

PRAYER FOR MINISTRY: ROMANS 15:30-33

When we talk about ministry we go much wider than ministers. As Peter says in his first letter, all believers are a “royal priesthood” and Paul reminds us we are all parts of the body of Christ, the church, by the gifts of the Spirit. So we are all ministers in our own way. We are going to look at a text, Romans 15:30-33 which is part of the conclusion of Paul’s majestic letter to a church he loved but had never visited. He has encouraged the Romans, told them of his plans for ministry that include an intention to visit Rome, and in our text, linking these two, very movingly requests prayer from them. We’re going to see that the prayer gives very precise directions to “pray for what we are here for” – we, at LST and in our churches, are here for ministry to each other, but especially to those lost without Jesus.

Let’s read the prayer together now before I try to bring out lessons God has for us.

“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. 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. The God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

Look at what a jewel of God’s word this is: there are all three members of the Trinity included, as well as several of the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace. So what type of prayer is Paul requesting of this powerful congregation? I think there are five points to make, on which you can reflect further in your prayer time in this great 24./7 week. First, he asks them to pray for him at a distance. Second, they are asked to join Paul in his struggle. Third, he asks for prayer for protection against enemies in his mission. Fourth, he wants prayer that his ministry will be well received by friends. And finally, he asks for prayer for his future ministry and long term plans.

Prayer for ministry at a distance. Paul was a firm believer in prayer at a distance. He knew that although the Romans were over 1000 miles from Jerusalem, God would listen and act on those prayers. This underlines why a key focus of World Prayer is the suffering church around the world. Why not go tomorrow and contribute to the mighty works of God in response to his people’s prayers – for example, 'Pilot' Jemy from Philippines. Living in the Muslim-dominated region of Mindanao, southern Philippines, Jemy's life is often threatened because of his faith in the Lord Jesus. Enrolled in Open Doors' lay leader training programme, Jemy has to travel a long distance, across frequently stormy seas, to attend the classes. Yet, his enthusiasm to learn more about God is unquenchable. Jemy loves to serve the Lord through serving his people. He often pilots a small 'banca' (boat), bringing believers from remote islands together for fellowship. So here again on your Thursday morning options, pray for Jemy – drink more tea, check your email, spend another half hour in the library! Hours don’t come again, but they can be used more or less well.

Prayer for ministry as a struggle. Paul says “join me in my struggle”. Matthew Henry talks of “fixedness, faith and fervency in prayer”. This reminds us of when Jacob wrestled with God in prayer – to seek to persuade him. But it also brings us back strongly to Ephesians 6 “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” When we seek to combat Satan’s power in prayer it is indeed a struggle. Such combat is best conducted in a platoon! There are no Rambo’s fighting alone in a proper army – they wouldn’t survive. This is also why prayer of a couple or of friends together is more powerful than of an individual, and why Satan tries to stop us by injecting annoying habits

and irritation into any attempts. Most crucially, Paul is emphasising that Christian leaders who are in the front line of the struggle, need prayer support. That is why he begs the Romans to “join me”.

This emphasises the need for us to pray for Derek and the staff. We need to support struggling fellow students. That is also why prayer support is needed for any outreach of the college or your church. Without it the attempt will surely fail. Here’s your opportunities – the Monday “solar” where we pray for all the needs in the college, and your class prayer. Also Renovare groups where we indeed respond to need, share our wisdom and understanding and counsel and pray for one another. If you aren’t in one, or don’t go – you are missing a lot!

Look at what motivation Paul offers for committing to the struggle. Paul doesn’t want us to pray from our own resources – he knows that because prayer is a spiritual battle, anything is more attractive than praying. He knows we can only be motivated “by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit”. Jesus, our saviour, himself bids us to struggle in prayer for the ministers who do his work, while the Holy Spirit equips us by his love to do so with the full armour of God that Ephesians 6 outlines to us.

Prayer for ministers against enemies. Whoever is engaged in ministry will raise an enemy in Satan and may well face persecution. Satan hates to see the college successful and flourishing. In Paul’s case, he had already seen such opposition many times, and God had made it clear to him that Satan would arouse the Jews of Jerusalem against Paul, hence his prayer “that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea”. We have to be clear sighted here in LST. There are enemies we face. It may be simple ill will from individuals, like the thieves who stole equipment not so long ago. But Satan is still playing a role, let’s face it, he longs to see the downfall of this college. He might use some of us to serve his purposes through our weaknesses. He might seek to prolong lecturers’ illnesses. Long bouts of depression for fellow students may be aggravated by his oppression. And Satan bids us to stay in our cliques rather than looking round at coffee time to see people who are alone.

Knowing the tricks of the evil one we should be stirred up to pray, remembering Christ’s victory over his Enemy: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col 2:15). And his eternal defeat when Jesus returns “The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” (Revelation 20:10). But till that day we still need to pray for protection from evil, covered in Jesus blood.

Do any of you feel embarrassed about praying against evil because you don’t believe in it? I used to be like that, till I became a Christian and suffered massive demonic oppression and opposition to doing so. And later, with others in this church, I felt the real presence of an evil spirit in a house, whose removal made a huge difference to the life of the occupants. Many will vouch for this. Most recently, I was asked by someone to pray for them and found myself involved in their deliverance from a demon. The idea Satan doesn’t exist is just another of his tricks!

Prayer for acceptance of ministry. Even a great minister can be undermined by lack of appreciation by the congregation. This was certainly Paul’s fear, when he feared that the Christians in Jerusalem would not accept the gift that the Greek churches had gathered to relieve their poverty (“community action”). Receiving a gift takes grace, as well as giving. A prayer for acceptance is for a softening of hard hearts “that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there”. And here we should examine our own hearts – do we have

anything against our lecturers or each other, which could undermine our ministry in the college, or in the churches you attend? Is there a lot of gossip? We can pray for all hearts to be softened in this regard.

Prayer for ministry plans. The errand to Jerusalem wasn't Paul's only ministry plan. His work in the Eastern Mediterranean was now in a sense complete, he wanted to go on to missionary work in Spain, on the way seeing the Romans. God expects his ministers to plan prayerfully like Paul, not "go on holy autopilot waiting for God". Here we have burning issues to pray for before us at LST, involving plans over both the short and long run. In the short run we need to pray for those leaving to find their roles in ministry, and be guided appropriately by God. Over the longer term we have the project for new buildings and its financing as a part of the longer term vision of the college.

Here I think the passage we read is giving us a powerful positive message. You must be familiar with this phrase that Jesus often used, when he felt his ministry to the Jews was falling in deaf ears. "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." Whatever he said, the people just wouldn't go along with it. This is from Isaiah, 6:9. Now, when Paul talks about his mission and future plans in verse 21 he uses another phrase from Isaiah 52:15: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Do you see the parallel – how all the negatives become positives? As a result of Jesus' mission, death and resurrection as the suffering servant of God, and the consequent coming of the Holy Spirit, Paul's mission – and ours – can meet with open ears! We can be in the 52:15 world and not the 6:9, in our ministry plans, empowered by the Holy Spirit!

The issue of answered prayer. Some of the commentaries I read on this passage urge that it is a stern message that prayer is not always answered. And indeed we know that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and sent to Rome in chains. But he was protected against the Jews in Jerusalem by a vigilant commander in Acts 21:32. Paul is also well received by the Apostles (Acts 21:17). And Paul did come to Rome and minister there powerfully for several years, before his execution. As it says in Acts 28 "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." Prayer was answered! But still it reminds us that ministry is by the will of God, and his ways may not be our ways!

Let me finally tell you a personal example of how important prayer is for ministry. In my church when I first presented the proposal of an Alpha course, and found myself afterwards overwhelmed by pessimism and hopelessness. No-one would come forward to help from the church. At the end of the service, I received prayer which affirmed the aim of the course as fulfilling Jesus' key command to us and gave me faith that people would come forward – God would provide. I found myself filled with the Holy Spirit and couldn't move for a good half hour. That gave me a really great lift – prayer for ministry in action.

To sum up, Paul's prayer tells us to pray for ministers, for the ministry of the college, and for one another, for we are all ministers. We need to pray energetically that the college will be protected from evil, and that our message will be well received outside. We need to pray that God will indeed send workers into his harvest field. We need to pray for God to preserve our integrity so that we might be true ambassadors of Christ. Most of all we need to pray that we would be filled with the Holy Spirit so in prayer God's power is released among us to undertake these ministries "that we might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" as verse 15 says.