

Paul's Marvelous Ministry – Part 2

Romans 15:23-33

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We come to what is called the epilogue of Paul's great letter to the Romans. It's both personal and autobiographical. Paul, having shared with the Roman church his understanding of his special ministry to the Gentiles, as God called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul now looks into the future and lays out his travel plans. At this point in his life, Paul had an impressive list of missionary accomplishments, yet there was no intention on his part to settle down to a comfortable life of retirement. It would be easy for Paul to say, "Look, I've traveled most of the Roman empire. I'm getting old. It's getting dangerous. The Jews are out to kill me, so I think I'm just going to retire to a little Greek island somewhere and relax." Paul was somebody all the way to the very end when he said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course, and there is a crown of righteousness laid up for me." Paul really wanted to run the race that God had set before him. I think that we should take our cue from Paul's life, that we should be wanting to be used by and serve God until the time the Lord takes us home to heaven to be with Him.

In 1 Corinthians 15:58 Paul said that we should "...be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." Paul really lived that philosophy out. He was steadfast, immovable, and was always abounding in the work of the Lord. There are several sections that I want to point out through this passage (verses 23-33) and then make application to Paul's ministry and to ours as well.

First Paul talks about his plan to visit Rome (verses 23-24). Paul wanted to express to the Roman believers that he had a desire to come to them and to explain why he hadn't been there yet. He wanted to come and have fellowship with them (verse 23). He says, "But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you; 24 Whosoever 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." For a long time Paul had been hindered from coming to Rome. He wanted to go to Rome. He wanted to visit Rome, but he had not been to Rome. Paul mentions three factors that hindered him in coming to Rome.

First of all the doors had now been shut for him in one area, and he was going to go to Rome. Notice it in verse 23. He says, "But now having no more place in these parts," it kind of sounds like an old John Wayne movie to me (I'm reading from the King James)—no more place in these parts. Now, what Paul means by that evidently is that he had preached the gospel to all that are in the area that he had covered, and he wanted to go into pioneer territory. He wanted to go into new turf. He wanted to reach out where Christ had not been preached into different areas of ministry, so Paul says, "It's kind of like the Lord has wrapped things up. The Lord has closed the doors, and there's no more ministry here so I'm going to launch out into another area."

God had actually closed the doors—"no more place in these parts." I believe that the principle or the lesson is this: God closes doors and God opens doors. God is the One who closes doors and God opens doors. You say, "Well, what do you mean He closes doors and opens doors? All this door stuff, what's this door stuff you're talking about?" Christians talk about "Well, God opened a door." It's a figure of speech, and in this figure of speech we're talking about opportunity. God opens doors of opportunity for us to serve Him, and God closes doors of opportunities for us to serve Him. What we need to keep in mind is that God is the One who opens the doors, and God is the One who closes the doors. We can't, by our own human manipulation, bring about an open or shut door. We can't kick the door down. We can't say, "Well, whether God wants it or not, I'm gonna kick this door down, and I'm gonna go into this area, and I'm gonna do this kind of ministry." No. We want to be led by God. We want to be guided by God, so we want God to open the doors, but our responsibility is to be faithful to step through the door that God opens for us. I know that it sometimes is challenging to discern, "Is this an open door or is this just what I want? What is the situation here?" We need wisdom from God to know when God is leading or when God is shutting a door. As long as I've been a Christian, and as long as I've been a pastor, I, like you, have struggled with the same situation, "God, is this Your will or do I go here, do I go there? Are You opening a door or are you shutting a door?" We find ourselves, as believers, constantly praying, "Lord, open a door. Open the door. If You want me to go this place, then You open the door. You make this opportunity available."

I remember before I was officially a pastor that I began to have a desire to be a pastor. I was teaching the Bible, and the home study group was growing. That was my prayer, "God, if You want me to go into ministry, if You want me to be a pastor, then You open the doors. I can't make it happen. I can't orchestrate it. I can pray. I can prepare my heart. I can be faithful to do what You give me to do, and then You open a new door," but God does lead us by our circumstances. That's one of the many ways that God makes known His will to us, but it is subjective and we can't go by it in every situation. Sometimes it will seem like a door is shut, but God is just telling us to be patient or to wait or the timing isn't right, and we need to trust Him that He will open the door in the right time for us to step through into ministry. Again, we look to God, we wait on God, we pray to God, we trust God, and if God shuts a door, He only does that because He's directing us. The Bible says the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord and he delights in His ways. Did you know also the stops of a good person are ordered by the Lord, and we should delight in His way?

Has God put a roadblock in your path right now? A goal, an ambition, a desire, a place you wanted to live, a thing you wanted to do, a profession, a calling, a ministry and CLAP God closed the door and you're disappointed? You don't know but what God is just trying to prepare you for the door to swing open at another time. You know what? Doors can swing open in a moment. Moses tried to open a door of ministry for himself when he killed the Egyptian, and he had to run out into the desert and spend 40 years going through the school of the backside of the desert—the school of hard knocks. How many of you have ever been to the school of hard knocks? It's the best way to learn, by the way. It's the difficult way to learn, but it's the best way to learn—by making mistakes. When Moses was 80 years old, God called him to go to

Pharaoh and command the release of God's people. By that time, Moses said, "Lord, find somebody else. I can't speak. I'm old. Here am I, Lord, send my neighbor," was his prayer really. "Use somebody else, Lord." Many times God shuts a door and humbles us then He opens the door. When He opens a door, we with fear and trepidation are kind of like, "Lord, okay, I'll be obedient but You'll have to help and strengthen me as we step through that door." I was struck by the fact that Paul said, "I have no more place in these parts," so it would seem to be a combination of that his ministry had been fulfilled in the area of Macedonia, northern and southern Greece, and Achaia, and now he wanted to reach out farther to the west. He wanted to go to Rome and then Spain.

To understand these verses that we're covering tonight, (I should've got a map to throw up on the screen) you really ought to consult a Bible map. Most Bibles contain maps of the missionary journey's of Paul or the travels of Paul. You would do well to familiarize yourself with this region, knowing where Rome is. You have Italy, the Italian boot there, you know, and to the west of that is Spain. To the east of that would be Greece, the Greek islands, the Aegean Sea, and the Asian continent (which is Turkey today), and then down into the middle east. Familiarize yourself with the travels of Paul to better understand this autobiographical section where he speaks about the doors had been shut, but be faithful to step through the doors that God opens and be patient to wait and trust God when He shuts a door—that He knows what He's doing and will open another door. You just trust Him and wait patiently.

I want you also to notice that God had given Paul a desire. God closed a door (verse 23) and then gave him a desire, so God works through circumstances and desires. He said (verse 23), "... having a great desire these many years to come unto you." Notice, for many years Paul had a desire to go to the Roman Empire or to the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman empire is what I meant. I believe that God leads us by desires. Psalm 37:4, "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." By that, I believe the Psalmist is saying that when God is your delight, and you want to love, serve, and follow God, then God takes His will for your life, places them on your heart, and they become desires. Again, you need to be careful that you're not imposing your desires on God saying, "Well, this is what I really want to do," but making sure that God comes first, you delight in God, you want God's will, you want to love and serve God, you want to do whatever God gives you to do; and whatever it is that God places on your heart then, I believe, that can be a God-given desire. You need to pray, seek the Lord, put Him first, and then ask, "What God-given desire has God placed upon my heart?" Whatever God calls you to do, He's going to give you a love and a desire to do that. He's not going to call you to do something that you don't want to do. He's going to give you a love, a desire, and a heart for what He calls you to do. So, that's another way that you can determine God's will—circumstances and desires.

For many years Paul had that desire, and that's another indication that it's a God-given desire because it doesn't come and go. This is why I believe it's good when God gives you desires and then opens the door, that you're patient, you pray, and you wait asking God, "If this desire is of You, make it stronger and more intense or take it away." Many times I've had a desire, and then God has taken the desire away. I just kind of dismiss it, "Well, I guess it was just me," or

"That wasn't really of the Lord," but if it's something that continues and stays with you and becomes a burning passion that doesn't leave you, then God has given you that desire. The cool thing about a God-given desire is that God will fulfill that desire. If God gives you the desire then God will open the door and lead you. You find yourself doing what is really the desires of your heart. That's why it's so wonderful to serve the Lord because you can say that God actually gave to me the desires of my heart. So, God closed the door and then gave Paul this desire that had been with him for all of these many years.

The third thing I want to point out is that Rome became for Paul (verse 24) just the stepping stone for him to go to Spain. He says, "Whensoever I take my journey into Spain..." and by the way, Paul is in Corinth. Again, you have to look at a map. When you look at Greece, and right in the middle of Greece narrows, it narrows to what is called a little isthmus, a narrow little strip of land, where you have northern Greece, which is Macedonia, and southern Greece, which is Achaia in Biblical times, and then this little tiny isthmus or connection of land is right there called Corinth. They have what's called the Corinthian canal built through that area of Corinth. When you visit Corinth, and we've been to this spot on our last trip over there, we actually hung out on the bridge over the Corinthian canal and looked at it. Paul was in Corinth. Paul wants to go west—go west young man—is what Paul wanted to do. So, he wanted to go to Rome, but that wasn't his final destination. He wanted to go to Spain. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us whether Paul went to Spain. Some believe that he did, but we don't know. Church tradition says that he went to Spain and preached the gospel there, but the Bible doesn't let us know. That doesn't mean he didn't go to Spain, but he would go to Rome and then hop on over farther west over to Spain. He wanted to go there (verse 24) so that he might have fellowship with them, "...to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company." He wanted to join together with the believers in Rome, pray with them, have their support, have their fellowship, and here's another principle of God's leading us in ministry in that God uses people in our lives.

God uses other Christians in our lives. People who are being used by God are in fellowship with and partner with other Christians. You can't be a lone-ranger Christian and expect God to use you. You can't say, "Well, I don't go to church, and I don't want to fellowship with other Christians, but I want to be a spiritual leader. I want to be used by God." You're going to be involved with people. You're going to be engaged with people. You're going to be committed to being with people. You're going to realize that you need people and people need you, but you need to be a part of other people's lives. I meet people all the time that aspire to be missionaries or to serve the Lord, but they're lone-ranger Christians. "Well, where do you go to church?" "Well, I don't really have a church right now that I go to, but I just thought I'd come to you and ask you if you'd support me." "Well, why don't you go to where you go to church? Why don't you go to your pastor?" "Well, I don't really go to a church. I don't really have a pastor." "So, you just want me to give you money to be a missionary, but you're not a part of this church? I highly recommend that you first become a member of a church, get involved, and start serving God where you are planted before you go off and think you can serve God somewhere else." I meet people like this all the time. They're not serving God, they're not in fellowship, they're not connected with other Christians, yet they want you to give them money to

be a missionary to go off somewhere so they can sit on an island and get sun-tanned while you send them money. I'm all about missions, but you need to be accountable to a local church and to a local fellowship. That's what God is doing. He's using the local church to be involved in sending out its members into the mission field, but we need to be trusting God, connected with other people, and in fellowship with them. God provides through His people.

When I felt called into the ministry, one of the things God did was He confirmed it through other people, and He encouraged me through other people. How do you know you have a gift in the area of ministry? Well, other people will recognize it. If you're the only one who thinks you have a gift and no one else sees it, then maybe you don't have a gift. "Well, God's calling me to sing." You're the only person who thinks that because every time we hear you sing people say, "No. That's not your gift." "Yeah, but I wanna sing for God." Well, I think that if God wanted you to sing He'd give you a voice. It makes sense, right? So, other people in fellowship with you will encourage you, see that gift in your life, seek to pray for you, and help to encourage you as you launch out in ministry in serving the Lord.

The second thing I want to point out is that Paul moves to verses 25-29. He begins to talk about his plans to visit Jerusalem and then Spain. Now you say, "Well, John, you just told us that he was going to visit Rome and then visit Spain. Now, he wants to visit Jerusalem and then he's going to go to Rome and then Spain?" Again, I mentioned the geography because Jerusalem is the opposite direction from Rome and Spain. He's in Corinth, and it's directly west to go to Rome and Spain, and it's directly east to go to Jerusalem. He would be going about two-thousand miles out of his way, but he wanted to go to Jerusalem first because he had a mission. I want you to notice it (verse 25). He says, "But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints." I'm going to explain what Paul is talking about, "For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia..." now Macedonia is northern Greece and Achaia is southern Greece, "...to make a certain contribution..." the word there is *koinonia*. It's talking about an offering, a financial offering, that was gathered by the Gentile churches of Macedonia and Achaia or Greece, to take to Jerusalem. He says, "...to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. 27 It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are." That is, these Gentiles are debtors to the Jews, "For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things. 28 When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain. 29 And I am sure that, when I come unto you, I shall come in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ."

Paul is talking about the offering that had been collected among the Gentile churches of Macedonia. The Gentile churches in Macedonia, northern Greece, included Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Achaia. Those are the churches in those areas. We know about the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. It's mentioned in the book of Acts, but we have letters in the New Testament to the church of Philippi and Thessalonica. Now, they took an offering and were going to have Paul carry it back to the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul, before he was converted, persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, but now that he has been converted, he was first known as Saul of Tarsus and he hated Christians, now he wants to show

them his love for them.

The church started in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was made up primarily of Jews. Did you know that the first Christians were Jews? They weren't Gentiles? They were made up mainly of Jews, and Paul went out to be the apostle to the Gentiles. There were some Jews in Jerusalem (the area around there is known as Judea) that really were bothered by Paul going to the Gentiles. They really felt like Paul ought not to do that, and they actually began to attack Paul and say, "Paul, you shouldn't do that. These Gentiles must become Jews in order to be Christians." They were known as Judaizers, and Paul wrote the book of Galatians to deal with this problem—that Gentile believers don't need to become Jews in order to be Christians. Paul wanted to unify the Jewish and the Gentile churches. In the early stages of Christianity, the church was in danger of becoming split into two groups—Jewish church and Gentile church. The Bible is very clear that the church is to be one—Jew and Gentile—that there is not to be any division, and the Jew and the Gentile have the same standing in Christ before God.

Paul wanted to take this money to them because they were poor, suffering, and there was a famine. He mentions in verse 26 that they were poor saints that were in Jerusalem. By way of a footnote too, Paul doesn't rebuke them for being poor saints. A lot of television preachers would do that today. They would tell them they ought to have more faith, and if they only had more faith they would have more money and wouldn't be poor saints, but Paul didn't do that. He actually says they are poor saints, and we want to take an offering up, bring it to them, and we want to share with them, so Paul would be going about two thousand miles out of his way.

Some lessons on Christian giving are here in this text for us that we need to see and draw from. In verse 25, it was a service to the saints of Jerusalem. This money that was collected by the Gentiles in Greece to support and help their Christians brothers who were Jewish in Jerusalem was seen as a service. I want you to look at a little phrase in verse 25. He says, "But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister..." there's the word, "...unto the saints." The word "minister" we get our word deacon from, *diakoneo*, which means to serve. The idea is that this money would be used as a sacred service in giving to God. Did you know that when you give money to God and to God's work that it is a sacred service? It's not just some kind of an obligation, you know, Christians have to give to God. It is actually a sacred service, a ministry that we offer up to God. It is truly a spiritual work of ministry. It's giving in a sacred service.

Secondly, the Gentiles were pleased when they gave. Notice it in verse 26. "For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem." They were glad to do that. They didn't bemoan it. They didn't gripe about it. They didn't complain. They didn't say, "Oh, man, that Paul. He's always wanting to collect money for those poor saints. Why can't they just work things out themselves or get their act together?" No. They said, "Praise the Lord! We're glad to give. They're our brothers in Christ." We're going to see here in just a second too, that the gospel came to them from Jerusalem by way of the Jew, and so they had a debt to them. They were their debtors. Those who ministered to them spiritually, they were in debt to minister to them financially and to take care of them. They didn't bemoan it. They didn't complain, and they didn't gripe.

Do you know that when the Bible says that we should give we should give joyfully? Do you know that the word “joyfully” actually means with hilarity? We should do it gladly. We should do it rejoicingly. If you are giving to God and you are bemoaning giving to God, then you need God to change your heart or not give to God. Ask God to change your heart. It would be a real loss if you just said, “Well, okay then, thank you, Pastor, then I just won’t give to God.” I think God wants to change your heart. We’re going to see that it brings blessing to you, blessing to others, and glory to God, but they gave gladly. They did it as a sacred service, and they were giving it with great joy. They were pleased to do it. It also uses that phrase again in verse 27, “It hath pleased them verily.” So, he mentions, at the end of verse 26, that they were pleased to do it, and again in verse 27 that they gave with joy in their hearts.

Thirdly, notice the Gentiles were debtors to Jews, verse 27. “It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.” Now, I’m reading from the King James translation. The word “carnal things” merely means here physical, fleshly or material things. Here’s the principle again. The principle again is that those who have ministered to you spiritual things, it’s fitting that you take care of them financially, materially or in physical ways.

Remember when God said this in Corinthians. He said, “Do not muzzle the ox that treads the corn.” Right? It’s an Old Testament principle. You’re all aware of the “don’t muzzle the ox” principle, right? You lay awake at night thinking about it. What they did when they threshed the wheat in those days, they had to winnow it by hooking to an ox a threshing instrument, and they would have the threshing floor and there would be a center pole. The ox would go around in a circle. You take this big log with spikes sticking out on it, known as a tribunal or a thresher, and the ox would carry it around. They would throw the wheat in there. The ox would thresh and winnow it, and while this ox is walking around working hard to prepare their grains, they were not to put a muzzle over the ox preventing it from bending down and taking a bite. The principle would be that if you work at McDonalds you ought to get a Big Mac once in a while, so take that verse to your boss you McDonalds workers. If you labor in that sense, you ought to be able to be benefit of that labor. So, he carries it over into the spiritual realm. By the way, that was an actual principle God gave them in the Old Testament—do not muzzle the ox that treads the corn. God cares about oxen. Isn’t that amazing! So, he says that when a minister preaches the Word to you, and I’m not doing this because I want you to give me money, but it’s a Biblical principle that when someone ministers to you spiritually, that you minister to them financially. You take care of them, so you’re taking care of those who have ministered to you. That’s the balance there that Paul is talking about. He says they’re their debtors.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:11, “If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?” He says that in Corinthians because they were attacking Paul of being a false teacher saying he didn’t deserve to be supported in the ministry. Paul is saying, “No, this is a Biblical principle.” So, their offering was a humble, material, symbolic demonstration of their indebtedness to the Jews.

There is a principle here too that’s a little broader. Did you know that if you’re a Gentile and a

Christian that you should thank God and appreciate the Jewish people? There's no place in Christianity for anti-semitism. There's no place in Christianity to hate anybody of any race, creed or color, let alone the Jewish people, when the Bible says salvation is of the Jews. If you have a Bible tonight, you're carrying your Bible, you can thank Jewish people for your Bible. If you've trusted Jesus as your Savior—He was a Jew. The Savior of the world was a Jew, so there's no place for us to have hatred in our hearts toward the Jewish people. The Bible says, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," when we take the gospel.

I want you to know the fourth principle about finances or giving in ministry. That is, it was fruit not loot. Notice verse 28. He says, "When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain." Their financial support was spiritual fruit. He wasn't looking at it as money. He was looking at it as spiritual fruit. It was like sowing seed. You give and it shall be given unto you. Jesus said, "Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." So, we sow and we reap. It's spiritual fruit. In Philippians 4:17, Paul says, "Not because I desire a gift: but I desire fruit that may abound to your account." When you give, as a ministry, gladly to the work of the Lord to minister to others, it is fruit that abounds to your account. Then notice in verse 29 that it brings spiritual fulness and blessing. He says, "And I am sure that, when I come unto you, I shall come in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ." I know that when I come to you in Rome, I'm going to come and experience the fullness of the blessings of the gospel of Christ. I believe that Paul did come to Rome and experience that blessing.

There's a third point I want you to notice (verses 30-32), Paul's request for them to pray for him. Paul's request for prayer for his visit. Here's Pastor Paul asking them to pray for him (verse 30). He says, "Now, I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me," notice that, "strive together with me," "in your prayers to God for me; 31 That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints;" that's the offering that Paul was going to take to them, "That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God, and may with you be refreshed. 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen." He closes chapter 15 with this doxology.

In Romans 1:9, Paul said that he made mention of them; that is, the Roman believers, in his prayer always to God. But now Paul asks them to pray for him, a common practice that Paul had. Think with me for a moment. Paul was an apostle. He had seen the risen Christ on the Damascus road. He performed miracles. He would write Scripture. He was a great man of God, but he was not above humbling himself and asking for prayer. That's commendable. Sometimes people feel, "I don't want to bother others. I don't want to ask them to pray for me." You know what? We need to pray for one another, and the context is praying for your spiritual leaders. You know, I believe that the church would be a lot more healthy and both see a lot more success if the congregants, the members of the church, spent more time on their knees praying for its leaders.

When people on Sunday say, "Pastor John, I prayed for you." That's the best gift that you could

ever give me, and that's the best thing that you could ever do for me. If you haven't prayed for me, and you're not praying for me, put my name on your prayer list in big bold capital letters—PRAY FOR JOHN MILLER. He needs all the help he can get. Believe me. Pray, pray, pray, pray every day. You say, "Well, how can we pray for you?" You can pray for my health, my physical stamina, my strength, my spiritual life, that God would deepen my prayer life, my time as I study and prepare the sermons. You know, you come on Sunday and you want to hear me teach the Bible, and you want to hear the Word of God. Do you ever pray that God will bless my prep and study time and speak through me so that when you come on Sunday I won't be boring? If I'm boring on Sunday, it's your fault. Don't blame me, you should've prayed more.

Here's Paul—Pray for me. He is really just begging them and all through the New Testament, over and over, Paul is actually appealing to the churches that he needs their prayers. I need your prayers. The other pastors here at Revival Christian Fellowship need your prayers. You can go on the website, scope out the pastors. You can look it over. You can print out a list of our names, put them on your prayer list, and pray for us every day. We covet your prayers, and we gather as pastors and pray for you as part of this church and the congregation here. So, if Paul asks for prayers, it's also an indication that he believed that it was effective. Why would Paul ask the believers in Rome to pray for him if he didn't think God answered prayers or it worked? Do you think Paul was just kind of doing the "Christian" thing? "Hey, pray for me." Oh, that sounds so spiritual, or saying to other people, "I'll pray for you."

I get so many people asking me for prayer that I try my best, I don't always, but I try my best to say, "Let's pray right now," because if I don't pray right now, I'm going to forget you. So, if you come up and say, "Pastor John, will you pray for me?" "Okay, let's pray right now. What is your prayer?" I can't tell you the times people say, "Hey, will you pray for me?" "Yeah. I'll pray for you." Then, I see them another week or two later and they say, "Oh, thank you for praying for me!" "Yeah, you're welcome." I don't even know who you are or what you asked me to pray for. I've had people say, "Pastor John, thank you for praying for me! God answered the prayer." I say, "He did? Wow! That's amazing," because I don't tell them that but I'm like, "That's awesome! I didn't even pray and God answered." Isn't it amazing how God can answer a prayer even if your pastor forgets about you? I encourage you to do that when you pray for each other. Say, "Hey, will you keep me in prayer?" Say, "Let's pray right now," or you write their name down and remember to pray for each other.

Paul knew that prayer was effective. The Bible says, "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Now, you say, "Well, why don't we pray more?" I believe that it is because it is difficult. Prayer is challenging. Prayer is spiritual warfare. It's spiritual work. Notice a little phrase Paul used, verse 30. It's a word picture. He says, "...that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me." From those words "strive together" we get our word agony from. It's the Greek agonizo. It means to strain or strive. It was used of a Greek Olympian, an athlete, and it was used for the wrestling match. I don't know of anything more strenuous than wrestling. You get each other in a headlock and you're locked in this battle. When you're wrestling with somebody it's agonizing. It's taxing. Paul's saying, "I want you to just agonize with me and pray with me." A lot of times we don't really put effort in. Remember,

the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. It's the same concept of when Jesus was in Gethsemane and was in agony, agonizo—as He prayed his sweat was as it were great drops of blood. We're in a spiritual battle. Satan tries to oppose and keep us from prayer and praying for spiritual leaders and for one another. Certainly, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

A little footnote before we wrap this up. I want you to notice the Trinity as it pertains to prayer. In verse 30, you have a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, a reference to the love of the Spirit, and a reference to prayer to God for me. So, you have the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—all three persons in the Godhead mentioned there in verse 30. Prayer is to be directed to God the Father in the energy and power of God the Holy Spirit, and it's through God the Son, Jesus Christ. How do we pray? We pray in the power of the Spirit. We pray to God the Father, and we come to Him through Jesus Christ, God's Son.

What does Paul want them to pray for? I want you to see this before we close our study time tonight. There are three things, some say four, I'm saying three, but I want you to see them. They all begin with "that." Sometimes you can discover prayers when it starts with "that." The first one is in verse 31—that he would be kept safe from the unbelieving Jews in Judea. "That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea." Judea being the region around Jerusalem, and these hostile, unbelieving Jews that were persecuting Paul because he was preaching the gospel to Gentiles. He was fellowshiping with them, so they were hating Paul as Paul hated Christians himself. Here's his first petition. Paul doesn't just generally speak saying, "Pray for me." Paul gives them specifics, very specific things for them to pray for, "Pray that I would be delivered from the hostile Jews."

Remember when Paul was on his way to Jerusalem in Acts 21. A prophet by the name of Agabus took off his belt (King Jimmy says girdle), tied his hands, and prophesied that the man who wears this belt is going to be bound when he goes to Jerusalem. He predicted that Paul was going to be arrested in Jerusalem. All the other Christians started crying on Paul saying, "Paul, don't go. We don't want you to get arrested. We don't want you to be in danger. Don't go." Paul says, "What are you trying to do, break my heart? I'm not afraid to be arrested. I'm not afraid to die. I believe it's God's will, so I'm going to go. Stop crying on me because I'm going to do it anyway."

Notice the second petition was that my service, which I have for Jerusalem, may be accepted of the saints, verse 31. That's referring to the offering. What he is saying is, "Pray, when I get to Jerusalem and give them the money that came from the Gentiles, that they will accept it; that they won't say, "Oh, it's got cooties because it's from the Gentiles," but they would gladly receive that money and see themselves as partners together with the Gentiles in Greece.

Here's the third petition in verse 32. I've got some things I want to say about them. "That I may come unto you with joy by the will of God," some add a fourth petition at the end of verse 32, "and may with you be refreshed." I think the petitions are three-fold—that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea (verse 31), that my service or the offering I bring to the

believers in Jerusalem may be accepted, and then (verse 32) that I may come to you with joy by the will of God and be refreshed by you and with you. So then, Paul was praying that they would have a prosperous journey, they would not be attacked by the hostile Jews, and their service would be accepted when they came to Jerusalem.

A little point I want to make. Paul planned and Paul prayed. They are not mutually exclusive. You plan and you pray. You pray and you plan. You plan and you pray. You don't just pray, but you plan; and you don't just plan, but you pray. You work like it all depended on you, and you pray like it all depended on God. That's ministry. You don't just say, "I'm just praying about it." I've met people that just pray about it. That's all they ever do—just pray about it. What are you doing? "I'm just praying about it." Then why don't you stop praying and get me out there and do something you dodo bird. "Well, I'm spiritual. I just pray about it." Well, you can't just pray, you have to get up and do! You have to roll up your sleeves. Paul planned and he worked and he prayed; and he worked and he prayed and he planned and he prayed.

What about Paul's three petitions, his three requests? He asked them to pray for three things. I want you to see something here. He said, "Pray that I'll be delivered from them that are unbelievers in Judea, pray that they'll accept the offering, and pray that I may come to you with joy by the will of God." Did God answer their prayers? In other words, did they pray? If they prayed, did God answer their prayers? Let me say this, God always answers prayer. Right? Not the way we always want Him to. Someone says, "I prayed and God didn't answer me." Yes He did! "No, He didn't." Yes He did. He said, "No." "Well, I don't like that." I don't care. That's an answer. You can say, "Can we go to Disneyland?" You say, "No." That was an answer, wasn't it? You asked and I answered you. Do you know that God sometimes just says, "No." Let me give a word to the wise. When God says "No," I know it's hard, but just remind yourself that God is smarter than you are.

Do you know sometimes immature people ask for things that are detrimental? You have a five-year-old who wants a shotgun for his birthday when he turns six, it's probably not a good idea. Right? So you say, "No. You're not ready for a firearm, or you're not ready for a bowie knife—you're only three." So, you say, "No." They throw a fit, they throw a tantrum, and they cry, "You don't love me! If you loved me you'd let me have a shotgun. You'd let me play on the freeway." It's just that I'm a little smarter than you, and it's not a good idea. Sometimes kids want things to eat that you know is detrimental for them. I see parents letting their kids eat things and I think, "Those parents should be arrested for that." So, you say no because you love them, and sometimes God says no. Sometimes God says wait, sometimes God gives you something different than what you asked for, and sometimes God gives you what you ask immediately. It's a wonderful thing, but God always answers prayer.

Let me point out (and I've got to wrap this up; I've gone a little longer than planned), this is probably one of my favorite lessons of this whole text here tonight; that is, God answered Paul's prayer. He did come to Rome. He was delivered from those who were in Jerusalem, but not the way he planned it. How many of you know the story of when Paul got to Jerusalem? Paul said, "Pray for me that when I go to Jerusalem that I'll be delivered from those hostile,

unbelieving Jews.” Do you remember what happened? He got beat up! He was literally attacked by a mob of angry Jews—I’m making a long story short. He got grabbed, attacked in the temple, and he was beaten to a pulp. He was probably thinking, “Why didn’t they pray? I thought I asked them to pray. God, what’s going on here?” While he’s getting smacked around by these Jews, the Roman guards came in and rescued him. They were taking him away to safety and Paul says, “Wait a minute, wait a minute! Can I talk to these guys?” He’s like, “What do you mean you want to talk to these guys?! They were just trying to kill you.” “Yeah, I know, but I really want to talk to them.” He always wanted to share his testimony with the Jews in Jerusalem, so the Roman guard says, “Okay, go for it.”

Paul stands on the steps of what are called the Antonio Fortress and says, “Men and brethren,” and he starts speaking in the Hebrew tongue so that they stopped and listened to what Paul was saying. He says, “I was just like you, and I hated Christians. I used to kill Christians.” They respond, “Yeah, maybe he’s not so bad.” They’re listening. He’s telling them, “Then I was on my way to Damascus, and I got saved and met Jesus. Jesus sent me,” he’s preaching a sermon and said, “God sent me to,” and he used the really bad word—he said Gentiles. The minute they heard him say Gentiles, “AHHHHH! They started throwing dirt in the air, ripping their clothes, grinding their teeth, and ran at him. Since he was speaking in Hebrew, the Roman guard didn’t know what he said. He said, “What did he say? Did he just insult their mother or something? What did he say to these guys?” So he grabs Paul and brings him inside the fortress.

Two years—for two years Paul was in chains. He ends up in Caesarea appealing to Caesar, a prisoner of Rome. Guess what happened? Rome sent him to Rome. He got to go to Rome as a prisoner—all expenses paid. Isn’t it amazing how God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s ways are past our finding out? That God has an eye for economy? Do you want to go to Rome? You’ll get to go to Rome. I’m going to have you beat up, arrested, thrown in prison, and you’ll go to Rome, but it’ll be a little delayed. You’ve got some other things to do, and on the way you’re going to get shipwrecked, land on an island, and I think I’ll throw a snake bite in there too. It’s like, “Thanks a lot, Lord.”

I can’t imagine when Paul finally got there, and he says, “I thought I asked you guys to pray! What’s the skinny? You guys must not have prayed very hard or something is wrong here.” No. They prayed. He got to Rome. When he came, he came in the fullness of the gospel; but there were chains on his wrists and ankles, and he was under house arrest. Here’s the point. God always answers prayer, but He does things differently than what we ask. We’re kind of like, “Okay, God. I need money. I need it by Friday, five o’clock, and this is how much I need.” We picture God as writing everything down. “Okay, step 1, step 2, step 3. You got that, God? Don’t mess up.” Boom, boom, boom. This is what I need. Like God is writing it all down. His ways are not our ways. His ways are above our ways. His ways are past our finding out.

I believe that God may have put a desire in your heart, God may have shut a door, and you’re waiting for God to open that door. God might have you in delay mode right now, and God might be wanting to do something right now. You’re praying right now, and God’s going to answer, but

He's going to answer in a way that you never thought possible and you never even imagined. Do you know that God has resources that you know nothing about? It's easy to trust God when we can figure out how God can work it out, but when we see no possible way that God can pull this off and yet trust and realize God knows what He's doing then God does things that we could ever imagine. He is able to work exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think. Amen? Let's pray.