

THE PRAYER OF AN APOSTLE

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I'd like for you to look with me for a few moments at the prayer life of an apostle. And at the prayer requests that come out of the apostle Paul's life in Romans 1. I think that when we get done looking at this we will know more how to pray and how to understand what God is doing in our prayer life when we bring to him specific requests. We do have the privilege of bringing to the Lord specific requests don't we? It's not always, "Lord, thy will be done and whatever you want to do is ok with me." Scriptures do give us the right to lay our heart before the Lord.

As you look at Romans 1:8-15 you will find Paul showing out of his heart four different things that he is praying for. He first, after a time of thanksgiving in verse 10, prays that at last by God's will a way might be open for him to come to the Roman Christians. If you take a map of the Mediterranean world and realize where Paul is at the time of the writing of this letter – the city of Corinth it is the end of the third missionary journey. It is approximately 58 A.D.. Rome is to the west. He'd never been there. He knows many believers have migrated there. Thus in the sixteenth chapter of Romans he gives a long list of greetings to the people that he knows. However he himself never met the Roman church. He had not founded the Roman church. Yet for people he has neither met before or visited in any way, he is already reflecting a life of prayer and thanksgiving for them. Quite remarkable.

I know I pray for the people that I know. I fail much of the time, much of the time, to pray for people I've never met. To pray for the church elsewhere in the world, whose faces I am not familiar with. And to give thanks to God for them.

I suppose you don't get to that place until your prayer life sufficiently matures to get to an advanced state like that. But Paul begins by thanking the Lord. And then he prays. His first request at last by God's will a way might be open for them to come to them.

The second request is that when he comes to them, he might impart to them some spiritual gift, some charisma. Writing from Corinth were the charisma or the charismata was very important work. What it might be the spiritual gift conveyed upon the Roman church. Were they a church lacking in spiritual gifts? It's kind of hard to believe that they would be. They certainly get a different style of letter than the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church is loaded with problems but the Roman church is sophisticated enough to get a Bible study. A masterful epistle out of Paul which suggests that at least on the level of spiritual gifts they are not lacking. Yet Paul says that when he comes to them he wants to impart to them some spiritual gift to strengthen them.

His third request is simply that they might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, verse 12.

And his fourth request, and you can see this as a tenor of his life, that he is in debt to the Greeks and the non-Greeks, both to the wise and the unwise. "That is why I'm so eager to preach the gospel to those of you who are in Rome. I'm not ashamed of this gospel because it's the power of God for everyone who believes first for the Jew and then for the Gentile."

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His fourth request is related to evangelism. He wants to have some harvest among them. Some fruit of ministry that will result in the unconverted coming to him. He writes this letter. Shortly after he writes the letter instead of leaving west for Rome, he heads for Rome in a very unusual way. He heads east. He has been collecting an offering to take to the Jerusalem saints. With offering in hand he prepares to leave from Corinth.

Then there begins a series of events that unfold in Paul's life that for the next number of years will show him heading into the wind. As he is set to leave from Corinth he finds that there is an assassination plot against his life. So he leaves his helpers to go on to modern day Turkey which was the Roman province of Asia across the Aegean. He himself goes up north to the city of Philippi where he picks up a person by the name of Luke, identified in the book of Acts as simply "we", not as the person named Luke. But we know from the process of deduction that it was Luke.

Of course what a propitious moment this was because had there not been an assassination plot upon Paul's life he would have not have gone to Philippi and had he not have gone to Philippi he would not have picked up Luke. If he had not have picked up Luke, a non Palestinian, non Jew, he would never had the opportunity for two years while Paul was in prison in Caesarea, traipse the countryside, interview witnesses of Jesus and works that had been written of Jesus and produced the gospel. If there had been no assassination plot on Paul's life it's very likely we would have never had Luke-Acts which is the major segment, the most written by any author in the New Testament. It is by Luke. Where did he get his information? Where did he have time to gather his sources as the Holy Spirit directed him? As Luke himself says in the first four verses of his gospels it came as a result of opportunity that he had. Where did he get that opportunity? Because he was a companion of Paul. How did he get to be a companion of Paul and when was he in Palestine? He got to be a companion because Paul met him when he was at the city of Philippi and took him with him to Jerusalem.

Incredible circumstantial kind of a deal.

Then he sails from Philippi to Troas. As the beginning of the second missionary journey when he had sailed from Troas to Philippi coming the opposite direction, coming west, Luke tells us that it had taken him two days to make the trip "for the wind was with them." But on the way back, getting to Jerusalem, it takes him five days to make the same journey going east. Why? Because the wind was against him. It is a spiritual tip off to the time of dismay and trial and trouble that is going to enter his life.

When he has made it to the coast of the province of Asia, now western Turkey he meets there at the city of Miletus a group of Ephesian elders and he tells them in Acts 20:23 "I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that imprisonment and hardships face me." But he says that he is going to Jerusalem because he has been compelled to go by the Spirit not knowing what will happen except that imprisonment and hardship awaits him.

He's heading into a storm. He feels on the inside compelled by the Spirit. But on the outside there are these witnesses telling him by the Spirit giving prophetic utterances, Paul, if you go imprisonment and hardship awaits you.

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In Acts 21 he finally comes down to Syria. He lands at Tyre, which is modern day Lebanon, then in the province of Syria. When the ship unloads its cargo he finds disciples there, 21:4, who stayed with him seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Hold that a moment and jump to verse 11 where the prophet Agabus whose prophecy in Acts 11 of a famine had come true and therefore he had been a validated prophet. Agabus comes and takes Paul's belt, ties his own hands and feet with it, and says, the Holy Spirit says in this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

There is a strange verse, 21:4, where the prophets at Tyre say to him, "Paul, don't go to Jerusalem." And yet when Paul is witnessing to the Ephesian elders at M* he doesn't say the Spirit is saying that. He simply says the Spirit warns me that if I go imprisonment and hardship waits me. And Agabus, the trusted prophet, says the same thing: If you go imprisonment is certainly going to happen to you. But notice, Agabus does not tell him not to go.

There are some people who have taught that Paul gets out of God's will by going to Jerusalem. That he never should have gone. That he refused the voice of the Holy Spirit.

But what Paul did is a very important thing. In a day when personal prophets abound in the charismatic renewal in the body of Christ and people get revelations and messages to give other people, it's wise to look at a biblical precedent. That people were giving personal prophecy toward Paul. But he rejected some personal prophecy that was given to him. That is the prophets at Tyre who said to him, Do not go to Jerusalem. He deliberately disobeyed them. Why did he disobey them? Because he had been compelled in his own spirit to go to Jerusalem. And because, I think, Paul knew something that anybody that's been in charismatic or Pentecostal circles any degree of time know and ha is there are some people who speak through the Spirit who aren't speaking through the Spirit. There are some people who have a legitimate message from the Lord. And instead of putting the period in the message where it belongs, they put a comma and keep going. What the Spirit had been saying was thus, says the Lord if you go imprisonment and hardship waits you. But no where else had the Spirit been saying, do not go. What the prophets of Tyre did was say, Thus says the Spirit if you go imprisonment and hardship wait you and therefore do not go. Thus says the Spirit.

In regard to personal prophecy God never turned the control of our life over to somebody from outside of us. We are a priest unto God ourselves. Personal prophecy may be preparational or confirmational but it is not directional ever in the scriptures. People don't take directs from it. It either prepares them for an opportunity God is going to open that will confirm in their own heart. Or it confirms the direction the Lord has already given. But do not run your life by somebody laying hands upon you and saying, "thus say the Lord."

There is a spirit in the charismatic renewal that I've noticed for a number years. I can only compare it to people who go to seances and crystal balls and hand reading that want to simply have an idle curiosity about the future. God is not going to unveil that curtain for us and simply disclose future events to us. The charismatic guru that are always reading people's personal prophecy do not sufficiently, some of them, bring people into a sense of their own personal accountability before God. Paul was not at all in error in going to Jerusalem. The Spirit was simply giving him confirming words. When he got in prison he would know that hadn't taken the Lord by surprise.

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He does come to Jerusalem and when he gets here he had asked the Romans, Romans 15, he had prayed for two things. 15:31 “Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.” He’s taking this offering to them.

We all know the story. He got in deep trouble in Jerusalem. Almost killed in a riot in the temple’s outer court. Finally rescued by Roman soldiers, spirited away, sixty miles northwest to Caesarea and there imprisoned for two years. He was rescued from the unbelievers in Judea but certainly in a far different way than he could have envisioned. His service became acceptable to the saints.

Picture this situation. Paul had written to the Romans saying, “Pray that in God’s will I might come to you.” Perhaps three months elapsed from the time he wrote the letter to the time he actually reached Jerusalem. He’s going the wrong way. When he gets to Jerusalem he’s imprisoned. Then his imprisonment drags on for a period of two years. Well might somebody in the Roman church begin to question Paul’s credentials as a man of prayer, let alone an apostle. Here they may be saying, the apostle Paul said, pray that I may come to you and there might be something wrong with him. There must be something wrong with his faith.

Paul could have claimed going to Rome all he wanted but the fact is he was in prison and I’m sure that if there were any name-it-and-claim-it people in Rome they were already putting down Paul as not being God’s man of faith and power. Prayer works; you say it and it happens! Peter was released from jail by miraculous intervention of an angel. What’s the matter with Paul? What is this business of constant hardships and shipwrecks at sea and all this? This can’t be God’s will. How could go ever allow anybody that was significant in his kingdom be such a poor example to the rest of the body?

When Paul finally appeals to go to Rome then he gets on a ship and the ship cracks up in the Mediterranean and he’s lost another year getting to Rome. I would estimate it’s three to three and a half years from the time he writes the Roman letter until he gets to Rome. That’s a long time for a prayer request to become fulfilled.

Do any of you have a still active prayer request that you know you have been praying for, for three and a half years and it has not yet come to pass? Generally after about three or four months if it hasn’t come we sort of put it on the back burner. But here is a three and a half-year prayer request.

He finally goes here and he spends another two years here under house arrest. Times of imprisonment. You look at this and say, what is the world is God doing? And what examples can we learn in our own personal life? I’ve come to understand that in regard to our prayers the Lord basically has three responses. He may say Yes, I’ll do it and I’ll do it right away. What’s the kind of response we all like best! His second response is, No. His third response is, Wait. I am going to work out a plan. You will not understand it’s unfolding. You will have no idea what I am doing while it is getting underway. It is only when it’s all said and done that you can look back and see what I’m up to.

If you look at Paul’s four prayer requests you will see by hindsight what really happened to him. In God’s will he comes to Rome. He had prayed. There are some people who teach we cannot condition our prayers by saying, In God’s will. For that defeats faith if we say in the will of

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God. Notice the apostle prays by the will of God, verse 10. I refuse to apologize for adding to my prayer, "If thou wilt."

He comes and he says That when I come to you I might have some spiritual gift to impart. Some charisma. I'm convinced that the charisma had nothing to do with the nine charismata of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. I think some other charisma was involved. Let me tell you what I feel it is.

We know from history that the year 64 A.D. was a turning point in the history of Christianity in the Roman Empire. When Paul arrives in Rome in 61 A.D. he had already been held in prison three years, or held in incarceration 3 years. Prison I Caesarea and then a prison ship. He's held two more years in Rome which takes him up to 63 A.D. one year before 64 A.D.

What happens in 64 A.D.? For the first time the official policy of the Roman government turns against the believers. Up until then according to the book of Acts whenever Christians had been before Roman justice they had been treated great and they had been given release. But in 64 A.D. Nero blames the Christians for having put a torch to Rome. The rumor was, Tacitus the historian says that Nero himself had ordered the fire set because he wanted to clear the slums to enlarge his palace gardens. But Nero blamed the Christians and he made massive arrests of the very people to whom Paul writes in Romans. Some of the people whose names are listed in Romans 16 were among those I am sure who lost their lives lied to crossed in Nero's gardens, pitch or oil poured upon them, being set alit at night in order to illuminate the yards. Some were sewn in dogskins and thrown into water to drown. Terrible deaths.

This kind of suffering was so unlike anything God's people had ever had before. Always in the Old Testament when God's people suffered as a group, they suffered because they had sinned. And judgment was being visited upon them to refine them. This is the first time God's community as a group has suffered and they had done nothing to merit it.

Paul's personal imprisonment of five years is God's way of taking the finest and the best of the church and working out through the crucible of his own experience a model to teach believers how to face suffering. So that when the 64 A.D. suffering came and the suffering which followed it, the churches already had in place the example of the apostle Paul and the letters like Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon which gave them a handle theologically for understanding and facing what was happening to them. I shudder to think of what would have happened to the church had it not had this example, and had it not had for example letters like the letter to the Philippians.

What spiritual gift then did the apostle Paul impart when he actually gets here through this circuitous route? He had a gift to impart to them of strength, for example, of the fact that simply because you're going through adversity has nothing to do at all with the idea that you failed God or had somehow been incomplete or had somehow done something wrong. It had nothing to do with that at all. It was an example to give to the church to say that when suffering comes and when trial comes you can face it with triumph and you can trust God to work all things together for good. In fact, it's intriguing that when Paul writes Romans 8:28 he had not had a five-year imprisonment experience.

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I wonder if the devil didn't throw those words at him a few times and say to him, "Paul, are you the guy who wrote Romans 8:28? Are you sure this is going to work together for good?" But when he comes he has a gift to impart, a gift that strengthens them.

His third prayer request is that there might be some mutual encouragement given. That they might encourage him and he might encourage them when you read the book of Acts – Acts 27 and 28 where Paul arrives in Rome – oh, do you see the encouragement! It greatly strengthened the church and they greatly strengthen him through their hospitality. In fact believers walk out 43 miles to the Three Taverns and escort him like royalty to the city. They risked identification with him. A man whom they have never met. Even though he's under imperial arrest they come out and risk themselves to meet him so that he might have the escort that an honored prisoner would have in getting to Rome.

Oh, does that pick up his heart? And does he ever encourage them? Does he have some fruit? The end of the book of Acts tells us that while he was under imprisonment there came to him both Jews and Gentiles and from his own rented house he boldly and without hindrance preached the kingdom of God and when he writes the Philippian letter he says that even some of Caesar's household and even the praetorian guard Caesar's elite secret service, there are those among them that have been converted. We know from Ephesians that Paul had prison bonds. That he was hand chained to arresting officers. We know that the Roman guard changed shifts about every four hours, two soldiers at a time. We can therefore surmise that when a soldier found himself chained to Paul for the first time he would say, What are you doing here? And Paul would say, We've got four hours. I'm so glad you asked that question. Then there would have followed a witness. Many times followed by a conversion so that the gospel got right under Caesar's nose in his own administration and among his own secret service. A crazy way God had of getting the gospel into that kind of territory. But it worked out.

My bottom line point is, is we may not always understand what is up. We pray prayers and we have an idea of how we would like to see the Lord answer that prayer. What's so surprising is sometimes the Lord does an absolutely crazy thing on us. Instead of going west we're going east. Instead of going forward we're going backward. Instead of going upward, we're going downward. We say how in the world can this be? And while it is going on we do not understand. Therefore while it is going on, while the trial is occurring, it's so important that our spirits be kept clear. That we do not assume that we have been defeated before the last inning. Paul could have assumed many times over that five years that defeat was there. But we must not assume defeat until we have seen the last trump card that the Lord is going to play. Neither therefore can we assume a spirit of bitterness, nor a spirit of defeated resignation. But we must assume an understanding that if we have truly committed this matter to the Lord he will work for his honor and glory. It may be in a way that we expect and we prayed for and the answer be yes. It may be in a way that we have totally unexpected and he will work out a more perfect answer through delay.

I was sitting here on the platform this evening wrestling on whether I ought to preach this message saying, Lord, there's an incident in my life that parallels this and I really ought to share that if I'm going to share this message. In sitting there I could not help but remember the very first time in my life I set foot on this property. It's very clear in my mind. It was June of 1962. 21 years ago. That's a long time. That's almost half my age. In September I'll be half.

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In June of 1962. I had graduated from Evangel College. I had before me a choice of three seminaries to attend that I had actively considered – Princeton Seminary in New Jersey in the East, Trinity evangelical seminary in Illinois in the Midwest. And Fuller Theological Seminary on the west coast. The reason why I chose to go to Fuller had nothing to do with the school. As indeed the reason why a lot of young people choose schools has nothing to do with the school. It has to do with people you know or reputation or friends or whatever. But I chose to come west because there was a girl that I knew attending southern California College, that if I went East I would never have a chance to pursue anything. And if I went Midwest it would be over as well. So the only shot I had was to come west. I figured all the seminaries being equal might as well go where there was a possibility of romance. Never let your head rule your heart!

So having great dreams about this relationship I got in my 54 Pontiac and came west. It was a Friday afternoon that I arrived in California. I checked in at the seminary. There wasn't any housing available at that particular moment. There was nobody I knew and I was already lonely. So I got on the freeway coming south down the Santa Ana Freeway and I began crying. I said to myself, I didn't realize I was so emotionally wrought up that I'm crying. It took me about half an hour to figure out that in that parking lot Friday afternoon, LA bottleneck I had encountered smog for the first time in my life. And that was why I was weeping!

After this interminable drive from Pasadena down to Costa Mesa I wheeled into the southern California College campus. There of course was nothing on this lot. There was the foundation for four buildings where the boulevard is now. And in the back there was the dormitory quad. I checked in with somebody who was in charge of housing and they said I could stay that night. I then walked to a phone booth to call a pastor in Los Angeles that I was to work for. As I was in the booth, dialing, the school was out, students were gone, the school was dead than it is now. They didn't have summer school then. It was dead. School had already been out for about three weeks. I'm dialing the phone and who comes walking by?

Thank you, Lord! You've confirmed the direction in my life!

Years later when she married somebody else I was really upset with God. I was so mad at God for a while I hardly prayed. I just felt his word had mocked me. Ask what you will... where two or three... *I agreed*. And the Holy Spirit I was sure agreed with me. God, if I can't trust you here, how can I trust you with anything else? Little did I know what God had a better plan in mind. If he had told me at that time he had a better plan I'd have just said he was just giving me pious words! As we often think when we're going through something and somebody tries to comfort.

But God had a better plan in mind. I won't contemplate any other alternative. The Lord knew what he was doing. It was just I was trying to rush things and do things my own way. I came to realize as I put a few years difference between myself and that experience, looking back I had this realization that we often in our prayers get ends confused with means. God even lets us in order to move us from one point to another. His end for me that I would get a taste of California because he knew that some day I would be ministering here. If I had went to school on the East Coast or the Midwest I wouldn't be here. So he said, How do we get George Wood to California? He's crazy about this girl! Let him be crazy about the girl. We'll use that as the hook that will be in his mouth to get him out here. But just wait until he finds out what I've really got for him. He'll be stunned at first and he'll be mad as a hornet. But it'll be ok after a while.

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Isn't that how we feel when God disappoints us and we look for something to happen and the Lord hasn't done it the way we felt he should and the way our heart told us that he should. It's so easy in those moments to become stunned and burned and critical and to drop out. That's why continually in scriptures we're called to perseverance, laying aside the weight that so easily besets us, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despised the shame. And it turned out it all right. He is sitting at the right hand of God.

Does God answer our prayers? Sure he does. He just works through a process many times. Some of you may be in that kind of process where things are just a jumble and a tangle. It's like untangling fishing line or kite line. If you try to unscramble it, it's too intermeshed. You can't do it on your own. It's going to take time to see how the Lord is going to unscramble all of that and untangle all of that. But he will.

The prayer life of an apostle is an example that some prayers, to see how they really become fulfilled in our life take three to four years to work out an five to seven to eight years to understand after they are worked out.

I hope you're not bothered by that. I hope you're not discouraged by that. I hope you can be encouraged in your prayer life. And I hope that while you're waiting for God to answer in your heart there will be a tenderness toward God, that you will check from developing a root of bitterness or a begrudging spirit or a passiveness that seeps into so many Christians that says I tried and I did my best but when I needed God he didn't come through. So that's the end of my active service. I'll just occupy a space from here on out. But I'm checking out in terms of my own activity.

God help us from being passive, resigned. But let us affirm again that God is working everything for the good in our lives. And if we'll wait upon the Lord he will renew our strength and renew us.

Lord, we come to you this evening. This church building itself is a delayed answer to prayer. Long before the permission came to place it here attempt after attempt to do it was met with a No. We didn't understand why the No was given at the time. It seemed like such a magnificent idea. But only after this has been placed and we have faced the financial responsibility that has come upon us as a result have we understood that if you had said Yes at an earlier time we would not have been ready to assume that responsibility. And in our haste we might have acted to plan in too small a way for what you wanted to do because our resources were not anywhere near what the opportunity would later demand. So you encouraged our hearts while we waited. And ultimately your plan you brought it to pass. Lord, we're in a relay race. It's a marathon. It's not just a fast start. It's not just a hundred-yard dash. We're in it for the long haul we commit again our way to you. That you might work in us not simply over the hours and over the days but that you might work in us your plan over the months and over the years. Lord, you're building us step by step, block by block, piece by piece, that the whole tapestry of our life may fit together into a perfect whole. Let us not despise what you may be doing at any particular moment, even the darker threads of our life may be used by you to serve a purpose. For your people here who are impatient with the future and have specific dreams of somebody that they're going to marry or some task that they're going to do, Lord, it may be that those dreams and those prayers

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will come to pass and they'll rejoice. But if they don't may they accept delays and Nos from your hand with the equal gladness that they would accept Yeses. Because when our hearts are in you, you indeed will lead and guide us. And your way after all will be proven to be the best. Take us Lord, persons here that are going through adversities in this present moment of their life and again cause them to realize in their heart of heart that their existence is not rooted in favorable circumstances but their existence in being is in you. And no matter what happens on the outside it is what is happening on the inside that will give us the strength to survive and to succeed. My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory. God indeed is working everything for the good. We yield our lives to you once more Lord that in them you might be honored and glorified. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.