

*How to Pray, How to Listen*  
*Romans 15:30-33<sup>1</sup>*



**Prayer for Ministry**

Is God obligated to answer our prayers in accordance with what we ask? If not, then how do you respond when God says “No” to your prayers or answers in an entirely different way than anticipated? In this passage, Paul asks for prayer for himself and his ministry and gets some unexpected results.

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- Paul “urges” his fellow believers in Rome to pray for him. His appeal hinges on three points to remind them that:
  1. They’re family (“brothers,” see also, Rom. 12:1)
  2. They serve the “Lord Jesus Christ”
  3. The love from God’s Spirit in them must be demonstrated by prayer.
- Specifically, Paul urges the Roman believers “to join me in my struggle” in prayer. This expression is used of the athlete who vigorously trains with strenuous discipline. Prayer involves struggle, discipline, and sometimes agonizing against the spiritual forces of evil (see also, Col. 4:12). *When we pray we are engaging in supernatural conflict.* Prayer is among the chief weapons of our warfare (Eph. 6:18-20.) When engaged in this kind of prayer for others, we “join them in their struggle.”
- Elsewhere Paul requests prayer for himself (2 Cor. 1:8-11; 1 Thess. 5:23-25; Philem 22). Here *Paul asks for prayer that he might be rescued from unbelievers in Judea.* Why?
  - Paul already mentioned that he was on his way to Judea with a large sum of money collected from Gentile churches (Rom. 15:26). The Jewish community was violently opposed to Paul and his gospel (Acts 9:29; 13:44-45, 50; 14:19) and he feared that the gift collected for the poor would be jeopardized.
  - The expression, “unbelievers in Judea” literally reads “the disobedient in Judea” (cf., NASB). Those who are “unbelievers” don’t just make a choice among a variety of options in the marketplace of religions. Contrary to popular parlance, what a person believes is not just a private matter. Refusing to believe in Jesus is sin; not merely a preference! It is moral rebellion of the highest order and the consequence is huge (cf., 2 Thess. 1:8-9). To reject God’s gracious offer revealed in his Son is to exalt self over God. Unbelief, therefore, is a form of idolatry.
  - Thus, Paul was deeply concerned for his safety but only in so far as it posed a risk to the delivery of relief to the poor in Jerusalem. So, he urges the Roman believers to pray for him (see Acts 21:10-14).
- *Also, Paul asks for prayer that his “service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.”* Since Paul’s collection came from “Gentile” bank accounts, it’s likely that predominantly Jewish believers would be reticent in accepting it.
  - Paul’s pastoral sensitivities to and respect for the various cultural differences among the churches is evident.
  - Some who are in need are better at receiving assistance than others. It takes as much grace to receive as it does grace to give. Paul was keenly aware of the psychology involved here and naturally shows concern.
  - The import of his request has huge implications. Poor Jewish believers accepting “Gentile” financial assistance would go a long way toward promoting unity in the Church that was (and still is) desperately needed.
- “Pray...so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.” This is a prayer request not just for him to get to Rome safely, but that he may go on to Spain and preach the gospel (Rom. 15:28).
  - It was Paul’s practice to preach the gospel where it was unknown (Rom. 15:20). His plan is to visit his readers in Rome on his way to more ministry. So, his prayer request is for the path to be cleared for the expansion of the gospel! Such priorities! Such ambition for God! Is that what drives your prayers?
  - It’s likely that after being refreshed by mutual encouragement (Rom. 1:11-13), Paul’s goal was to use Rome as a base for furthering his ministry into Europe (Rom. 15:23-24).
  - Paul’s prayer request for specifics did not eclipse the bigger picture of outreach. So too, we must tie our requests to a larger vision of what God is doing and not settle for a quick fix to life’s discomforts.

<sup>1</sup> I’m indebted to Don Carson’s *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (pp. 205-224) for most of the insights here.  
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- *Paul's prayer request turned out very different than he would have liked.* Originally, Paul asked for prayer that he be rescued from Jewish unbelievers in Judea and that his ministry would be acceptable to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. His hope was that he would be “refreshed” in Rome on his way to more ministry in Spain. But, Acts records different results and tells us how things really turned out (Acts 21:15ff).
  - Paul was not rescued from the unbelievers in Judea but was arrested (Acts 21:33)
  - He did not go on to Rome for “refreshment” but eventually stood trial in Rome after incarceration in Caesarea for some 2 years and suffering a shipwreck along the way. So far as we know, Paul never reached Spain.
  - Two other instances of unanswered prayers:
    1. Paul explicitly asked God to remove a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:1-10). Yet God saw fit to supply more grace to endure rather than merely remove the problem.
    2. Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was for God to “take this cup from me” (Lk. 22:42). Praise God that this prayer was *not* answered!
- ***Now that you know these things...***
  - We should pray that Christian leaders might be rescued from opposition of outsiders who try to destroy their ministry.
  - We should pray that Christian leaders might find their service acceptable to those to whom they minister.
  - Imagine getting everything you prayed for. How might your life be different?
  - When God says “No” or answers in unexpected ways it demonstrates that prayer is not some magical, mechanical incantation that views God as one who can be manipulated by our pleading. Prayer is not superstition, but an expression of a dynamic relationship with God who is all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful.
  - Often we fail to distinguish rightly between what we need and what we want. God always gives us what we need, but not always what we want. He’s more interested in *us* than in seeing our requests granted. This is the essence of a loving, heavenly Father who only does what’s best for his children.

“I asked the Lord that I might grow  
in faith and love and every grace;  
might more of his salvation know,  
and seek, more earnestly, his face.

I thought that in some favoured hour  
at once he’d answer my request;  
and by his love’s constraining power,  
subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel  
the hidden evils of my heart,  
and let the angry powers of hell  
assault my soul in ev’ry part.

‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried,  
‘Wilt thou pursue thy \*worm to death?;  
‘Tis in this way’ the Lord replied,  
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ  
from self and pride to set thee free,  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
‘That thou may’st seek thy ALL in me!’”

-- John Newton

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