

Romans 15:30-33
Agonizing Prayer for God's Will

How is your prayer life?

- I realize that is a very hard question to answer

I just began teaching a SS class on prayer a few weeks ago

- Even as I teach this material, I understand just how often I fail in this area of obedience

No matter how long you pray, you can never completely satisfy the demand and responsibility to pray

- Yet, there is tremendous joy in praying

The apostle Paul was a fervent and faithful pray-er

- He understood the importance of praying himself
- He understood the importance asking others to pray for him

This morning, as Paul winds down Romans 15, he does so by asking for prayer from the believers at Rome

- The apostle does not shy away from asking others to pray
- As a matter of fact, he earnestly pleads that others would pray for him

Let's read Romans 15:30-33

In these closing verses of Romans 15, the apostle Paul gives four (4) qualifiers that should characterize our prayers

- Serious prayer (15:30)
- Specific prayer (15:31)
- Hopeful prayer (15:32)
- Peaceful prayer (15:33)

I. Serious prayer (15:30)

30 Now I urge you, brethren,

Paul opens this prayer request by stating, **"I urge you, brethren"**

- This helps to show the urgency of the matter

This was no trivial matter

- This was a matter of true importance

He uses the term **"brethren"** to indicate that they were all part of the same spiritual family

- Even though most of these believers had never met Paul, he still considered them to be his spiritual family

by our Lord Jesus Christ

So if Paul had never met these believers, what right does he have asking that they pray for him?

- The apostle refers to the only authority that means anything

The authority of Christ

- Not himself

Notice that Paul uses the full name, “**Lord Jesus Christ**”

- “**Lord**” – His sovereignty, authority, and lordship
- “**Jesus**” – His personal, human name
- “**Christ**” – His Divine, supernatural name; the Messiah; the Anointed and Expected One

But again, observe the use of “**our**”

- Paul didn’t claim exclusive rights on knowing God

Much to the contrary, Paul and these Roman Christians shared a common allegiance to Jesus Christ

- They are brethren
- They are in the same spiritual family

and by the love of the Spirit.

Paul isn’t interested in bullying these believers into obedience

- He isn’t interested in shaming or manipulating them

This is why the apostle balances the authority of Christ with “**the love of the Spirit**”

- Now the motivation is out of love

What kind of love does Paul have in mind here?

- Obviously, it is the kind of love that has its source in the Holy Spirit

What is the first virtue listed in the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22?

- Love!

Agape love is selfless, sacrificial, and servant-driven

- Agape love is Christlike love

Agape love is the love that God has shown to us

- Agape love is the love that husbands are to show toward their wives
- Agape love is the love that Christians are to show toward other Christians

Romans 5:5 tells us, “**the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us**”

- Again, there seems to be a very strong relationship between love and the Holy Spirit

Any kind of love that is motivated out of selfishness is not agape love

- Any love that leads you away from the Bible and its teachings is not agape love

True, agape love has its source in the Holy Spirit

- The Holy Spirit will never lead you away from the Scriptures
- He will always lead you to the Scriptures

Did you notice that all three members of the Trinity are mentioned here in verse 30?¹

- Lord Jesus Christ
- The love of the Spirit
- Prayers to God

to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.

Paul has urged the believers through the authority of Christ and affection of the Spirit

- Now he lays down his request, “**strive together with me in your prayers to God for me**”

I don't know you view prayer

- I don't know if you find it easy or hard

The apostle Paul uses a particular word that is very picturesque to describe the kind of prayer that he is requesting

- It is the English word “**to strive together**”
- Doesn't sound too difficult, right?

The Greek word is συναγωνίζομαι

- Let me explain the word a little bit

There is a preposition συν

- This means with or together

It implies a union or sorts

- This makes sense, because Paul wants his readers to join him in praying like this
- Sort of a team effort

Then Paul includes the main verb ἀγωνίζομαι

- This is the basis for our English word agony

Here is the information from Webster on the word agony²

- Intense pain of mind or body (anguish, torture)
- The struggle that precedes death
- A violent struggle or contest
- A strong sudden display (or joy or delight)

The word was used to describe the act of wrestling in the Greek games³

- Quite a word picture, right?

This is a very powerful word picture

- The NT uses this word in different ways

An athletic contest

- “**Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable**” (1 Cor 9:25, emphasis mine)

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Romans*, 270.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agony>

³ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse*, 546.

Hard work in ministry

- “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Col 1:29, emphasis mine)
- “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God” (1 Tim 4:10, emphasis mine)

But twice in the NT, it is used of the struggle in prayer

- Here in Romans 15:30
- The other in Colossians 4:12, “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God” (emphasis mine)

Let’s back up

- Is Paul insinuating that prayer should be an excruciating, distressing experience?
- Not necessarily

But the balance comes in that sometimes, prayer is extremely difficult

- It seems like an intense conflict or war
- That’s because it is!

Does Satan want believers to be effective in prayer?

- Of course not!

Do you find that when you set your mind to pray, you are immediately assaulted with thoughts and temptations?

- Things you have to do
- Appointments
- Kids screaming
- Sinful thoughts

Oh how different it would be if we could escape to a noiseless, non-interruptive bubble in which we could pray!

- But that’s not the case

Susanna Wesley gave birth to 19 children

- Only 10 of these children made it to maturity

But do you know that Susanna Wesley prayed for two hours a day?

- With that many kids, that took some very strong commitment

From my reading, I am told that she would flip her apron over her head when she prayed

- It was a way of her indicating to the kids that she was escaping to God in prayer

If you are looking for a time in which things will calm down and be quiet to pray, then you may never find that

- Even if things are quiet on the outside, your mind is still raging with constant interruptions

Dear friend, prayer is a battle

- It is a war

“Instead of prayer being the easiest, it is the hardest work of the Christian, because principalities and powers of evil combine to oppose the progress of the soul in prayer”⁴ (emphasis mine)

⁴ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 411.

What makes prayer so difficult?⁵

- We must fight against our old self (desires, habits, etc.)
- We must deal with Satanic enticements and temptations
- We must deal with personal distractions
- We don't like sitting still and focusing for very long
- We struggle with seeing how our prayers coincide with God's sovereignty

Paul uses a very strong term here to remind the Roman believers that prayer is not for the faint-hearted

- It is for the strong
- It is for those who have great faith

In Ephesians 6, Paul describes the reality of spiritual warfare

- Most of you are somewhat familiar with that passage

After listing the elements of the armor, do you know how Paul concludes the section on spiritual warfare?

- With a reminder to pray!

Listen to what Paul wrote, “**With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and *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.**” (Eph 6:18-20)

- An all-out call for prayer!

How committed are you to prayer?

- Be careful how you answer that question

When the prayer requests come to you, what do you do?

- Delete them or devote time to prayer?

When someone asks you to pray for them, what do you do?

- Write it down?
- Or rely on your memory?

Prayer should not be considered as an optional duty to the Christian

- It is imperative that we pray

Jesus Christ gave prayer a very high priority

- The apostle Paul gave prayer a very high priority

What are we saying if we don't make prayer a high priority?⁶

- Are we superior to Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul?

Paul doesn't want a half-hearted approach to prayer⁷

- Rather, it takes tremendous determination to pray faithfully, fervently, and persistently for these requests

The Roman believers didn't have email, postal service, or FaceBook

- His correspondence with this church was very rare

⁵ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Romans 9-16*, 351-52.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, 539.

⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, *ICC, Romans 9-16*, 777.

The first description of prayer that Paul lists is that it be

- Serious prayer (15:30)

II. Specific prayer (15:31)

31 that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea.

Why is Paul asking for serious prayer that seems like an agonizing spiritual battle?

- Because Paul knew the potential dangers that he faced on a regular basis

“Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure upon me *of concern for all the churches.*” (2 Cor 11:23-28)

- Wow!

Why did Paul continue on in ministry?

- Why didn't he just give up?

Paul told the elders at Ephesus, “*And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.*” (Acts 20:22-24)

Paul wasn't surprised by suffering

- He expected it!

But I fear that if persecution began here in the US, many believers would be surprised!

- We don't expect suffering

Just a few verses earlier in Romans 15, Paul has explained the last remaining priority before visiting the church at Rome

- He has to take a collection of money to Jerusalem

Paul has two threats in mind that form the basis for his prayer requests

- “*that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea*”
- “*that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints*”

If you take the NT as a whole, who gave the greatest opposition to Jesus and the apostles?

- It was not the Gentiles
- It was the Jews!

The people who outwardly claimed to be Abraham's children were the very ones who persecuted Jesus and His apostles!

- This is sad!

Paul describes the violent nature of unbelieving Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2

- They “both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.” (2:15-16)

Paul refers to these Jews as “disobedient”

- They are disobedient because they refuse to submit themselves to God through the Gospel⁸
- They refused to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, their Messiah

The apostle speaks of the “disobedient” by use of a present tense participle

- He viewed their disobedience as an ongoing reality in their lives

It wasn't that they were disobedient in the past

- It is that they are disobedient in the present

That rebellious and defiant disobedience would cause problems for Paul

- Hence the reason that he asks for prayer

As Paul headed east back into Jerusalem, he was concerned that yet again he would face opposition from the Jews

- He needed to ensure that the collection was received and interpreted correctly
- Obviously, he had to deal with Jews in the process

So what was Paul's request?

- “that I may be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea”

The word refers to a rescue from danger

- To be delivered from danger

The same word is used of God rescuing Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet 2:7)

- I would say that Lot was in a dangerous position, wouldn't you?

Paul knew that he was walking back into the arena of spiritual opposition

- This is sad, since Jerusalem should have been the place of spiritual acceptance

So he prays that he might not fall into the hands of his opponents⁹

- This would only hinder his visit to Rome
- And this would hinder his desire to head for Spain

His desire for deliverance was not for selfish reasons

- It was simply so that he could fulfill the ministry that God had for him¹⁰

⁸ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Romans*, 496.

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 523.

¹⁰ MacArthur, 353.

and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints:

The second danger that Paul anticipated involved the financial collection

- We studied this last week

The Gentile churches of Macedonia and Achaia had sacrificed to give toward the needs of the Jews in Jerusalem

- Paul hoped this would solidify and settle the relationship between Jews and Gentiles
- He hoped that this would break down some barriers that had existed for a long time
- He hoped that this ministry from the Gentiles might help to show the Jews that Paul's ministry was not anti-Jewish

If the Jewish believers didn't receive the offering in the right perspective, it would be a devastating blow against the unity of the church¹¹

- Paul desperately wanted this offering to unify Jewish and Gentile believers

The Jews might look at this offering as a bribe¹²

- Of course, this was not Paul's motive

So Paul prays that his "service" would be "acceptable to the saints"

- Again, Paul refers to his ministry as that of a deacon
- A servant

The apostle just wants to help and serve others

- That is really where his heart is

What humility this shows us!

- What a proper attitude this shows us!

Sometimes we don't ask for specific prayers

- Sometimes we don't ask for prayers at all!

If I could be so bold as to say this

- If you have a need and don't ask for prayer, it might very well be a sign of your spiritual pride

Christians are not to have a "I can take care of myself, thank you" attitude

- We are to admit our weaknesses
- We are to ask for prayer from others

Paul is anticipating some potential problems in his near-term ministry, so he asks for prayer

- Serious prayer (15:30)
- Specific prayer (15:31)

¹¹ Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 160.

¹² Mounce, 524.

III. Hopeful prayer (15:32)

32 so that I may come to you

Assuming that the two requests in verse 31 would be answered, then “I may come to you”

- The long-awaited, often-delayed trip to Rome would become a reality

in joy

Paul envisions his trip as being one of joy

- Joy is a spiritual gladness that is not dependent upon outward circumstances

Happiness is quite different from joy

- Circumstances determine whether I am happy or not

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit

- It is a product of His ministry in our lives

No Christian can manufacture joy

- But we can certainly see it due to the Spirit’s work

by the will of God

Verse 32 is a bit of a best-case scenario in the mind of Paul

- He was received well by the Jews
- The offering was interpreted correctly
- Unity was fostered and encouraged

Paul also mentions that his visit, if God allows it, would be “by the will of God”

The apostle was not one to say, “Ah, God is sovereign. Whatever He decides will happen anyway. There is no need to pray.”

- Such a response is shallow and unbiblical

Jesus Christ was the unique God-Man

- Yet in the Garden, He prayed three times, “Thy will be done” (Mt 26:42)

A week ago in SS, we examined the first half of the Model Prayer where Jesus told His disciples to pray, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”

- Interesting, isn’t it, that Jesus teaches His disciples to pray for God’s will to be done!

It is true that God is sovereign

- Psalm 115:3 tells us, “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases”

Yet this Sovereign, Almighty God has invited us to pray

- Furthermore, He has commanded us to pray

Through praying, we don’t change the mind of God

- Rather, through prayer, God changes our mind
- He conforms our minds to His will

Even the apostle Paul was totally aware of the fact that his life and ministry were subject to the will of God

- He wasn't a renegade
- He lived in submission to God

and find refreshing rest in your company.

Again, Paul includes the thought of refreshing fellowship within his prayer

- This shows just how important this element of fellowship was to the heart of Paul

We need to remind ourselves that fellowship is an integral part of the body of Christ

- Acts 2:42 tells us that the early church was “continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”

You need to ask yourself, “Am I regularly committing myself to times of fellowship with the believers at CBC?”

- You can't do this if you show up last minute and leave immediately after the service
- You can't do this if you continually neglect fellowship meals
- You can't do this if you think that you can do just fine without other Christians

Paul earnestly anticipated the benefit he would receive from these Roman Christians

- He would enjoy a time of spiritual refreshment

Is this how you view the body of Christ here at CBC?

- Do you receive spiritual refreshment and encouragement from the flock?

Our culture has taught us to be independent

- But the Bible warns us against being independent

As believers, we are to be

- Dependent upon God
- Interdependent with other believers

Paul has given us three descriptions of the kind of prayer that he needs

- Serious prayer (15:30)
- Specific prayer (15:31)
- Hopeful prayer (15:32)

IV. Peaceful prayer (15:33)

33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul closes with a type of benediction

- A blessing upon the believers at Rome
- He prays to “the God of peace”

In the book of Romans, we have seen God referred to by different titles

- The God of Jews (3:29)
- The God of Gentiles (3:29)
- The God who gives perseverance and encouragement (15:5)
- The God of hope (15:13)
- The God of peace (15:33; 16:20)

In calling God “**the God of peace,**” Paul is highlighting the fact that God is the One imparting and giving peace

- He is the very Source of peace

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:14, “**For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into one*, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall**”

There are two types of peace

- Peace with God
- Peace of God

Believers have experienced the peace with God

- “**Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**” (Rom 5:1)

Peace with God comes through justification

- God declaring sinners to be righteous
- God reconciling sinners to Himself through the work of His Son

But there is also a peace of God

- This is only for believers

In the book of Philippians, Paul writes, “**Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**” (4:6-7)

- God’s peace truly surpasses all comprehension and explanation

The peace of God can be experienced and enjoyed

- But it cannot be rationally explained¹³

The last word of this prayer is “**Amen**”

- It was a term of agreement
- It means “may it be so”

We ask the question, “Was Paul’s prayer answered?”

- Yes and no

When Paul went to Jerusalem, he was welcomed by many (Acts 21:17-20)

- He was able to recount what God had done through him

But soon thereafter, some Jews stirred up the crowds against Paul (Acts 21:27)

- The Roman cohort had to save Paul from certain death

¹³ Mounce, 271.

Paul did arrive in Rome

- But as a prisoner

The apostle Paul was not so strong that he viewed prayer as optional

- Rather, he frequently asked the churches to pray for him¹⁴

Evaluate your prayer life this morning

- Would Paul enlist you to pray for him?

Are your prayers

- Serious (15:30)
- Specific (15:31)
- Hopeful (15:32)
- Peaceful (15:33)

Don't be discouraged and give up

- Ask God for help
- Ask God to teach you to pray

But we must also apply diligence in this manner

- God will give grace
- But we must work hard at praying

¹⁴ Griffith-Thomas, 413.