

Series on The Prayers of the Apostle Paul
Romans 1:7-13
Sermon #13
August 6, 1995

A PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE
L. Dwight Custis

Alright. Please take your Bibles and turn again to the first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

I asked Dick to read this whole section, but I am limiting myself to the text that you have in the Tableau.

For those of you who are visiting with us this morning, or are here for the first time in the series, we are looking at "The Prayers of the Apostle Paul as we find them scattered throughout his epistles. I am taking them up as best I can in chronological order, that is, the order in which these books have been written. We have come through 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and now Romans.

When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church at Rome, he had never been to Rome. So we know that he did not found the church at Rome, as he did many of the other churches. How it was founded, we do not really know. It is possible that some of the Jews who were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost following the death of the Lord Jesus Christ were saved and went back to Rome and established the church there. You will find, if you read Acts 2 where it mentions different parts of the world from which the Jews had come, that Rome is mentioned. Of course, there were Gentile proselytes there as well.

It is also possible, as Dr. Griffith-Thomas says in his commentary on Romans, that the close and frequent communication between Palestine and Rome through Asia Minor and Greece, would give an easy opportunity for Christianity to reach the metropolis of the empire.

So we cannot set a date for the beginning of the church in Rome, but it is thought that Paul wrote to them in the middle fifties. Therefore, the church could not have been more than twenty years old. It might be more likely that it was only something like ten years old.

From the fact that Paul wrote such a long letter to them, and this, of course, is the foundational epistle of the New Testament in which he gave complete teaching on the doctrine of salvation, then we assume that the church was really in need of teaching. That is also apparent in the prayer that we are going to be looking at. There is no suggestion that Paul was really trying to correct some error that had come into the church, as was the case with the Corinthian church and also with the Galatian churches. He obviously wanted to make sure that they understood the great doctrines of the faith that he mentions here: The doctrine of justification, the doctrine of sanctification, the doctrine of glorification, and then some of the basic truths regarding the way the people of God should live. We have all of that in the Book of Romans.

Our main concern today in this service is the prayer in chapter 1. It begins in the middle of verse 7, which you can see, where he gives his familiar greeting, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." Then he mentions what his prayer is:

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,)..." [Let is an Old English word meaning "hindered. I was hindered to this point.] "...that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles."

You notice that this is not exactly stated as a prayer; yet this is what he had been praying about. He was thankful for their faith and for the wide communication of their faith throughout the whole world. I take it that he means the Roman world, the Empire.

He had been faithful in praying for them and his basic request was that he might be able to go see them. He tells why he wants to go see them and explains to them that he had often planned to go and trusted that it was the will of God that he be able to go, but he was hindered from going. He tells us in the fifteen chapter why he was hindered, but he wanted to go and have some fruit among them.

Let's look at these details, after having briefly surveyed the whole thing.

The customary greetings which we have had in most of his epistles, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Griffith-Thomas, to whom I referred a moment ago, says "These two words--grace and peace--which we see over and over again in Scripture sum up the whole of the Gospel. Grace is the cause and peace is the effect, is the result.

The need for grace and peace does not stop when a person is first saved, or you would not have this prayer mentioned over and over again in Paul's epistles. It continues on throughout life day by day. Today, every single one of us needs grace and we need peace. Tomorrow, if the Lord tarries and spares us, we are going to need grace and we are going to need peace. It is by God's grace that He is so patient with us. It is by God's grace that He forgives us when we fail. It is by God's grace that we are strengthened against temptation and sin. It is by God's grace that He blesses our work. We need and experience the grace of God every day in many ways in which we do not recognize His blessing.

It is through His grace that we experience His peace. But, you know, there are means God uses for giving us peace. For example, the psalmist said in Psalm 119:165, "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them." The more you love the Word of God, the greater is going to be your peace. Peace comes in answer to prayer. "Do not be anxious about

anything..." Paul told the Philippians, "...but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

Peace comes as we keep our minds focused on the Lord. Thou will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee..." (Isaiah 26:3).

So let's never tire of reading this greeting in the epistles of the New Testament. May they always be a reminder of our need of grace and peace, and may they encourage us to pray this for each other and pray this for ourselves and to be encouraged to draw more heavily upon the resources that we have in our blessed Lord. "Grace and peace come from God **our** Father," he says, "and the Lord Jesus Christ." There is no way that we can possibly exhaust the supply. Let's not fail to remember this in our relationship to each other. Husbands and wives need to pray this for each other. Parents need to pray this for their children. Pray this for every person who is on your prayer list. Pray this for every servant of the Lord you know who ministers the Word of God.

I know of two pastors who are going through some deep trouble right now because of difficulty in their congregation. You can be sure that what they need more than anything else is grace and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. You have need of this today. How thankful we can be that it is available.

Now, secondly, he mentions his thanksgiving. This is really in verses 8 and 9, because nine, in a sense, explains why is so thankful for what he mentions in verse 8. I hope you do not get tired of reading about Paul's thanksgiving. It was a major part of his life. You could not have been with the Apostle Paul very long before you would find him expressing his thanksgiving to God for something. We would have been very impressed about that. Everywhere Paul looked he saw reasons for lifting his heart in thanksgiving to God.

Notice something here about his thanksgiving, because I want to spend some time this morning just looking at his statements in detail. Notice that he says, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all..." He offered his thanksgiving to God, but he offered his thanksgiving to God through Jesus Christ. What does this tell us? Why, it tells us that even our praise, which delights the heart of God, cannot be acceptable to God unless we approach Him to thank Him through Jesus Christ. Our only claim to access to the throne of grace is through Jesus Christ--what He has done for us, what He accomplished for us, when He died on the Cross.

If Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews, he said essentially the same thing in 13:15. Speaking of Christ he says, "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name." As our thanksgiving is only acceptable to God if we recognize that as we come to praise Him we come through Jesus Christ. If it were not for Jesus Christ, our prayers would mean nothing. They would go nowhere. But if we come through Him, we are laying hold of God and delighting the heart of God. Our praise is not acceptable to God, if it is not offered through the merit which we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. You and I are not accepted because of what we are. We are accepted in spite of what we are and in Him. Christ is the One and the only One through Whom we have access to the Father, so our praise must be offered in His name.

What was he thankful for?

As you have heard it twice this morning, one from Dick and once from me, he was thankful that their faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

This means the testimony of their faith--the reality of their faith. It was well-known, apparently, in the city of Rome and throughout the Empire, that there was a church in Rome, a true church, a group of people who knew and loved God and who knew and loved the Lord Jesus Christ and who were devoted to worshipping them. Paul was not concerned about who started the church or how long it had been going or how many were attending, but it was the clear testimony of their faith that brought joy to his heart and praise to God from his lips. Such news about any church would have delighted the heart of the Apostle Paul, but I want you to notice--and this is the reason I have linked verses 8 and 9 together--why it was a special source of joy to him, because he explains in verse 9, "For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers."

Think about this for a moment. This was a church that Paul had never visited. We know from Romans 16, the last chapter of this epistle where he mentions a number of people in Rome, that he knew some who were in the church, but he probably met them--undoubtedly met them--in other places. Still he could say to them, "taking God as his witness," meaning that he was really telling the truth, that day by day as he went to the Lord in prayer, without ceasing he mentioned the ministry there in Rome. It is remarkable if you can say to anybody that you remember them without ceasing in prayer, but to be able to say that about believers you have never met, never visited, is truly a remarkable thing. This did not mean that Paul was just spending all of his time in prayer, but it meant that whenever he prayed he prayed for them. As you read the epistles, and this is always a good thing to notice, the Roman church was not alone in this. The churches that we have been considering so far as we have looked at the prayers--the church at Thessalonica, the church at Corinth, the churches of Galatia--Paul had a hand in establishing all of these churches, but he said, as far as this Roman church, "every time I pray, I pray for you, therefore I can take great joy in the fact that your testimony--the testimony of what God is doing in the city of Rome--is well-known throughout the Empire."

Paul said this very same thing when he wrote to the church at Thessalonica, "Without ceasing, I make mention of you in my prayers." He said this when he wrote to the church at Ephesus. He said this when he wrote to the church at Philippi. He said this when he wrote to the church at Colosse. He said this when he wrote to Philemon, who was a member of the church at Colosse. Paul must have spent a major part of every day in prayer, pleading for the blessing of God upon all of these churches. Therefore, when he saw special blessing, as was evident in the city of Rome, it was a case of great thanksgiving as far as he was concerned. Paul was a man of much prayer, but a man of many thanksgivings. We have noticed this, haven't we, as we have gone from one prayer to another.

The point I would like to make is that we always enjoy seeing God's blessing on others, or even hearing about it, if we have been faithful in seeking such blessing upon His people. Praying for missionaries and have never visited them upon the field. You occasionally hear from them by letter. Or, praying for your family members who may be in other parts of the country. I always

seek to pray for the pastors who are ministering to Frank and Carolyn and Dwight and Nancy, trying to uphold them in their ministry. The effectiveness of their ministry means a great deal to me because members of my family are in their churches. When you have been interceding for others, perhaps for years, and then see His blessing upon them, not only will you rejoice more than others who have not prayed, but you will thank God that He has made you an instrument through whom He has brought blessing in answer to prayer. All of the glory, of course, belongs to God, but when God uses us as an instrument in any way, that is cause for thanksgiving, isn't it? So, remember that Paul told the Corinthians as they prayed for Him that they had helped him in his ministry. The statement was, "Ye also helping together by prayer." It did not mean that they had met his needs, but that God had met their needs because He had heard and answered their prayers. Our prayers are very, very important. That is the reason we are exhorted to pray and to pray much as we come to the Word of God. Nobody is a greater example, unless it would be the Lord Jesus Christ, than the Apostle Paul.

Now let's look at his request. This occupies the rest of what he had to say to the church at Rome.

His thanksgiving, generally, was accompanied by a special request, but here we see that his request was that he wanted to go to Rome to see the believers there.

There was much more on his mind than just the possibility of going to Rome.

Lucille and I had the privilege a few years ago of going to Rome. It is a very interesting city. We spent a weekend there and just saw a little bit of what it is possible to see. Sight-seeing in Rome is a very attractive thing to visitors. But that is not the thing that was in the heart of the Apostle Paul.

Before we get to the details, notice in verse 10 how he expressed his request. He says, "Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey **by the will of God** to come unto you." The first expressions that I would like for you to note are the expressions, "making request," which indicates that he had made this request over and over and over again, and was still praying about the possibility when he wrote this epistle. The second that goes along with this is the expression "at length." These two expressions mean that Paul had been praying for this a long time and he was hopeful that after such a long time of praying and waiting upon God he was now approaching the time when it would be the will of God for him to go to Rome.

What does this tell us? One thing that discourages the people of God about prayer is that we pray about so many things where we do not see any answers. This tells us that Paul had to wait for answers just like we do, but the delays did not keep him from bringing the same request to the Lord over and over again. I am not talking about something that we might ask for that is just a selfish request. I am talking about things that are involved in the lives of the people of God and the work of the Lord such as we find here in this epistle. But Paul prayed and Paul waited. Paul had made his plans, as we saw in verse 13. He had planned many times to go to Rome, had been hindered from going, yet this request was kept alive in his heart.

Then, you will notice that he says, "If by any means..." This showed Paul's submission to the Lord regarding how God might get him to Rome. I do not know. I cannot say for sure, but I

doubt that if he even suspected that the way he was eventually going to go to Rome was as a prisoner of Rome--because, you remember, that was the way he got there. He had an expense-paid trip, but it was not the kind of expense-paid trip that you normally would enjoy. But, you see, Paul was saying, "I do not care how the Lord does it. Let Him be the One to choose, but whatever the means might be, I am going to leave that up to Him," and it is apparent also in his words, "by the will of God." As much as Paul wanted to go to Rome, he did not want to go there until the Lord was ready for him to go. Be sure that you notice those details. "Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you." "A prosperous journey" here simply means that he was going to see his prayer answered and he would find himself in the city of Rome visiting these people he had prayed for so faithfully for such a long time.

Perhaps the assurance that God was going to answer his prayer grew out of his reason for wanting to go to Rome. He was not going there as a visitor or sight-seer, or just to satisfy his curiosity. He had a very special reason. His reason for wanting to go there was entirely in line with the work that God had called him to do. He wanted to impart unto them some spiritual gift.

The words that the Holy Spirit led the writers of Scripture to use are usually very, very interesting words. When you look into the words, you can find facets of truth that add to the blessing.

The word "impart" here means to share. This is a familiar expression that we use, and perhaps overuse today. We talk about sharing things with people, even in the Lord's work. The idea in this word "impart" means that Paul wanted to come to share a gift with them while he could still keep it for himself. That idea is in the word "share," isn't it? It means that I am going to give you part and I am going to have part for myself. This is imparting, sharing, some spiritual gift.

We do this in our ministry to each other. This is what every Bible teacher, every pastor, should always seek to do. This is what you parents should be doing with your children. God gives you a blessing. He teaches you some truth. You share it with others without losing it yourself. In fact, it is in sharing it with others that it is enriched in your own heart.

Many of you who are here today are Bible teachers and have done Bible teaching. You know, this is why we often say that the teacher usually gets the most out of his own teaching. In giving it to others, the truth means more to us. So Paul says, "I have come for the purpose of imparting to you some spiritual gift." The term "spiritual gift" is the term that Paul used for spiritual gifts in writing his first letter to the church at Corinth, but I do not think that is what he is talking about here. He did not have that ability to communicate that kind of a spiritual gift. I think here he was speaking of spiritual blessings that God had given him, truth that he had come to understand from the Lord, truth that would strengthen them, truth that would lead to their being more established in their relationship with the Lord. In other words, he was coming for the purpose of edifying the people of God, giving them what God had given to him, and yet, not giving it in such a way that he lost it, but giving it in such a way that his own heart was enriched and blessed by the ministry that the Lord had given to him. So he was talking about teaching them, teaching them the truth of God. It is very likely that this epistle was written just in case it might never be the Lord's will for Paul to go to Rome in person. By his writing we can certainly

thank God that we profit today, this morning, from his ministry almost two thousand years later. We have the advantage, don't we, of being with each other every week. For many of us it means several times a week. I wish it meant that for everybody here this morning. The main reason for our getting together today as we are here is so those of us who teach can impart to others some spiritual gift so that we all will become more firmly established in our knowledge of the truth and in our fellowship with the Lord. That is why we are here. We are not here to be entertained. We are here to learn. We are here to focus our attention upon the Lord Jesus Christ. We are here that our faith might be built up and strengthened and that we can go from this place rejoicing that we have had this time with the Lord.

This is why we have come, but remember that this imparting is not just for those of us who stand up here or stands down there, or in one of the classrooms teaching a class. It certainly applies in all of these. But this is for all of us. Remember, in our conversation with each other, we ought always seek to be imparting some blessing, to be a blessing to those to whom we speak. Christian fellowship is not just a group of Christians getting together, as I have said, talking about the weather, or talking about sports, or talking about politics, or talking about a lot of the other things that we talk about. Christian fellowship means that we are gathering together to talk about the Lord. Of course, you cannot talk about the Lord without talking about His Word.

We are not finished yet, as far as Paul's request is concerned. Look at verse 12. He wants to clarify this a little bit. I am coming to share what I know in order that you might be established in the faith, but I want you know that I am coming that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Paul not only wanted to be a blessing and to be a means of blessing to the people at the church of Rome, but he wanted to receive blessing. That is why one reason I always pray when Dr. Johnson comes to be with us, or Jerry Bridges, or Dr. Waltke, any of these men, I pray, I guess, because of my own experience, I pray that they will receive blessing in being here. Blessing goes both ways, as you have heard me say many times. I come this morning just as much in need of spiritual blessing as you do, and I am sure I can say this for every one of our Sunday School teachers. That was Paul's concern: That I may be comforted. So blessing goes both ways. You remember, comforted means to be encouraged, to be strengthened. It can mean to be rebuked. It can mean to be exhorted. It means to be taught. Paul attached a prefix on this Greek verb to indicate that he would benefit from his time in Rome. He would benefit spiritually in his own heart and his own relationship just as much as they would benefit because he had come to them.

I love Paul because he never lost sight of the needs of his own heart. I do not know how he could have described Christian fellowship any better than the way he did here. Perhaps this is why he felt so strongly that somehow, that sometime, perhaps now God was going to answer this longstanding prayer. There can be no doubt about it when you examine this prayer that Paul was certainly praying according to the will of God.

There is a final word that has to do with this prayer. It is in verse 13: "Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles."

I mentioned a moment ago that he explained in chapter 15 why he had not been able to come.

Will you turn to that chapter with me for just a moment, and you will see here his explanation as to why he had been hindered. It is a wonderful way to be hindered. In chapter 15 verses 20-24 Paul wrote this: "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: But as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand. For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you. But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you; Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company."

Paul's burden was to preach the Gospel where Christ had never been preached. He had many opportunities to do that.

When I began my ministry a good many years ago now, that did not seem like much of a possibility because even in our own country it seemed like everybody had heard about the Lord and everybody in some way knew something about the Gospel. You could hardly go into a home where there was not a Bible. Today the picture is altogether different. Not only will you find people who do not have a Bible in their homes, but you will find people who have never seen a Bible and have never held a Bible in their hands and do not know really anything about Jesus Christ. So we have that opportunity today in our own country to preach the Gospel where Christ has not been named.

Going back to this thirteenth verse of chapter one, he says at the end of the verse, "...that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles."

When he went to a city where the Gospel had been preached and a church was established and there were believers meeting together for fellowship and they had a remarkable testimony like this church at Rome had, Paul was always conscious of the fact that in Rome there were still thousands of people who did not know Jesus Christ. Paul, in his love for the people of God, and his love for teaching the Word of God, being an instrument of blessing to the Lord's people in so many places by his presence and by his writing, never lost sight of the fact that always, all around us, there are people who need the Saviour. It is easy for us to feel that the Lord has given us a wonderful fellowship here, and He has. We enjoy being together. Sometimes after church I think you are never going to go home, but, you know, that is wonderful to see. I am delighted to see that. You love to be together. You love to talk about the things of the Lord. That is a mark of the Lord's blessing. But when we enjoy our fellowship, let's remember that there are thousands of people in the metropolitan area who do not know anything about the Lord Jesus Christ--people who have never heard the Gospel, do not understand anything about Christ. Maybe they have heard His name spoken in blasphemy, but nobody has ever sat down with them to tell them anything about Who Jesus Christ is and what He has done and their need of them.

Paul, here, after he says, "I want to come and I want to share with you what God has given to me. I want to teach you what He has taught me and I want to be comforted. I want to receive His blessing to." He says, in addition, "I have purposed to come to you many times because I want to have fruit among you also even as among other Gentiles." Paul was thinking and Paul was praying that when he eventually got to Rome he would not only have a time of blessing with the

people of God, but God might give him the privilege that he had had in so many places of leading unregenerate Gentiles, and we would not exclude the Jews, leading unregenerate people to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour. What more could he say? He had been praying that not only would he be able to edify the saints, but he was hoping that in the providence of God the Lord would give him the privilege of leading others to the Saviour.

We have completed, for this morning, the study of another of Paul's prayers. Is this a picture of the way you and I pray? I am sure this is why the Holy Spirit had Paul put this in this epistle, to teach us a little bit more about prayer, but do we have the same burden for each other that Paul had for the people at Rome? Are we concerned about people here in Portland and Vancouver and this whole area, as well as throughout the world who are without Christ? Do we share anything of the burden that he had? Does Paul's prayer indicate the burden that we have for our ministry here at Trinity Bible Church? If not, it certainly should. I trust this morning that we have learned something, learned something about prayer, that we will be encouraged to pray about these great matters that were upon the heart of the Apostle Paul even when we do not see our prayers answered, because the fact that we have not seen them answered is no indication that we will not see them answered. God may answer in a very amazing way. We will not pray, like Paul, that we would be able to go to Rome, but we need to be praying this prayer for our church and for our families and for people the Lord might be pleased to use us to reach them throughout this area. We have a ministry to each other. We have a ministry to the world. What better place to catch a vision for such a ministry as right here at the Lord's table today, as we eat the bread and as we drink the cup, we are doing what? We are preaching a message. We are showing forth the Lord's death. This is our mission in the world, isn't it? We would not be here today. I would not be saying the things I am saying to you, if Jesus Christ had not died for us and in His wonderful grace drawn us to Himself and changed our lives and given us a desire to know Him, to be what He wants us to be and to carry this same Gospel message with us.

So, as we come to the Lord's table this morning, let's pray that the Lord will enable us really to do this as He said we ought to do it, in remembrance of Him. May the Holy Spirit focus our attention upon the Lord Jesus, His broken body and His shed blood, and may the Holy Spirit work in our hearts, giving us a desire to know the Lord even more better and then to go out into this world to tell others what we know of Him.

Shall we pray.

Father, we thank You that You led the Apostle Paul to pray the way he prayed and that You led him to write it down so that the Roman church could read it, and more than that, Father, You have preserved this letter for us all these years so that today, as we consider this passage of Scripture, we can profit from it, and we can see from the way You worked in the heart of the Apostle Paul what our concern should be today. We ask, Lord, that this prayer may be upon our hearts and that we may see Your blessing in a greater way, not only as we minister to one another, but, as we leave this place and go out to live our lives in the world, may we always remember that You have left us here on earth to be ambassadors for our Lord Jesus Christ. In His precious Name we pray, Amen.