

## When Prayers and Providence Disagree

### Romans 15:30-33

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We have held our annual Week of Prayer for more than years than I can remember. Each year we say, *we don't just pray this one week! We want this week to turbocharge our prayers the other 51 weeks!* If you could ask Jesus about anything, what would you ask him?

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. There is no record of them asking him to teach them how to preach, heal, or fast, or how he created the universe. But they do ask him to teach them to pray. I suspect this is because they listened to Jesus pray to his heavenly Father. When you hear a great prayer, it inspires you to want to pray that way. *Jesus, teach us to pray.*

That's our heart at Bethel Church. Year after year we ask, *Jesus, teach us to pray.* Teach us how to pray and stimulate us to more and better prayers.

One person who understood prayer better than most was the Apostle Paul. Most of what we know about prayer comes from his writings about prayer. Paul wrote about prayer repeatedly. Perhaps that itself is a clue to godliness; what do we always talk about repeatedly? How often does prayer come up or how often do we actually pray? I suspect if we spent time with Paul, we would talk often of prayer and probably would often be praying with him.

Paul makes an intriguing statement about prayer in Romans 15:30ff. What makes this particularly interesting is that Paul gives specific prayer requests for how he wanted things to go in his life. And we know historically what actually happened to Paul. Get this. Here's an encouragement: Paul prayed for things and God didn't answer the way he wanted. Just that should make us all feel better! Let's see what he says:

*"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, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen"* (Romans 15:30–33 ESV).

As we saw last week, Paul had ministry plans that involved leaving Corinth, where he wrote Romans, and taking a special offering to the Jerusalem church. The Jewish Christians were financially struggling, and Paul took up an offering for them among the Gentile Christians in Greece. Not only did he want to supply the needs in Jerusalem, but he also wanted this gift to heal the rift that remained between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. What better way to say *I love you* than a love offering for them? On Paul's travel itinerary from Jerusalem was a trip to Rome for some refreshment with the Christians there, and then on to a pioneer gospel work in Spain.

We tend to think the Apostles made their plans with constant divine direction. Sure, Paul had a vision of the Macedonian man urging him to come to Macedonia. We assume he must have dreams all the time telling him what to do next. Wrong. Those divine directions were the exception. Most of the time they made their plans the way we do, according to our best

judgment and wisdom and desiring to please God in the calling of our lives. Paul's plans here are just that—human-made plans. Good ones, but human ones. It didn't go as Paul had hoped.

## **What Prayer Requires**

### **Prayer requires sustained and determined effort**

*"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"* (Romans 15:30).

Say what you want about prayer, obviously the Apostle Paul saw it as essential. Why else ask the Romans to pray for him? He doesn't just ask, he appeals/urges them. *Pray to God on my behalf! Pray by our Lord Jesus and by the love of the Spirit.* Here we see the means to our prayers, access granted by Jesus. We pray in his name. And by the love of the Spirit. This could be the Spirit's love of us or the fruit of the Spirit creating a loving desire to pray for Paul. I think it's that. One of the most loving things we can do for each other is to pray for each other.

One of the most interesting words in this whole section the ESV translates as *"strive together."* NIV translates it, *"join me in my struggle."* You'll get the Greek word. It's a combo word. First part is *together*. The second part, *agonizomai*. You don't have to be a Greek scholar to get that. *Agonizomai*. Agonize with me in prayer. One Greek dictionary defines it, "to join with someone in a severe effort."<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who has ever tried to sustain a prayer life can totally relate to describing prayer as agony and a severe effort. It's hard to pray consistently. It's hard to pray even as you pray. Listen to Paul describe a Christian named Epaphras, *"Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you"* (Colossians 4:12 NIV).

*"Wrestling in prayer."* That's a good description of the experience. But wrestling with whom? Certainly not God. Don't compare this to Jacob wrestling with God. No. The struggle in prayer is not with God, the struggle in prayer is with me. Prayer is hard because it requires things internally that my sinful flesh resists. A few that come to mind:

### **Prayer requires loving and caring for others enough to pray for them**

*"...to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf"* (Romans 15:30 ESV).

Did the Romans read this and pray for Paul? They did if they actually cared about him. Great love leads to great prayer. This is why it's much easier to pray for our parents or children than revival in Sudan. My love drives me to pray for my family. I know them. I love them.

### **Prayer requires that I not be mentally/spiritually lazy or distracted**

This is my biggest struggle in prayer—to sustain a prayer time without my thoughts going to my daily to-do list or problem solving or the game I want to watch. I can watch football without distraction all Sunday afternoon but two minutes into prayer my thoughts are all

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<sup>1</sup> J.P. Louw & E.A. Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1), New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 447.

over the place. It is a kind of agony to exert the spiritual energy to pray. A few things that have helped me are:

1. *Praying out loud.* Talking keeps the mind more conversational in prayer in a way that thinking-type praying doesn't.
2. *Write down ideas/distractions.* Whether from the flesh or the Holy Spirit, I'm not sure, but many of my best ideas come to me while I am praying. I now keep a note pad next to me and write them down quickly so I can get back to praying.
3. *Walking and praying.* One final tip, I find walking while I pray keeps my mind sharp. A walk around your neighborhood or in your basement could be a sweet time of prayer.

### **Prayer requires me to fight my fleshly desires NOT to pray**

Paul said earlier in Romans, "*when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand*" (Romans 7:21). When I think, *I should pray*, immediately a hundred other things less spiritually beneficial flood my mind. *Nah, I think I'll just continue to watch bowling....* Indwelling sin doesn't want us praying. So, when you think, *I should improve my prayer life*, be ready for great resistance to doing so. Perhaps you're feeling that even from a message on prayer. Something inside is shouting, *NOOOO!*

For these reasons and others, prayer is an exertion, a wrestling agony, and my opponent in prayer is me.

### **Prayer Asks According to Our Will**

*"...that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints"* (Romans 15:31).

Let's remind ourselves of the time and place of Paul's writing and requests here. He is in Corinth. He's collected an offering among the Gentile Christians which he wants to deliver to Jerusalem. No problem, right? Wrong.

There is a history here. Remember, Paul was a bit of a Jewish celebrity before becoming a Christian. He was the Pharisee chosen to stamp out Christianity. Acts 9 tells of his conversion. After that, he escaped from Damascus, where the Jews opposed to Christianity tried to kill him. He then went to Jerusalem and even the Apostles were afraid of him. But Barnabas advocated for him and he was eventually received by the Jerusalem church. But once again, the Jews opposed to Christianity tried to kill him in Jerusalem. He was surreptitiously shuttled out of Jerusalem to save his life. Now years later, his ministry to Gentiles was viewed in Jerusalem as heresy. He was famous and hated. Now he's going back to Jerusalem. Back to the snake pit.

What would you ask of friends if it was you? *Please pray that they don't kill me, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.*

Paul recognizes that even this gift requires some diplomacy in the church at Jerusalem. Morris notes that Jerusalem was the most conservative of all churches. Paul was sometimes seen as a rogue apostle. Would the church view this gift as a bribe? Would they view it as an implicit endorsement of Paul's Gentile ministry? Would it negatively affect the church by aligning publicly with Paul? This could hurt their standing in the community.<sup>2</sup> *This might not go well. Please pray they accept this love offering.*

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<sup>2</sup> See Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1988), 524.

It is his third request that highlights perhaps the biggest challenge to praying of all, "so that *by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company*" (Romans 15:32).

Paul wanted the Jerusalem stopover to go great and then for him to proceed smoothly to Rome and be refreshed in the company of these Roman Christians. Sounds wonderful! I take heart in this as many of my prayers sound like that. I will pray over my day: *God, I pray over my 9:00 appointment and I ask that it would go well. I pray over my doctor's appointment at 11:00, that there'd be no problems. I ask for safety as I drive through some snowy roads and please give me a good night of sleep tonight. Amen.*

Sound like your prayers? Even Paul didn't pray for more trouble or trials or problems. His humanity shines through. He wanted smooth sailing.

In a sense, there's nothing wrong with that as long as you include in your prayer and in your heart the very small little clause here. I'll bet most missed it. Look again, "so that ***by God's will*** I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company" (Romans 15:32).

By God's will? Why say that? Why not just, *so that I may come to you*? Because Paul understood something. Even an apostle's desires for the future are not determinative. Paul asks for prayer for his future the way he would like it to be. But he asks that it would be God's will, knowing that God's will is what will happen.

### **Providence Answers According to God's Will**

We ask according to our will. God's answers according to his will. Providence is a theological word for how God works in our world; the circumstances and events of our lives. Providence is the expression of God's will in our daily lives. Paul asked for one thing, but providence gave him something very different.

What happened? Paul takes the gift to Jerusalem. We are not told but presumably all went well with the church. However, it didn't go well with the Jewish unbelievers. He went to the temple to worship. A mob scene ensued. He was nearly killed. The Roman cohort saved his life. A plot to kill him was uncovered, and he went by massive armed guard to Caesarea. There he was jailed for two years. Then he appealed to Caesar and his voyage at sea was on par with Moby Dick or Robinson Crusoe. He nearly died. He was shipwrecked. Many other challenges. Finally, he makes it to Rome and spends two more years under house arrest. Did God answer his prayer to get to Rome and be refreshed by the Christians there? *Yeesss, kinda. Eventually.* But certainly not the way he hoped for and prayed for.

This is where prayer has to be properly understood or you give up praying. We think the purpose of prayer is get God to do what we want. There is a part of prayer in which God encourages us to ask him for things in prayer. "*You do not have, because you do not ask*" (James 4:2-3). Does prayer change things? From one human perspective, the answer is yes.

As long as we also understand that God's will is the final say. Isn't this what Jesus taught the disciples to pray? *Your kingdom come; your will be done.* My youngest daughter often prays the Lord's prayer for us as our prayer before a meal. She sometimes gets a little confused and prays, *Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. My kingdom come, my will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* At least she's honest. And if we were

honest, in our hearts, that is what we are hoping for. We want our will to be God's will. But then when providence doesn't answer the way we want, we think we lack faith, or that God didn't hear us, or prayer is useless.

Was Paul bitter at God for not providing smooth sailing to Rome? No. And we see why here, *"so that by God's will I may come to you"* (Romans 15:32). Here is where prayer helps us. True prayer wants my will to align with God's will. Did God answer the prayer of Paul? For a couple years it didn't feel like it. Which day or month in the Caesarean jail did Paul think, *God, I'm an apostle. There's so much I could be doing instead of sitting here in this jail. Why didn't you answer my prayer? I could have been planting churches in Spain right now.*

But even Paul's prayer request included, *if it be God's will*. And I'm urging as a church to hold these truths in tension. Pray as if prayer moves the hand of God. And when God moves in a way different from what we want, embrace God's will as being better than our own. *Your kingdom come; your will be done.*

How many of us could overcome long-term bitterness in our lives if we truly believed God's will is better than ours? Even Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that God would take the terrible cup of the cross away from him. He added, *"Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done"* (Luke 22:42).

Do we find a bitter Savior on the cross? Jesus on the cross and Paul in prison. A messiah and an apostle experiencing providence different from their prayers. Yet they prayed. What did Jesus continue to do on the cross? He prayed! *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34). *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"* (Luke 23:46).

Dear Bethel Church, we do not know the future, and all of us want smooth sailing to Rome. Prayer doesn't align God with me. It aligns me with God, and since God's will determines my life, prayer quiets my fears and submits my will to my heavenly Father. A will which Paul describes in Romans 12:2, as *good, pleasing, and perfect*.

*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, in my day, in this week, and in my life as it is gloriously and perfectly done in heaven. Amen.*

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