we see in that the humility of the Apostle Paul. He wanted to be refreshed by the Romans? He had been the one who had brought to them the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. But even he saw that his relationship with them was not a one-way street. It was not simply that he was the great teacher and they were the recipients of his ministry. He realized that they had a ministry to offer to him! In fact, he craved it! He longed to be in their presence.

I was talking with a friend of mine a few years ago who served as an assistant under a minister that I've always admired. And he said to me once that he was talking with him at a conference in a hotel room. And that the minister had said to him, "You know, I really feel at home right now." He was away from home, he was on the road, he was at a conference. He said, "I really feel at home right now." And a lot of that was because he was having tensions in his home church, and he really didn't feel 'at home' in his own church.

And I want to tell you that it's one of the great blessings that I have serving here, that there is no place that I would rather be than right in your midst. It's nice to go off and do other things, but there's no place I would rather be than in your midst. And Paul felt like that about the Roman church. He wanted to be with them in their midst and be encouraged by them. And he prays that the Lord would answer the petitions in verse 31 so that he could experience that in verse 32. And that's a good prayer to pray for ministers: that they would have a place for refuge in a community of believers that would refresh them for ministry.

IV. Paul's benediction.

And then Paul concludes in verse 33 with this beautiful benediction. “*The God of peace be with you all.*” It's a benediction of presence and peace. Only the God of peace can grant peace in every circumstance. He prays here, in this blessing, in this word of benediction, that these brethren, all of them—all the Roman Christians—notice his word—“*...be with you all*”—all the Jews and Gentiles—that they would experience the results of peace with God, and that they would realize that God gives peace, not circumstances. What an important blessing for those Roman Christians would know the oppression of Nero in the years to come.

May God grant us to pray this way for one another, and for ministry. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word. Refresh our hearts by it, build us up in it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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