

Sermon 207: Romans 15:30-33: How God answers prayer

OUTLINE

Lessons about prayer
Answers to prayer

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have ever kept a prayer journal? Many have testified to the encouragement of looking back on their early prayers and seeing either God answering the prayers, or changing the prayers into better ones. Every prayer is always answered with a yes or a no or a not yet or in a way better than you expected. Today as we come to Romans we are in a closing section where Paul ends his personal travel plans with a request for prayer, Romans 15:30-33, 'I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.³³ May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.'

In this section we have 3 of Paul's prayer requests, and since we also have the book of Acts we get to have a front row seat on how God answered Paul's prayers. As we look at this section we will be looking at it under two headings, lessons about prayer and answers to prayer.

Lessons about prayer

There are 7 lessons for us on prayer in the verses before us.

Firstly, we see the urgency of prayer, 'I appeal to you brothers.' Paul doesn't simply ask for prayer or mildly wish that the Romans would pray, but appeals for prayer. Other translations use words like 'beseech' or 'urge'. When Paul speaks about the armour of God in Ephesians 6:13-20 all the other pieces get half a verse or a whole verse at most, but prayer is given three verses in the armour of God. We are in a spiritual war and prayer is crucial to our success. If we stand and fight and gain victory by God's strength not our own, and we gain God's strength by prayer. Prayer is as urgent as air. Prayer is the opening barrage that prepares the way for our advance. Prayer is the needed back up to help us when we are pinned down by enemy fire. It is that long ranged ballistic missile which destroys resistant bunkers in our path. Paul saturates his letters with requests for prayer stressing his dependence on it, 2 Cor. 1:10-11, 'He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.' Phil. 1:19, 'for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.' Etc.

Secondly, we see the necessity of prayer as Paul appeals for prayer by the authority of Christ, 'by our Lord Jesus Christ.' In one sense Paul is not asking for prayer but demanding it and on the basis of the authority of Christ. Prayer is not something that is an optional extra in our lives it is a command. If you are not praying you are sinning, it is as simple as that. The command to prayer is not a legalistic burden but a command to be free. It is like a doctor commanding a sick person to take her medicine, a starving person to eat his food,

a weak person to take a strong arm for help. The church is obligated to pray for its missionaries and those who are on the front line.

Thirdly, we are taught the naturalness of prayer to the born again believer, 'and by the love of the Spirit.' What does Paul mean here by 'by the love of the Spirit?' Is this the love of the Spirit to me as God tells me I am His child, or is it the fruit of the Spirit of love through me that I love others with? It is the second meaning that Paul is intending. Paul is saying this: 'Romans, I urge you to pray for me, not only because Christ commands it but because the love the Holy Spirit generates in your heart for the work of the gospel and your fellow Christians ought to compel you.' Before we became Christians we were only concerned with our own selfish pursuits, did not care about God's will or the church. Even the people we loved we often loved for selfish reasons, using them to get what we want and fighting with them when they did not do our will. When we see our sin and especially our selfishness, and we come to Christ and ask for forgiveness and He makes us a new heart we suddenly feel set free and now delight in serving others. A genuine interest in others comes upon us and we find great joy in serving. When our mind is renewed and we mature we begin to love not only the church but the work of making God known to others. When we hear about a missionary giving up his life to serve God in order to bring glory to God by seeing others converted we resonate with that work, even if we do not know the person we love what they are doing. Paul knows that this is the way the Spirit works within us causing love and self-sacrifice to flow freely. It is this love that Paul is appealing to for prayer. He has made his need and motives known and expects every heart that is born again to resonate with his purpose and gladly and naturally join him in prayer. In one sense prayer for missions is one of the most natural things for a Christian, an inward compulsion. The question is, are our hearts functioning properly in this expected fashion or are they clogged and incapable of caring because we have fallen back into self-concern?

Fourthly, Paul tells us something of the mode of prayer when he calls the Romans 'to strive' with him in prayer. This word is what we call a hapax legomena, it only occurs once in the Greek text, it is *sunagonisathai*, the root word is the word we get our English word agony from. *Agonizomai* is the root word and a word used to describe a contest or battle. It is the same word used to describe Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Luke 22:44, 'And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.' Why is prayer described in this way? If God is all powerful and willing to answer prayer why do we see prayer being described as a battle, an agony, a striving or wrestling? We have to wrestle in the first place with ourselves to take our unwilling and distracted selves to our knees and prayer closets to pray. But the wrestle is also with the principalities and powers. This does not mean that we go toe to toe with them, but that we pour out our urgent pleas to God because of an assaulting foe. Finally we also wrestle with God as Jacob did. In our praying we have our hearts changed to agree with God's and can be overwhelmed with a desire to see sinners saved. In our praying we wrestle with God as He puts His finger on our sins and calls for radical amputation. In our praying we wrestle with our doubts about God's goodness and we bring our questions and tears before Him. We wrestle with God as we beat upon His door over and over again for a particular request. I think one of the effects of our digital age is to blunt the heavy emotional investment we make in prayer. Being constantly tantalised by a thousand story lines, being called by constant catastrophes on the news, distracted by a thousand ongoing conversations on social media, confronted with 10 000 consumer products to buy, there is no free space left to feel our sins, the situation of the lost, wonder towards God, etc. Paul is praying in earnest because his life is being threatened because important things hang in the balance, and he calls us to enter into his agony, his earnestness, his wrestling and desires.

Fifthly, we see that prayer is to be cooperative, 'strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.' We do not pray in individual silos but a concert of cooperative prayer is to ascend to God. Praying with people for their needs, this is how we carry one another's burdens. And what better place to put another's burden than before the throne of God. We can cast our own cares upon God because He cares for us, and we can cast the cares of others before Him because He cares for them. We must remember that praying for someone is not merely a way of giving sympathy but it is a legitimate way of serving another and seeing God move in their situation.

Sixthly, we see one of the focuses of prayer, we are to pray for God's ministers and the situations of their lives and ministry, 'that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.' Paul as a missionary needs deliverance, for a good reception for his ministry, but we also see the need for joy and refreshing. We are to pray for the ministries of missionaries asking God to bless their efforts, but we cannot forget the needs of the missionaries themselves. Physical wellbeing—protection; emotional wellbeing—joy; and spiritual wellbeing—refreshing are all mentioned in this portion.

Seventhly, let me point us to a key attitude in prayer, v32, 'so that by God's will I may....' Paul has a humble attitude and is submitted to the will of God. Some have foolishly thought that a prayer like this saying, 'Thy will be done' is a prayer that lacks faith. Some have accused such a prayer as lacking desire and decisiveness. Some see such a prayer the prayer of ignorance who have not been given insights by the Holy Spirit. But all of that is wrong. This prayer is in fact a prayer of deep faith as one submits to God's hidden ways; it is a prayer of strong desire as we submit our desires to seek God's; and it is a well-informed prayer recognising the superiority of God's will instead of ours. Some may pray it as a cop-out, or a short cut, or a heartless way to insure that all bases are covered, but not Paul. This is no pious throw away statement but a mark of a man living by faith. Paul knows that He is weak but God is strong. He recognises that he can get it wrong even with the best of intentions, but God's will will come to pass despite our errors. He realises that the things that he wants may not agree with what God is doing and is showing his confidence in God and his submission to God's plan. Paul wants something good and godly, to be preserved to visit Rome and go onto Spain. The purity of his motives do not insure an answer, he recognises that he belongs to God soul and body and God may have different plans to his own ones. Despite this he is the servant of God and will accept what God gives him. We are like Paul in this. We can pray and seek God's will as we understand it revealed in the bible, let us call this the general will of God. We can plan to be fruitful and effective in ministry, making our best attempts at serving God. But God has a specific will which is hidden from us, it may include the dashing of our plans, it may include pain and disappointment, yet even so we say, God's will be done. Paul is no fatalist in praying this way. He is willing and ready to die, Acts 21:13, but he is also making every effort in prayer to stay alive. He is just not deceiving himself with wishful thinking or positive confessions, but relying on God to do His will.

The urgency of prayer, the necessity of prayer, the naturalness of prayer, the mode of prayer, cooperation in prayer, our focus in prayer and our attitude in prayer are all indicated at in this text.

Answers to prayer

We began by saying that we have a record of Paul's prayers and in the book of Acts a record of how they were all answered. Let us turn our attention now to how God answers prayer.

We see three prayer requests. Firstly, Paul asks the Romans to pray that he would be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea. Secondly, he asks for prayer that his service of gathering contributions from the Gentile churches would be well received in Jerusalem. And finally he asks for prayer that, God willing, he may be able to visit Rome for joy and refreshing. The questions we want to answer are, did God answer these requests, and if yes how?

Perhaps I should tell you upfront what to expect from this investigation. Phrases like God's ways are not our ways, His timing is not our timing, God works all things together for good, these are the things that I hope will come alive for you. Also I am hoping to encourage you in your praying itself. God does answer prayer and here we see how He does it.

Was Paul delivered from the unbelievers in Judea? No and yes! Acts 21 gives us some of the details. Paul has arrived in Jerusalem to deliver his gift. However when he arrives he is told of the slander against him, that many think him an enemy of Moses. So they advise him to participate in some purification rites and to pay for others doing the same 21:17-26. He goes along with the plan but after 7 days some Jews from Asia who knew him stirred up the crowd claiming he had brought Gentiles into the temple and taught Gentiles to deny Moses. The mob grabbed Paul to kill him outside the temple, v31. But then God intervened by the interference of the Romans in Jerusalem. They came along while Paul was being beaten and he had to be carried away because of the crowd. He had an opportunity to address the crowd but they kicked up a fuss as soon as he mentioned that he was to be sent as an apostle to the Gentiles, 22:22. So did God answer his prayer for deliverance? Yes, but it was not without the beatings and rejection of the crowd. His best efforts to stop the bias of the Jews failed and they desired to kill him. It is an answer but not the one you would choose.

More than that God answered Paul's prayer by delivering him into the hands of the Romans. And only by being a prisoner of the Romans was he safe from being murdered by the Jews. One would expect that God would make him free and popular and the leader of a revival of the Jews, but God does not choose the path we would have orchestrated for ourselves. But the animosity of the Jews and their attempts to harm Paul did not stop there. In 22:12-35 we see that there was an assassination attempt against his life and he was spared by it coming to light and being sent under armed guard to the governor Felix. Paul could have been released by Felix but he was looking for a payoff, 24:26, and so Paul sat languishing in prison. When Festus took over from Felix he thought he might do the Jews a favour for one of the first items of business they set before him as the new governor was the issue of Paul so he thought to hand Paul over to them, this forced Paul to appeal to Caesar, 25:11. Was Paul delivered, Yes and no! God answered just not in the way expected.

Lets consider the second request. Paul asks for prayer that the contributions would be well received, were they? We don't really know. We know from Acts 21:17 that Paul was well received and the Jewish Christians rejoiced at God's work among the Gentiles, but there is not a word spoken about the gifts. Imagine you are Paul. You have worked so hard to gather these gifts, you have prayed and garnered prayer from others that it would be well received, you bring it, but it is a non-event. And then on the heels of that all those lies you were trying to silence with your best intentions flourish against you and soon after you have done a good deed to the Jews they turn around and try and kill you. There is no mention

made of the gift being rejected so perhaps there was some answer to Paul's prayer. I find the big lesson is on how big conflicts can follow on the heels of your greatest sacrifices and could very easily discourage you.

Let's look at the third request. Paul asks for preservation that he can finally arrive in Rome, does Paul get to Rome? Yes he does, but! Guess how long it took for Paul to get to Rome. two and a half years as a prisoner. He had to go through several false trials, an assassination attempt, getting bitten by a snake, and a near fatal shipwreck, but he got there, in chains. The funny thing is that shortly before the assassination attempt happened and shortly after his arrest in Jerusalem Christ appeared to him in a vision, Acts 23:11, 'The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.'" Jesus promised he would get to Rome, but there was no explanation of how. God heard his prayer, and He answered it, it just wasn't what he expected, nor when.

Why did it have to happen this way, why couldn't God just answer his prayers in a nice safe and neat fashion? Here are some reflections on some whys.

Have you ever read, Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians? Those are called Paul's prison epistles, they are called that because during this time when he was a prisoner on his way to Rome he wrote those. Paul's experience as a prisoner gave rise to three books read by millions and which have been food for church. Listen to these familiar words knowing that Paul wrote them as a prisoner on his way to Rome, Phil. 3:7-10, 'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' These words and many like them were slow brewed in the difficulties of Paul's trials.

Listen to Phil. 1:12-14 where Paul reflects on what God was doing at this time, ' I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.' Do you think Paul thought it a waste? He sees it as something that has advanced the gospel. Because Paul would have to be chained to an imperial guard at all times and they would have been cycled on a roster he got to preach the gospel to every single guardsman.

Listen to what happened on the ship before it was wrecked in Acts 27:23-24, 'For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship,²⁴ and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' Paul was to preach to Nero himself. Not to mention the impact he had for the gospel in Malta, 28:7-9.

Paul arrived in Rome and when he got there he got to preach there for two years unhindered as he was under another two years of house arrest before he was released and could go on to Spain.

How does God answer prayer? In ways you could not imagine. I hope I have demonstrated the importance of prayer and the way God answers. My goal has been to remind you of the power and wisdom of God and to encourage you to pray. What are you praying for right now? Take these lessons to heart, pray and do not lose heart, pray and expect God to answer, but remember He does not answer as you expect.