

Romans 1:8-13; 15:30-32 “Praying for an Open Door: Paul’s Prayer for the Romans”**

Main Idea: From Paul's personal thoughts in Romans 1:8-13 and 15:30-33, we learn that there are four key ingredients in God-honoring prayer.

I. Prayer involves seeking (1:8-13).

- A. Paul desired God’s will to be done.
- B. Paul desired an open door to Rome .
 - 1. The request was for spiritual reasons, not selfish ones (11).
 - 2. The request was for mutual encouragement (12).
 - 3. The request was for the sake of the harvest (13).

II. Prayer involves struggle (15:30).

- A. If that's true, why should we pray?
 - 1. Our first motivation is the person of Christ.
 - 2. Our second motivation is the love of the Spirit.
- B. Since that's true, how should we pray?
 - 1. Make it a priority.
 - 2. Make sure you know who you're talking to.
 - 3. Make it personal.

III. Prayer involves being specific (15:31-32).

- A. Paul mentioned two requests (31).
 - 1. He asked for protection from unbelievers.
 - 2. He asked for acceptance among believers.
- B. Paul mentioned two results (32).
 - 1. He wanted a joyful trip.
 - 2. He wanted a refreshing visit.

IV. Prayer involves submission (15:33).

Take Inventory: Ask yourself three important questions...

- 1. Are you praying?
- 2. Are you praying biblically?
- 3. Are you willing to walk through the door that God opens?

I was in junior high, just a couple of years old in Christ, when the Lord placed on my heart the desire to invest my life in two, eternally significant things: the *Word of God* and *people*. I was so thrilled with the things I was learning from His Word that I just knew I wanted to pour my life into learning *His Word* and giving it to *people*.

It was during my sophomore year in college that the Lord made it clear that I was to pursue pastoral ministry. I'd begun as a pre-med major, but through various means including a personal study of the pastoral epistles, a semester of study in Israel, and the confirmation of the necessary pastoral gifts by the leadership of my home church, I set on a course to become a pastor. I finished my undergrad degree in Pre-Seminary Bible from Cedarville College, which included serving during my senior year as a pastoral intern/assistant under the mentorship of my home church pastor. Then it was off to seminary for four years in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to study the biblical languages, to explore the Scriptures carefully, to develop a biblical and systematic theology, and, in short, to prepare to be a shepherd serving in God's church.

Quite honestly, as my final year in seminary approached, I couldn't wait to get out and get busy serving in the local church. I wanted to take the precious truths that He had allowed me to learn from His Word and give them to others, particularly to a flock I could love, feed, and lead, for the glory of Christ. The *Word* and *people*, that's what burned in my soul, and so we prayed that in God's timing He would open the door.

Sherry and I intended to move directly from Quincer Dorm, where I had served as a Resident Director of a men's dormitory, to a church. That was our plan anyway, but the Lord had something else in mind. There was no open door to ministry, so we moved to an apartment that gave us a short term lease, not knowing if we'd be there a month, or two, or a year, and we kept praying.

The desire to preach was intense. Whenever a church requested pulpit supply, we gladly went. As pastorless churches contacted us, we eagerly responded and soon I entered the candidating process in several places. There was a church plant in Pittsburg, another in Oxford, Ohio, a recovery work in Springfield, a Grace Brethren church in Englewood, as well as a church or two in Michigan.

"We want to serve you, Lord," Sherry and I would pray. "Open the door for the ministry of *Your* choice." That was our request.

And then came a call from a one hundred and nine year old Baptist Church located in the foothills of Wheelersburg, Ohio, followed by two visits to pulpit supply, and in October of 1987 God opened the door for ministry, and we walked through and met you!

Have you ever prayed for an *open door for ministry*? If you have received God's gift of salvation through Christ, you'll want to share that gift with others. If He has used His Word to transform your heart and life, you'll want God to use *you* to do the same with others. The *Word* and *people*—that's what real living is all about.

Praying for an *open door* is what we find Paul doing as we open the God-inspired letter he wrote to the church in Rome. We want to take a close-up look at this particular prayer, for there's much we can learn from it. We find Paul's prayer for an open door in two places in Romans, in Romans 1:8-13 and 15:30-33. We're going to look briefly at the first passage, and more carefully at the second. In so doing, we'll discover four necessary ingredients in God-honoring praying for open doors.

I. Prayer involves seeking (1:8-13).

Jesus taught in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." That's what we see Paul doing at the beginning of his letter to the church in Rome. He's *seeking* something.

Verses 8-10—"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how

constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you."

Paul was in Corinth when he penned those words, some five hundred miles east of Rome . Yet the Roman believers were on his heart. He valued them, and told them so. He prayed for them, and this was his twofold prayer.

A. Paul desired God's will to be done. Verse 10 again, "I pray that now at last *by God's will* the way may be opened..." I want God's will to be done, affirmed Paul. And if it is His will, here's what I want, that "the way may be opened for me to come to you."

B. Paul desired an open door to Rome . The question is, *why?* Why was Paul bringing this request to God? He mentions three reasons in the following three verses.

1. *The request was for spiritual reasons, not selfish ones (11).* "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." Paul didn't set his sights on Rome to see the sites. He wasn't coming to see a show in the Coliseum or to take a tour of the Roman Senate. His intent was to *give*, not get. He wanted to give the Christians in Rome something. What? Some *spiritual gift*. And why? To *make you strong*. In other words, he wanted to use his Holy Spirit given gift as a minister of the Word of Christ to impart some spiritual gift or provision to them, that is, to teach them truth that would help them grow stronger and stronger in Christ. Remember, *the Word* and *people*, that's what drives a minister of the gospel!

But as Paul knew, the ministry road runs in two directions. Hence a second request...

2. *The request was for mutual encouragement (12).* "...that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Paul knew he would benefit, too, from a trip to Rome . His faith would be strengthened, as would theirs.

3. *The request was for the sake of the harvest (13).* "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order *that I might have a harvest among you*, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."

Here's what made Paul tick. It's why he had gone to places like Antioch , Philippi, Ephesus , and Corinth in the past, and why he was praying for an open door to Rome in the near future. It's why he was flogged at least eight times (five times by hostile Jews, three times by abusive Roman authorities), stoned once, shipwrecked three times, hungry and cold often, and more (2 Cor 11:24ff.). It's all about *the harvest*. Jesus had said, "Open your eyes and look to the fields! They are ripe for the harvest (John 4:35; see also Matt 9:37-38)."

Multitudes are perishing in their sins. Do you see the harvest fields? Christ has come. He died for sinners, conquered the grave, and offers eternal life to all who will repent of their sins and believe in Him. But how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?[\[1\]](#)

"I'll go!" said Paul. "Give me an open door!" prayed Paul. Are you praying that kind of prayer? Prayer involves, first of all, *seeking*. Let's turn now to Paul's other prayer text in Romans, Romans 15:30-33, and notice that...

II. Prayer involves struggle (15:30).

Listen to Paul in verse 30, "I urge you, brothers[\[2\]](#), by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me."

This is a letter to "brothers." It's a missionary letter from Paul to a church he had yet to visit in Rome . The letter is almost over. The doctrinal section of chapters 1-11 is finished. The section on Christian duty in chapters 12-15 is nearly complete. Quite frankly, before us is the type of passage we tend to brush by quickly. It sounds so personal, even sentimental, that we might think, "There's nothing here for us, is there?"

Indeed, there is. This is a passage that calls us to pray, not just to talk about prayer, not just to say we believe in prayer, but to pray! This text says to us, “If you want to move ahead for Christ, if you want to see the ministry of the gospel move ahead, then get ready for a struggle, for prayer involves a *struggle*.”

In the previous section of Romans 15 (verses 14-29), Paul shared again (as he did in chapter one) his future plans with the Romans. Because he saw himself as God's minister to the Gentiles (16), he was planning to head to Jerusalem with a love-gift from the Gentile churches, and then set out for an evangelistic trip to Spain via a stopover in Rome (24).

Why did Paul tell the Romans about his plan? In part, so they could get ready for his visit by collecting funds (and personnel) to support his missionary endeavor to Spain. But there was another basic reason for telling them. What was it? It was to give them an opportunity to have a vital part in the advancement of the gospel. How? Through *prayer*.

Here's how the KJV renders verse 30, “Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.” Do you catch that word? *Strive*. Prayer involves *struggle*. That reality prompts us to ask two questions.

A. If that's true, why should we pray? Concerning Epaphras, Paul said he “wrestled in prayer” (Col. 4:12). Is prayer hard work for you? It is for me. It goes against every self-sufficient fiber in my body to stop my activity and pray. Most of us would rather *do* than *pray*. What we need to learn is that when we're praying, we are doing something very significant!

J. Oswald Sanders wrote this in his book, *Paul the Leader*: “It is obvious that Paul did not regard prayer as supplemental, but as fundamental—not something to be added to his work, but the very matrix out of which his work was born. He was a man of action *because* he was a man of prayer. It was probably his prayer even more than his preaching that produced the kind of leaders we meet in his letters.”

Prayer is vital. But it's also a struggle. So what incentive do we have to do what doesn't come naturally and may be costly? Paul here lays before us two motivators.

1. Our first motivation is the person of Christ. “I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ...to join me in my struggle by praying.” Why was Paul a man of prayer? Why would he actually invite other people to join his struggle? The answer? “I urge you, brothers, *by our Lord Jesus Christ*.”

The Lordship of Jesus motivated Paul to pray. My friend, there is a Person in heaven who is the Lord of the universe, and His name is Jesus Christ. If you believe that, if you *really* believe that, you will have ample incentive to pray.

2. Our second motivation is the love of the Spirit. “I urge you, brothers...by the love of the Spirit.” The love of the Spirit is a second motivator for pray.

What does Paul mean by “the love of the Spirit”? There are two ways we can treat this prepositional phrase. One is to say that our love *for* the Spirit is the basis of this appeal to pray. The other is to say that it's the love *produced* and *prompted* by the Spirit. The second option seems more likely.

Why was Paul urging his Roman brothers to join this prayer struggle? First, because of the Lord Jesus Christ. But secondly, because it's what the Holy Spirit wants, the Spirit whom Christ sent and who produces love in us (Gal. 5:22). Prayer is a vital way to express our love for others, a Holy Spirit-produced way. Do you want to please Christ? Then keep in step with His Spirit when He gives you opportunity to show your love for others by praying for them.

B. Since that's true, how should we pray? The truth is, people call lots of things “prayer.” A father calls a family together around the dinner table and says the words, “God is great, God is good, now we thank you for this food. Amen,” and concludes, “There. We said our prayer.” A child drops to his knees by his bedside and recites,

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” A clergyman stands behind a pulpit on Sunday morning and (as Howard Hendricks humorously puts it) “scrapes the Milky Way” with high-sounding, flowery words, a “prayer” vocalized through a saintly, deep voice. Conversely, a broken-hearted widow stands at the graveside of her departed mate and “prays” in total silence, not a word proceeding from her mouth, only a groaning lifted to her heavenly Father.

So which of these people actually prayed? For some folks prayer is repeating certain formulas to God. Others insist it must be extemporaneous. The question is, how does the Bible say we should pray? According to this verse, we learn three “how-to's” for prayer.

1. *Make it a priority.* “I urge you, brothers,” Paul appeals. “Join me by praying.” There's a sense of urgency that should move us to pray, and Paul had it. The reason he viewed prayer as a priority is because he saw its significance in God's plan. “*Join me by praying,*” he said. Prayer is a vital part of the advancement of the gospel. Not everyone can go to Spain, but everyone can pray.

Why don't we see more advancement of the gospel these days? Could the answer be a very simple one? Could it be a lack of prayer? Why is prayer not a greater priority in our lives? (I'm not talking about prayer for *self*, but prayer for the advancement of the gospel). If a church advertises it's having a concert, it'll get a crowd. If it brings in a big name speaker, the multitudes will come. If it announces a prayer meeting, who comes? Do you? Are you making mission-focused prayer a priority? That's the first “how-to” in verse 30. Here's the second.

2. *Make sure you know who you're talking to.* The text says, “Join me in my struggle by praying *to God* for me.” Who's the object of prayer? *God*. That means that fundamentally, prayer is a conversation *with God*, not merely a recitation of a religious formula, but meaningful, heartfelt communication with *God*.

But what God? There were many so-called “gods” in Paul's day as in ours. Not everyone who prays engages in biblical prayer because not everyone who prays is conversing with the true and living God. Who is the true and living God? That's the question Paul addressed in great detail in this epistle. According to Romans...

He's the Creator of the universe (1:20), that's who. He's the One whose wrath is being revealed against ungodliness (1:18). He's the righteous Judge (2:2). He's the One who chose the Jews as His special people and through the Jews sent His Son into the world. He's the One who offers forgiveness and an eternal relationship with Himself to all who will come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ (3:22). That's who God is. He's the Sovereign One who makes no mistakes, who works together all things for good in the lives of those He called (8:28). And those He called, He also justifies, and those He justifies He also glorifies (8:30). He's the One who saves the sinner who calls on His Son (10:13). He's the One who uses His Word to produce faith in the heart of sinners (10:17). He is the One to whom every man, woman, and child must give account (14:12).

Please know this. Prayer is valid only if you know the One you're talking to. If your prayers seem like they're bouncing off the ceiling, maybe the reason isn't that you're using the wrong words. Maybe it's because you don't know the Person with whom you're speaking.

3. *Make it personal.* “Join me in my struggle by praying *to God for me.*” Pray for *me*, Paul pleaded. He's not throwing around clichés. He knew he needed prayer. He, a real person, a first century missionary, needed the prayers of real people, Christians living in Rome, as they called on the real God.

When you pray, is it *personal*? Do you pray for people by name? Through the name of Christ, we have that privilege.

So biblical prayer is marked by these three “how-to's.” It's a priority. We know the One we're talking to. And it's personal. When our prayers are marked by these traits, we'll persevere even though prayer involves a *struggle*. Now a third key ingredient in biblical prayer.

III. Prayer involves being specific (15:31-32).

Notice the specifics in verses 31-32, “Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.”

Prayer involves being specific. In Paul's case, he mentioned four very precise items that he wanted the Roman church to be praying about. First...

A. Paul mentioned two requests (31). What were they?

1. *He asked for protection from unbelievers.* “Pray that I may be rescued [delivered, AV] from the unbelievers [lit. ‘the ones disobeying’] in Judea .” That's a very specific request, one that Paul sought for obvious reasons. He'd already been run out of Judea once when angry Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29)!

So why then was he going back to Jerusalem ? It must have been pretty important. It was. He was going to deliver a gift of money to needy Christians in the mother church.

When Paul asked for protection, it wasn't for selfish reasons. Paul didn't fear death per se, for elsewhere he wrote, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21).” The reason he here asks for protection was because if harm came to him, it meant harm to the gospel, too.

Yes, he knew God was sovereign, and that an angry opponent couldn't harm him if God didn't allow it, BUT. A sovereign God uses something to accomplish His sovereign purpose. What's that? The prayers of His people. Paul knew that, so he made a specific request. He asked for protection from unbelievers. A second specific request...

2. *He asked for acceptance among believers.* Verse 31—“Pray that...my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.”

My first thought is, why *wouldn't* such an offering be acceptable? The apparent answer is that it wasn't just the unbelieving Jews who had a problem with Paul. So did some of the *believing* Jews. Why?^[3] They didn't like what he was doing with the Gentiles. They felt he was compromising. He didn't make the Gentile converts keep the Jewish customs. He preached that a person was justified by faith in Christ alone and not by adherence to the Jewish Law. And that message ruffled some feathers.

He could just imagine the cold reception he might receive... “Paul, or *Saul* as you used to be called, where did you say this money came from? From some pagan *Gentiles* in Macedonia ? Thanks, but no thanks. We may be poor, but we're not that poor. Even if you don't have standards, we do! If you're going to preach that cheap-grace message, we don't want any part of it!”

The thought of that caused Paul to cringe. He didn't want a divided church. The reason he was going to Jerusalem with a love-offering from Gentiles was to maintain the unity of the church that Christ died to achieve. But he knew it would take more than his efforts to bring about this unity.

That's why he asked the Roman church to pray. And pray *specifically*—for protection from unbelievers and for acceptance with believers.

Don't miss this. These are two good prayer requests. Why? Because these are two areas where Satan loves to attack.^[4] Satan knows he can hinder the progress of the gospel by causing the world to resist Christians and Christians to resist each other. That's why we must pray, and pray in specifics.

In John 14:13 Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” That's why we pray. It's a way to glorify God. John Piper, in his classic book *Desiring God*, illustrates the point:

“Suppose you are totally paralyzed and can do nothing for yourself but talk. And suppose a strong and reliable

friend promised to live with you and do whatever you needed done. How could you glorify your friend if a stranger came to see you? Would you glorify his generosity and strength by trying to get out of bed and carry him?

“No! You would say, ‘Friend, please come lift me up, and would you put a pillow behind me so I can look at my guest. And would you please put my glasses on for me?’ And so your visitor would learn from your requests that you are helpless and that your friend is strong and kind. You glorify your friend by needing him and asking him for help and counting on him...

“Here is a great discovery. We do not glorify God by providing his needs, but by praying that he would provide ours—and trusting him to answer.”^[5]

That's why we must pray in specifics, like Paul requested his readers to do. He mentioned two specific prayer requests in verse 31. In addition, he mentioned two specific prayer-results in verse 32.

B. Paul mentioned two results (32). What were they?

1. *He wanted a joyful trip.* “So that [here's what Paul anticipated as the result of the answered prayer requests in verse 31] by God's will I may come to you with joy.” If God answered his request for protection and acceptance in Jerusalem, then that would open the door for a trip to Rome. And that's what Paul desired, if God permitted. As well as this...

2. *He wanted a refreshing visit.* Verse 32 concludes, “And together with you be refreshed.” The verb means “to lie down to rest with,” and figuratively means “to be refreshed in spirit with.”

Is it okay for God's servants to desire to be refreshed? Paul wanted to be, a fact which he mentioned both at the beginning of his letter (as we've just seen) and at the end of it. I love the following remark by William Barclay, “It is a great thing to go on knowing that we are wrapped in the warmth of the prayers of those who love us.”^[6] Isn't that true?

Now answer this? Is specific prayer for other people a significant part of your prayer life? If not, allow me to offer a suggestion. There are a lot of prayer systems, but here's a simple one. Use our church directory, and pray each day for the names of people on two pages. If you do that, every ten days you will pray for everyone in the church.

Prayer involves seeking. Prayer involves a struggle. Prayer involves being specific. There's one more ingredient that Paul models for us.

IV. Prayer involves submission (15:33).

Which brings me to an important question. Did God answer Paul's prayer request? Paul prayed (and asked the church in Rome to pray) that God would deliver him from unbelievers in Jerusalem, and allow him to take a ministry trip to Rome and eventually to Spain. Did God grant his request?

The answer is yes...and no. He did make his trip to Jerusalem, and afterwards he did make it to Rome, but not according to his plans.^[7]

Do you remember what happened? Acts 21 tells us. Romans 15 tells us Paul's original plan, but Acts 21 tells us what actually happened. Paul's intent was to take the offering to Jerusalem, then head for Rome for a refreshing visit, and then travel to Spain to do evangelism. That was the plan. That was the prayer request.

But God doesn't always answer our requests according to our plans. His plans are higher than ours. And better. Aren't you glad?

What happened to Paul says much to us about submission in prayer. As we turn to Acts 21, keep in mind these words from Paul's prayer request in Romans 15:32, "So that by *God's will* I may come to you." Yes, Paul had requests, but he submitted those requests to God's will.

And here's what happened. Acts 21 says Paul made it to Jerusalem, and the brothers received him warmly (17). So far so good. The next day Paul met with James, and reported to the church about his ministry with the Gentiles (18-19). Verse 20 says when the Jews heard this, they "praised God." But they kept talking, and warned Paul that there were Jewish Christians who kept the law and who had heard rumors about Paul's alleged anti-Moses message (21). To dispel these rumors, Paul went through a purification rite at the temple. The day he finished, some Jews from Asia stirred up the crowd against Paul (27), and the mob tried to kill him (31).

So back to the question. Did God answer Paul's prayer requests? Did Paul make it to Rome as planned? The answer is, not as planned, but he made it! God did protect him in Jerusalem. How? He used a Roman centurion who arrested him! A jail cell became his place of protection. Paul spent the next four years in prison, two in Caesarea and two in Rome.

Did God give Paul his trip to Rome? Yes, but he went as a prisoner, not a free-man. And as a result of his chains, the gospel advanced to the whole palace guard in Rome (Phil. 1:13). Prayer often leads to *paradox*, as the following poem aptly reveals:

He asked for strength that he might achieve;

he was made weak that he might obey.

He asked for health that he might do greater things;

he was given infirmity that he might do better things.

He asked for riches that he might be happy;

he was given poverty that he might be wise.

He asked for power that he might have the praise of men;

he was given weakness that he might feel the need of God.

He asked for all things that he might enjoy life;

he was given life that he might enjoy all things.

He has received nothing that he asked for, all that he hoped for;

his prayer is answered. [81](#)

God-honoring prayer involves *submission*. He calls us to submit our will to His. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to trust God and entrust your life to God, come what may? He loves us. Indeed, He gave His Son for us. Why wouldn't we trust Him?

Paul concludes in verse 33, "The God of peace be with you all. Amen." Beloved, when you know that the God of peace is with you, you can face life's perils without fear.

What have we learned this morning? Prayer involves seeking, a struggle, being specific, and submission. Now it's time to respond to God's Word.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself three important questions...

1. *Are you praying?* Does prayer have the place in your life that it should? If not, what needs to change? Your schedule? How much time did you spend on your knees this past month?

S. D. Gordon wrote, “The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing. The great people of the earth today are people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer, nor those who say they believe in prayer, nor yet those who can explain about prayer, but I mean these people who take time to pray.” Are you praying?

2. *Are you praying biblically?* When you do pray, do your prayers resemble Paul’s? Do you seek God’s will fervently? Do you persist in the struggle? Do you pray in specifics? And do you submit your prayers to the will of God?

Perhaps there's sin that's short-circuiting your communication with God. Sin does that, you know. If there is sin in your life, face it, and come to the cross. Confess it, experience God’s cleansing for it, amputate it from your life, and if necessary seek godly counsel for dealing with it.

3. *Are you willing to walk through the door that God opens?* And remember, it may not be the door you envisioned! But if you’ve been praying and God has opened a door of ministry opportunity, will you walk through it, and honor Him in it?

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] As Paul shares in Romans 10:14.

[2] Paul uses the same intense language he used earlier in Romans 12:1, “I urge you, brothers, to present...”

[3] D. A. Carson points out a very basic reason: “Some people are not very good at receiving things—especially from those who are regarded as inferior. It takes grace to receive gifts in the right spirit, every bit as much as it takes grace to give them in the right spirit.” (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 216).

[4] As Ray Stedman points out; p. 208.

[5] John Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 138.

[6] William Barclay, p. 206.

[7] The historian, William Barclay, says that as far as we know Paul never made it to Spain . Others suggest he may have, so this part of the prayer request remains an unknown.

[8] Anonymous, cited by D. A. Carson, pp. 223-4.