

PRAYER FOR THAT WHICH WE ARE HERE FOR

This is the last of the series on prayer, which I am humbly honoured to present. You'll see that the focus is not how to pray but what to pray for. Reading: Romans 15:14-33

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done-- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written:

*"Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand."*

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

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.

The text that you have just heard is part of the conclusion of Paul's majestic letter to a church he loved but had never visited. We have heard that he encourages the Romans, tells them of his plans for ministry that include an intention to visit Rome, and finally, 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, the church, are here for ministry to each other, but especially to those lost without Jesus.

Our main focus is going to be on 30-33, but first it's worth considering: Who is he asking to pray? He clearly respects the Romans and treats them as his equals. He doesn't see them as needing hard lessons or harsh criticism, unlike say the Corinthians. In verse 14 Paul says "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." In other words he saw the Romans as having all the right motives, full of compassion, responsive to need; knowing the foundations of their faith in God's love; and able to advise and counsel one another.

All of these are really important – they make me think especially of our small groups where we indeed respond to need, share our wisdom and understanding and counsel and pray for one another, and for the church. If you aren't in one, or don't go – you are missing a lot! It also implies that when we talk about ministry we go much wider than Pastors. 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.

What would Paul think of PBC? Imagine him walking in the door today. I think he'd tell us PBC is also “good, complete and competent” – the letter is for us! But, like he goes on to tell the Romans, he would also tell us that even a strong church needs to be reminded of the gospel “I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister...with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God”. We are all too human and readily forget. This is why preaching is so essential in any church. We need constantly reminding of the wonder of God's grace and salvation – that we are in a spiritual battle with the forces of darkness – and that without the Holy Spirit our ministry – and prayer for it - is in vain. Something we should remember when Satan bids us remain in bed on a Sunday morning!

Let's revisit 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 the small groups. 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 we have Rachel's prayer group for 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, Hamid Pourmand who is a lay preacher and an army officer in Iran. He was arrested last September by the Iranian security police whilst attending a church conference near Tehran. After five months of interrogation in strict solitary confinement, Hamid was accused of "deceiving the Iranian armed forces" by not reporting his conversion to Christianity. Despite clear-cut evidence to the contrary, he was ruled guilty, dishonorably discharged and handed down the maximum three-year prison sentence for his 'crime'. He was also ordered to stand trial before an Islamic court on separate charges of apostasy and proselytising. Thanks to prayer and international pressure the Islamic court acquitted Hamid, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity 25 years ago, because he had "done nothing wrong" according to Islamic law. Hamid's judge reportedly told him, "I don't know who you are, but apparently the rest of the world does. You must be an important

person, because many people from the government have called me, saying to cancel your case." Now we pray on for him to also be acquitted of the military offence.

So here are the Monday evening options, pray for Hamid and his family – or watch Coronation Street! Hours don't come again, but they can be used more or less well. I would like to challenge you. Is your Monday evening TV so crucial? Why not commit to a "TV fast" when there is prayer meeting – God will honour it!

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 the Ephesians 6 series that David preached last year. "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." If you missed it, check out the MP3s on the website or Nigel's tapes. When we seek to combat Satan's power in prayer it is indeed a struggle. Such combat is best conducted in a platoon! As David Marfleet has told us, there are no Rambo's fighting alone in a proper army – they wouldn't survive. This is also why prayer of a married 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".

Closer to home, that is why I am asking Rachel to arrange prayer support for the Alpha course. Without it the course will surely fail, and the same goes for our other ongoing ministries, Wayne's Pastoral ministry, the Monday Group, Little Rascals, the Youth Ministry all need prayer support. Here's some opportunities to do so. On Thursday 1.50-2.50 there is prayer at Rachel's for the church and the village. On Monday at 9.00 every other week there is prayer for the school, organised by Evelyn. Don't leave the old warriors to battle alone!

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 E6 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 church 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 PBC. There are enemies we face here that our ministry and ministers need protecting against. It may be simple ill will from individuals, like the thieves who stole all the lead from the roof this week. But Satan is still playing a role, let's face it, he longs to see the downfall of this church. He might use some of us to serve his purposes through our weaknesses. He might seek to prolong minister's illnesses. Long bouts of depression may be aggravated by his oppression.

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. 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 leaders or each other, which could undermine PBC's ministry? We can pray for all hearts to be softened in this regard. We can also pray that hearts in the village will be softened to accept our ministry in respect of Community projects and that many will come on the Alpha course.

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 PBC, involving plans over both the short and long run. In the short run we have the Noise, the Alpha course and the two-service innovation. Over the longer term we have the set of proposals that Jemma has put forward at the church meeting, and the longer-term vision of the church.

Here I think the passage we read is giving us a powerful positive message for our plans. 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, empowered by the Holy Spirit! Didn't Jesus say to his disciples, prophetically, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” All our ministry is geared to that harvest field of reaching the lost – directly or indirectly – are we not the only organisation to exist for its non-members? Paul was planning to go to Spain, but our mission field is in the village, in our families, at our workplace. This is a theme for prayer indeed!

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. Last week I presented to you the 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. 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 church, and for one another, for we are all ministers. We need to pray energetically that the church will be protected from evil, and that our message will be well received, not only in the services but also in the village streets. 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. I invite you to pray about these matters in 2s and 3s, as well as in the House Groups during the week.