

Main Idea: What motivated Paul to pray? The same thing that motivated everything he did. Gospel obligation. As we ponder what Paul said about his prayer life in Romans 1:8-13 and 15:30-33, we see that gospel obligation gives us incentive to pray in four ways.

- 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).

Make It Personal: Let’s ask ourselves three important questions.

1. Am I praying?
2. Am I praying biblically?
3. Am I willing to walk through the door that God opens?

This summer the Lord is using the apostle Paul to show us how to pray. Redeemed people *pray the Word*. From his prayers in 1 & 2 Thessalonians we’ve learned that he prayed *missionally*. From his prayers in 1 & 2 Corinthians we learned that he prayed for *perfection*, that is, the perfecting or maturing of those under his care. Today we turn to the Cadillac of his letters, his epistle to the Romans.

There’s an important word I want us to have in mind as we open our Bibles to Romans 1. It’s the word Paul had in mind as he wrote. The word is *obligation*.

Do you like that word? Do you like when people do things out of obligation? Is that a proper motive? We tend to say *no*. Yet Paul says in Romans 1:14, “I am under obligation.” Obligation was not a negative concept for Paul. It’s actually what motivated him, at least in part, to preach, make sacrifices, suffer hardship, do everything he did, including pray. *I am under obligation*.

To whom, Paul? Why? And are we under obligation too? Unfortunately, we’re prone to turn the gospel into what Bonhoeffer called *cheap grace*. Sadly, the book of Romans is often used to justify this cheap grace.

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\*\*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.

<sup>1</sup> For a previous look at this passage, see the messages preached at WBC in 2008 and on 10/4/15.

Ask the typical American evangelical, “Are you under obligation?” And the response is, “Obligation? No way. God saved me by grace, not by works. I don’t owe Him anything, or anyone else. Christ paid my debt. That’s the gospel truth.”

Actually, that is cheap grace. The fact that Christ paid my debt is the reason Paul says “I am under obligation.” Obligation is actually a wonderful motivator as long as we are obligated to the correct master and for the correct reason.

With this in mind we’re now ready for today’s message, “*Gospel Obligation: Learning from Paul’s Prayer for the Church at Rome.*”

*Scripture Reading: Romans 1:8-13*

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*.

At first I thought He wanted me to invest my life in medical missions. But during my sophomore year in college the Lord made it clear He had other plans for me. He uses various means to show me, 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. Consequently, I set out 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 pastor-less 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 Appalachia, in Wheelersburg, Ohio, followed by two visits to pulpit supply. And then in October of 1987 God opened the door for ministry, and we walked through it, and have been serving Him with you ever since.

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. And praying too.

Praying for an *open door* is precisely what we find Paul doing as we come to the God-inspired letter he wrote to the church in Rome. He says in 1:10 (NIV84), "And I pray that now at last by God's will *the way may be opened for me* to come to you." We actually find Paul's prayer for an open door in two places in Romans, at the beginning in Romans 1:8-13, and at the end in Romans 15:30-33. We're going to look briefly at the first passage, and more carefully at the second.

What motivated Paul to pray? The same thing that motivated everything he did. *Gospel obligation*. As we ponder what Paul said about his prayer life in Romans, we learn that gospel obligation gives us incentive to pray in four ways.

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

Jesus used this word 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." This is what we see Paul doing at the beginning of his letter to the church in Rome. He's *seeking* something.

Notice verses 8-10, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you."

Paul was in Corinth when he penned those words, 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 (NIV), "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 verses 11-13.

1. *The request was for spiritual reasons, not selfish ones (11).* Notice verse 11, "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you." 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 was it? Some *spiritual gift*, he says. And why? To *make you strong*, he says. 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. He wanted 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).* Verse 12 says, "That is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Paul knew he would benefit too from a trip to Rome. His faith would be strengthened, as would theirs be strengthened. Yet there's more.

3. *The request was for the sake of the harvest (13).* He says in verse 13, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order *that I may reap some harvest among you* as well as among

the rest of the Gentiles.”

This is what made Paul tick. It’s why he had traveled 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 Himself 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).”

Paul’s eyes were wide open. No wonder he then said in verses 14-15, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.”

When Paul looked at the world around him, he saw a multitude of people perishing in their sins. Do we 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 (as Paul shares in Romans 10:14)?

“I’ll go!” said Paul. “Give me an open door!” prayed Paul. “I’m under obligation to preach the gospel. I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Are we praying this kind of prayer? Prayer involves, first of all, *seeking*. Let’s turn now to Paul’s other prayer text in Romans. We find it in Romans 15. It’s here that we learn that gospel obligation gives us incentive to pray in a second way.

## II. Prayer involves struggle (15:30).

Listen to Paul in verse 30, “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.”<sup>2</sup> Paul uses the same intense language he used earlier in Romans 12:1, “I urge you, brothers, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.”

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 finished. The doctrinal section of chapters 1-11 is complete. The section on Christian duty in chapters 12-15 is nearly complete. 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.”

Or is there? Indeed, there is. This is a passage that beckons 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 that if we want to move ahead for Christ, if we want to see the ministry of the gospel move ahead, then we must 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 one under obligation, as God’s minister to the Gentiles (16), he was planning to head to Jerusalem with a love-gift from the Gentile churches. After that, he says, he would set out on an evangelistic trip to Spain via a stopover in Rome (24).

Why did Paul tell the Romans about his plan? In part, it’s so they can get ready for his visit by collecting funds (and personnel) to support his missionary endeavor to Spain.

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<sup>2</sup> In the NIV, “I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.”

But there's another basic reason for telling them. What is it? It's to give them an opportunity to have a vital part in the advancement of the gospel. How?

Through *prayer*. Listen to 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." Don't miss that word. *Strive*.

There are different kinds of prayer. Talking to the Lord as you're driving down the road on a beautiful day, like a child does to his father. That's prayer, and it's wonderful. This is different. This is a soldier calling out to his commanding office for battle intel in a life and death situation. This kind of prayer involves *struggle*, and it prompts us to ask two questions.

**A. If that's true, why should we pray?** Think about Epaphras for a moment. In Colossians 4:12 Paul said he "wrestled in prayer". Picture a wrestler. Picture him straining with every ounce of energy he possesses as he seeks to pin his opponent.

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 involves struggle. So what incentive do we have to do what doesn't come naturally and may be costly? Paul identifies for us two motivators.

*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.

Ponder this, dear friends. There is a Person in heaven who is the Lord of the universe and His name is Jesus Christ. If we believe that, if we *really* believe that, we will have ample incentive to pray.

*Our second motivation is the love of the Spirit.* "I urge you, brothers...by the love of the Spirit." 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 brothers in Rome to join this prayer struggle? First, because of the Lord Jesus Christ. We're under a glad-hearted obligation to Him. 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?** Again, people call lots of things "prayer." A family gathers around the dinner table and someone mouths 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 says, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." A man of the cloth stands behind a

pulpit on Sunday morning and (as Howard Hendricks said) “scrapes the Milky Way” in his congregational prayer. Conversely, a broken-hearted widow stoops 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.

Which of these people actually prayed? For some, prayer is repeating certain formulas to God. Others insist it must be extemporaneous. How does the Bible say we should pray? In verse 30, 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. When a church advertises it's having a concert, there will likely be a crowd. When it brings in a well known speaker, the multitudes will come. When it promotes a good potluck, the saints gather. But when it announces a prayer meeting, the same people who carved time out of their busy schedules for music, preaching, and food miss the opportunity to please the heart of God by calling on Him.

Brothers and sisters, are we making mission-focused prayer a priority? This is 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). 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).

Dear friends, our prayer is valid only if we know the One we'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 a meaningless cliché like we tend to do. “Oh, please pray for me.” No. Paul *knew* he needed prayer. Paul, a real person, a first

century missionary, needed the prayers of real people, Christians living in Rome, and asked them to call on the real God with him.

When you pray, is it *personal*? Do you pray for people by name? Missionaries. Preachers of the gospel. Parents in this church who are trying to make Christ known to their children. 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*. This brings us to a third characteristic of prayer that is motivated by gospel obligation.

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

Notice the specifics in verses 31-32, “That I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,<sup>32</sup> so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.”<sup>3</sup>

Prayer involves being specific. In Paul's case, he mentioned some precise items that he wanted the Roman church to be praying about. Two requests. And two results.

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

*First, 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 and Paul is requesting it for obvious reasons. He's already been run out of Judea once when angry Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29)!

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

When Paul asks for protection, it isn't for selfish reasons. Paul doesn't fear death *per se*, for elsewhere he writes, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21).” The reason he now asks for protection is because if harm comes to him, it means harm to the gospel, too.

Yes, he knows God is sovereign, and that an angry opponent can't harm him if God doesn't allow it. But he also knows that a sovereign God uses something to accomplish His sovereign purpose. He uses the prayers of His people. Paul knows that, so he makes a specific request. He asks for protection from unbelievers.

*Second, he asked for acceptance among believers.* Verse 31 says (NIV), “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?<sup>4</sup>

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.”

Frankly, many of the Christian Jews in Jerusalem didn't like what Paul 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.

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<sup>3</sup> In the NIV, “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.”

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 216.

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 *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, we don't want any part of it!”

The thought 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.

This is why he asked the Roman church to pray. And pray *specifically*, for protection from unbelievers, and for acceptance with believers.

These are two good prayer requests. Why? Because these are two areas where Satan loves to attack.<sup>5</sup> Satan knows he can hinder the progress of the gospel by causing the world to resist Christians and Christians to resist each other. This is why we must pray, beloved, 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.” This is what prayer is for us, a way to glorify God. John Piper illustrates the point in his helpful book *Desiring God*:

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

That's why we must pray in specifics, as Paul requested his readers do. After mentioning two requests in verse 31, he then mentions two results in verse 32.

**B. Paul mentioned two results (32).** What were they? *First, he wanted a joyful trip.* Verse 32 says, “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.

*Second, he wanted a refreshing visit.* Verse 32 concludes, “And be refreshed in your company.” The NIV, “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? Sure it is. 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As Ray Stedman points out; p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> William Barclay, p. 206.

Is specific prayer for other people a significant part of your prayer life? There are a lot of prayer systems, but here's a simple one. Use our church directory. Pray through it on a regular basis. Look at the names of your brothers and sisters. Think about them, what they're doing, what their needs are. Thank the Lord for them. Pray for them.

Prayer involves seeking. Prayer involves a struggle. Prayer involves being specific. There's one more characteristic of prayer that is motivated by gospel obligation.

#### IV. Prayer involves submission (15:33).

This brings us 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*. Paul did make his trip to Jerusalem, and afterwards he did make it to Rome, but not according to his plans.<sup>8</sup>

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 these 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, he made it but not as planned. God did protect him in Jerusalem. How? He used a Roman centurion who arrested him. A jail cell became his place of protection and he spent the next four years in prison (two years in Caesarea and two years in Rome). So 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 glorious gospel advanced to the whole palace guard in Rome (Phil. 1:13).

And Paul rejoiced. Just read Philippians. That's what gospel obligation produces.

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 to greater things;*

*he was given infirmity that he might do better things.*

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

*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.<sup>9</sup>*

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, "May the God of peace be with you all. Amen." Beloved, when we know that the God of peace is with us, we can face life's perils without fear.

Prayer involves seeking, a struggle, being specific, and submission. This is the kind of praying that gospel obligation produces.

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves three important questions.

1. *Am I praying?* Does prayer have the place in your life that it should? 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. *Am I praying biblically?* Over the years I have counseled hundreds of people, and the reason many were sitting with me was because they were struggling with sin issues. Yet again and again, when asked what they had done about their problems, I would hear, "I have prayed about it."

So if they have prayed, why haven't they changed? Friends, what happens when an unrepentant sinner prays? Psalm 66:18 says, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." When I cherish my sin, it short-circuits the prayer channel. There's no answer from God, no power from Him.<sup>10</sup>

Friends, when you 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? Are you compelled by the gospel? Or is it your sin that you cherish? If there is sin in your life, it's time to face it, bring it 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. *Am I 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?

**Song of Response:** #371 "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" (all four verses)

**This evening:** "We Are the Bride of Christ" Ephesians 5 (at Temple BC)

**This week:** GARBC annual conference at Cedarville University; WBC on Tuesday

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, cited by D. A. Carson, pp. 223-4.

<sup>10</sup> Consider Isaiah 59:1-2, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; <sup>2</sup> but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear."