

Paul's Prayer for Providential Direction

Romans 1:8-12

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Tonight we will look at Paul's prayer from Romans 1 asking for providential direction.

From our knowledge of the Bible we might ask, "Why would Paul pray?"

Wasn't it Paul who taught us so diligently of the sovereignty and providence of God? If God is sovereign and has prepared everything since before the foundation of the world, why pray?

How does the sovereignty of God relate to our prayer lives?

We understand from Scripture that God is sovereign, that he rules and reigns over all things for his glory and the good of his people. We also understand that God invites us to come to Him in prayer, bringing our petitions before Him.

As soon as we set these two ideas—the sovereignty of God and the prayers of His people—side by side, we run into a very tough theological question.

People say: "Since the Bible tells us that 'all things work together for good to those who love God' (Rom. 8:28), shouldn't we be fine that what God has ordained is best?"

Isn't it really just an exercise in futility, and even arrogance, for us to presume to tell God what we need or what we would like to happen? If he ordains all things, and what he ordains is best, what purpose is served by praying to him?"

R.C. Sproul writes:

"Some say that prayer benefits us more than it benefits God. We can see this readily enough, at least for some of the elements of prayer. Consider, for instance, the elements of adoration and confession. God's existence is not dependent on our praises. He can get along without them. But we can't. Adoration is necessary for our spiritual growth. If we are to develop an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father, it is essential that we come to Him with words expressing reverence, adoration, and love. At the same time, it is necessary for us that we mention our sins before His throne. He knows what they are. In fact, He knows them more clearly and more comprehensively than we do. He gains nothing by our giving Him a recitation of our sins, but we need that act of contrition for the good of our souls."

Prayer is like preaching in that it is a human act also. It is a human act that God has ordained and which he delights in because it reflects the dependence of his creatures upon him. He has promised to respond to prayer, and his response is just as contingent upon our prayer as our prayer is in accordance with his will.

“James makes a statement that is vital to our practical understanding of the relationship of God’s sovereignty and prayer. He said, “You do not have because you do not ask” (4:2). We must not understand reality as God working alone, as God being at center stage while we are mere puppets who have no active involvement in the plan of redemption. That is not Christianity or reformed theology. It’s a distortion. God brings to pass His sovereign ends by virtue of earthly and human means. This is the theological concept of concurrence, and it works as much in the arena of prayer as it does in the other areas that we have considered.” RC Sproul

What would you think of a farmer who, when the spring comes, sits on his porch in his rocking chair, folds his hands, and says, “Well, I sure hope we have a great harvest this year; I hope that it’s the plan of God to give us abundant crops”? He doesn’t plow the field. He doesn’t plant the seed. He doesn’t weed the rows. He sits there and waits for God to deliver him a harvest from heaven. That’s not how a farmer works. If a farmer ever did try to “farm” that way, I think it’s clear what would happen—his benefit from the hand of God would be zero. We are called to plow our fields. We are called to plant and to water. And this calling applies to our prayers.

The apostle Paul begins his letters almost always with words of thanksgiving. If we were to turn to the Epistle to the Ephesians, for example, he begins with praise and thanksgiving for what God had done for the Ephesians.

It is in this same way that Paul begins his prayer in verse 8. Paul expresses his thanksgiving because of the testimony of the church at Rome.

The first thing we notice is that Paul is thankful.

Thankfulness is an essential attribute of the believer. We have received grace, mercy, and tremendous blessing and thus, are exceedingly grateful.

God has been merciful to us in that he has **not given us what we deserve**. “The wages of sin is death...” but God has spared us.

God has been gracious to us in that he **has given us what we don’t deserve**, “...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

- This doesn’t mean that we don’t struggle.
- This doesn’t mean that bad things don’t happen to us.
- This doesn’t mean that we don’t sin against God throughout our lives.

But, “God works all things together for good to those who love him...”

And for this, we must be thankful. For those forgiven much should be the most thankful.

And Paul does not forget who made this all possible. It is through Jesus Christ.

Paul, the greatest persecutor of Christians the Bible records, has been saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul certainly recognizes that the same salvation graciously given to him was also given to these Roman believers. And Paul not only sees the past work of Christ in their lives, but Paul now approaches the throne of grace dependent on the fact that Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father mediating on our behalf.

Notice also Paul is not only thankful for them personally, he is thankful for their faith.

They had a need for a strong faith. They were in the center of the Roman Empire. Pagan worship, along with the Roman state religion, was strong. There would be an ongoing pressure to give in and deny the faith. It was also the central position of Rome that would enable their zeal for the Lord to be known through the Roman world. Travelers would carry back work of their faith. This word had been taken back to Paul.

I have friends who believe that faith is all about us. It is something we “do” and is not a gift from God. Yet Paul is thanking God for their faith. If God is not the author and perfecter of our faith, then why thank him for it? So Paul recognizes and is thankful for the gift of faith God has given those who are his.

And then Paul goes on to describe the outworking of that faith.

Ligon Duncan writes, “Paul here says here he is thankful for their faith and for the fact that their faith is proclaimed throughout the earth. You know what you’re thankful for tells you a lot about you. Among other things it tells you what you think is really is important in life. Look what Paul is excited about. Paul is excited about the fact that these people are believing. They are believing in the gospel the Lord Jesus wrote. It thrills his heart to think that in Rome, the capital city of the world, there are believers huddled around the word, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that their faith is so clear that a testimony is being sent out not only in Rome, but throughout the known world. People are talking about, boy have you heard about those Roman Christians? They really believe. They’re right under the eyes, right in the shadow of the emperor, and they believe with all their hearts in the Lord Jesus Christ. Who would have thought that in the Roman capitol there would be those who would believe in the Jewish Messiah and they’re right there. And it thrills Paul, not just because of the influence this church can have or claim throughout the world, but it thrills him because their faith encourages him.”

When you and I pray for those in our church, is their faith something we look at or for? When you and I pray for those in our Romania, China, Africa, Dubai, is their faith something we look at or for?

Stop right now. Put down your Bible. Think for a moment about someone in this church, or another Christian in your life, that has shown tremendous faith.

- Are you encouraged by those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?
- Are you encouraged by those who persevere through trials and through whom God is glorified?
- Are you encouraged by those who preach and teach the Word faithfully?
- Are you encouraged by the tireless work that takes place through our counseling ministry here at the Chapel?
- Has their faith made a difference in your life?
- Are you thankful for it?

It is evident that a work of God had begun in Rome a number of years before the writing of this letter, for already their faith had been known throughout the Roman Empire. There is no evidence whatever that this work was in any sense linked with apostolic ministry. Both Scripture and history are silent as to who founded the church in Rome.

Paul is so thankful for these people – but he has never met them! He doesn't know them personally. But he has heard about them and is thrilled by their testimony. And Paul wants them, to know that even though they have never met, he prays for them.

Here Paul reports of his faithfulness in prayer for these people. Paul testifies of his constant intercession for the Romans. Paul says, God knows that I pray for you persistently. I am constantly interceding for you. But Paul actually takes an oath here. Paul says, God is my witness. I pray for you constantly.

Paul invokes the name of God in a serious oath. Don't get freaked out by the oath. Oaths were never outlawed, just the misuse of frivolous ones. And he says this same God who can witness that I am faithful in prayer for you, this is the God that I serve from my heart. Paul is indicating the nature of his service here. I serve God in my spirit, from the inner-man, from the depths of my being. My service of God is not superficial.

And even though he has never met them, and he is not the one who shared the gospel with them, his intense desire is to personally visit them. We see that Paul prays according to the Lord's principle and the Lord's Prayer. One of the sections of the Lord's Prayer is this prayer, "Thy will be done." Paul prays according to that principle here. Notice his words again in verse 10. Paul is reporting here his desire to come to the Roman believers and to be with them, but he does so in complete submission to God's will.

And then he makes in clear why he longs to be with them.
To impart some spiritual gift.

It would be natural for us to assume Paul is speaking of one of the spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans, 12, or Ephesians 4.

But what do we know about those gifts? They are given by the Holy Spirit, not men. Remembering that it is more likely he is talking about his own teaching and preaching.

He immediately adds to that reason by adding his own edification into the mix. Paul will be encouraged by them as he hopes they will be encouraged by him.

It is almost as if he feels they need to explain himself by using the term, "that is". Paul understands the reciprocal blessing of Christian fellowship, and although he is an apostle, he is not too proud to acknowledge his need of it.

I believe Paul also understands his apostolic responsibility to the Roman Christians. Remember Paul is called to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles, and many of these Roman believers were such. So Paul is also fulfilling his ministry to them by this visit.

Verse 13 indicates that there seems to have been a providential reason why Paul was hindered from going there earlier. He already has called God to witness that he had never ceased to pray for those Roman believers since he first heard of them; and coupled with his petitions for them was his earnest request that if it was the will of God he might have the opportunity to visit them.

It is apparent from other comments made in Romans that Paul had tried to get to Rome before but his other missionary work it kept him busy. He is now about to leave court for Jerusalem to

deliver the special offering received from the Gentile churches for the poor Jewish saints. He hoped he would be able to travel from Jerusalem to Rome and then on to Spain.

While Paul was praying for a wonderful opportunity to visit Rome, he never could have guessed God's providence; as he arrived in Rome a prisoner as well as a preacher. And while we probably would have become discouraged by this providence of God, we see in Paul's letter to the Philippians the reason for Paul's imprisonment:

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."

CONCLUSION

Sometimes, prayer gets lost in the pile of other things, and the result can be tragic.

I'm reminded of the true story of the little baby that had been christened at church. The mother was so excited she invited friends and family over after church to celebrate the big event. The baby was laid out on the bed, sound asleep, in the parents' bedroom. As the guests arrived, they took off their coats and placed them in the bedroom.

Later, one of the people asked, "Where is the baby?" The mother realized she had forgotten about the baby amid the festivities. When she went into the bedroom, she discovered that the guests' coats had been placed over the baby's head and the baby had suffocated.

I can't imagine anything more tragic for a family. And I can't imagine anything more tragic for the family of God than to smother prayer by burying it underneath all the other stuff we do. When we smother prayer, we simultaneously smother our development as Christ's disciples.

The Puritan Thomas Watson once commented, "Christ went more readily to the cross, than we do to the throne of grace."

I hope that is never so for us.