

*How to Pray for a Missionary: Romans 15:30-33*

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This is a significant Sunday for us, as a church, as we are part of launching one of our families to the mission field. Stephen and Sarah have been with us for over 5 years. I looked in the file and found the church covenant which they each signed on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008—so almost exactly 5 years ago. Stephen has served faithfully as a deacon here. Sarah has been very involved in many important ministries. They are both wonderful servants and leaders in this church family. They have become dear friends to many of us. We have been impacted by their passion for missions. Stephen has shared this with us recently in the Sunday School hour, and we will hear from him again briefly at the end of this service.

It is certainly bittersweet to say good-bye to their family. We will miss them. And yet we rejoice to see the glorious call of God on their lives to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, to the unreached peoples of the world, to an area where there is very little Gospel witness.

And so I want this to be a Sunday we will remember. I want this to be a Sunday that will impress upon us the importance of praying for our brothers and sisters who are laboring in Gospel ministry in difficult parts of the world. We need to pray for them, (in the words of our fighter verse for this week) that they would “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Now, a lot of the things I’ll say this morning apply to all of us, in all kinds of ministries. And I want you to understand that when we trumpet the importance of frontier missions—going to the unreached peoples of the world—that does not mean that other kinds of mission work, evangelism, various ministries here in Pittsburgh, are unimportant. It’s not either, or. Rather, it’s both, and. We don’t make a choice of whether to support overseas mission work, or local ministries. As a church we have to be involved in both, praying for both, supporting both. We ought to be reaching out in whatever context God places us. And we must never lose sight of the Great Commission, that we must make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and the promise of Matthew 24:14, that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all

nations, and then the end will come.” That hasn’t happened yet. There is still work to be done. And we can pray for that, and support that, and labor in that great work, with the assurance that God is most certainly going to bring it about.

So what I want to focus on this morning is how to pray for a missionary. The emphasis of this sermon is to recognize the unique challenges of moving to a totally different culture, where there are *very* few Christians, if any. For those of us here, we have plenty of other believers to talk to, pray with, worship with together every Lord’s Day, and at other times during the week. When we have needs or hardships or discouragements, there are plenty of people right here in the church we can turn to for support. But for the frontier missionary, for those who are in an unreached area of the world, they may feel very alone. Hopefully they have somewhat of a team around them, but even then, there will be spiritual and emotional struggles that we do not face here.

I want us to learn from God’s Word some specific ways in which we ought to be praying for missionaries. And to do this, we’re going to look at Romans 15:30-33, where Paul, the missionary, asks that the church in Rome pray for him. Remember, Paul was a missionary. He was a frontier missionary. He was travelling around from city to city where the Gospel had not yet been preached. And he proclaimed Jesus Christ, and he planted churches.

This letter to the Romans, which we’ve been studying together (and we’ll get back to Romans 7 next week), this is a missionary letter. This is a support letter, as we typically call them today. This is the missionary Paul, writing to the church in Rome, asking for them to support his mission work. That’s at least part of his purpose in writing. And it’s quite a support letter, isn’t it?! Conventional wisdom would say, “Don’t write a support letter that long, or with that much theological depth—nobody will read it.” But Paul had to let them know where he stood on the Gospel. He wanted to instruct them regarding the Gospel and many of its implications. And he had to make sure they were on board with this Gospel of grace. He needed to know that their support of him would be rooted in the deep bonds of this Good News.

### **Historical Context**

I want to make some specific points from the request for prayer in verses 30-33, but first let’s make sure we understand the context of Paul’s plans. He was writing this letter from Corinth in 57 A. D., during his third missionary journey. And his hope was to travel to Rome, and from there, to Spain. But first he needed to get

to Jerusalem to deliver the collection he had been gathering from the churches. There were believers in Jerusalem who had fallen on hard times, and Paul had exhorted the other churches to help. He writes about this also in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where he speaks about joyful generosity. So he wants to deliver that collection to Jerusalem, and then hopefully get to Rome, and then Spain. Those are his missionary plans.

### **Paul's Prayers**

If you're somewhat familiar with Paul's letters in the New Testament, certainly you've noticed his prayers for the churches. I love the prayer in Philippians 1:9-11.

*“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”* (Philippians 1:9–11, ESV)

And in Ephesians 3:14-19.

*“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”* (Ephesians 3:14–19, ESV)

These are such rich prayers, and great examples for us of how to pray for one another. And so it's appropriate that these be passages that we meditate on again and again.

### **Paul's Requests for Prayer**

It may be less noticed that there are also places where Paul requests prayer for himself. That's where I want to direct our attention this morning.

The main request for prayer that we'll look at is in Romans 15, which I already read. There are others, which I will also refer to. In one place, it's just the simple statement, “Brothers, pray for us.” That's at the end of 1 Thessalonians (5:25).

And the fact that Paul was not timid about asking for prayer should be an encouragement to all missionaries to make their needs

know to churches, requesting prayer and support. Missionaries should not feel shy or awkward about this. And churches must not yawn at these requests, or see them as a burden. Of course, we can't meet every need, but we should be attentive and compassionate toward those who are pouring their lives out in frontier missions, and we should be praying fervently and helping how we can.

It's easy for us to fall into an attitude toward overseas mission work, that it is "out of sight, out of mind." We don't feel connected with what's going on over there on the other side of the world, it's hard for us to really understand the struggles of what's going on there, and we're so wrapped up in the day-to-day challenges of our own lives, that we seldom think of those overseas missionaries, much less make a concerted effort to pray for them.

### **Strive Together**

The first thing I want to highlight from Romans 15:30 is the fact that Paul is asking the church in Rome to "strive together" with him in praying on his behalf. The language there reminds us that prayer is hard work. It is a discipline. It is something that demands energy and attention and focus. It's a fight. It's a struggle. It's part of a spiritual battle. And in this way, we are to pray for missionaries as though we were in the midst of their struggles. This is part of the beauty of the body of Christ. We bear one another's burdens. And one important way of doing that is in prayer. John Calvin says that Paul shows here "how the godly ought to pray for their brethren, that they are to assume their person, as though they were placed in the same difficulties."<sup>1</sup> And, of course, in order to do that, we will need to take the time to stay in touch with missionaries, read their letters, consider their joys and their struggles, so that we can put ourselves in their shoes, and pray on their behalf.

### **Protection**

One very practical thing to pray for, which Paul mentions here, is protection from those who may want to hinder his work. He says in verse 31, pray "that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea." Paul was painfully aware of the fact that he had some fierce enemies. I read a couple of those passages last week, where he lists the hardships he endured in the course of his ministry. And so he asks for prayer that he would be protected from such opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Moo, 910.

He makes a similar request in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2.

*“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.”* (2 Thessalonians 3:1–2, ESV)

Roger and Cathy Cheesbro, who served in Africa for several years, can bear witness to the importance of this kind of prayer. Roger was sharing with us Tuesday morning, at the men’s Bible study and prayer time, that he knows of instances when God was specifically answering this prayer. There were times when he could look back and know that prayers were being answered. He shared of a time when he and another pastor were backed into a shed by a group of workers with pitchforks and machetes, but they were unharmed. Later he learned of folks who were praying for them on that very day. That’s one of the blessings of keeping a journal, and of having friends who are praying for you regularly and intentionally.

Prayer is effective. Prayer makes a difference. God works through our prayers to make an impact in the world. We need to be praying for missionaries, that God would protect them and cause their ministry to flourish even in the face of opposition.

### **Fruitful Ministry**

Next, Paul goes on, asking the church to pray for fruitful ministry. In this case, he is wanting his service for Jerusalem (the collection he’s going to deliver there) to be acceptable to the saints. For various reasons, he’s not quite sure how that collection will be received by the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. But he wants to be a blessing to them, and he wants them to receive this gift from the churches.

Broadening this out to include a couple other passages, Paul asks for prayer (and we ought to pray for missionaries) that they would be fruitful in Gospel ministry. In Ephesians 6, at the end of the passage about the armor of God, Paul writes, *“praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”* (Ephesians 6:18–20, ESV)

We should pray for boldness in proclaiming the Gospel. This is what Paul asks for here, and I think we can apply this to

missionaries and evangelists whom we know and support, and also to every one of us. Pray that God will give us words to say in opening our mouths boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel. May God give all of us opportunities to share the Gospel, and may He give us the words to say and the courage to say them.

Paul wanted people to know the Gospel. He wanted people to be convicted of their sins and realize that God's wrath stands against sinners and that our only hope is to be forgiven through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. This is the greatest news of the universe, that God's own Son was sent into this fallen world to redeem a people for Himself. And Paul knew that there exists in this world and in the spiritual realm a very intense opposition to this message. It is good news, and Satan hates it. It is good news, and sinful pride resists it. It is good news, and the world rejects it. And because of the opposition to the message, we are quick to wimp out and keep our mouths shut. They're not going to listen, why bother. They'll think I'm a freak. They'll criticize me or persecute me. I'll just shut my mouth.

But Paul, knowing the spiritual battle that is involved and knowing the power of prayer, says, pray "also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the gospel." Let's pray that, and act on that, and seek to bring sinners into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ as they repent of sin and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin.

And we ought to pray for missionaries in this way. Many of them are in places where the pressures to keep your mouth shut are far more intense than they are here. And so we pray for their protection, and also for fruitful ministry in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In Colossians 4:2-4 Paul asks again for these prayers. *"Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak."* (Colossians 4:2-4, ESV) Notice, in the Ephesians passage and the Colossians passage, Paul is in prison, and he makes reference to that. He knew the consequences of his ministry. He knew the danger he faced. And he did ask for prayer for protection, as we've seen. But that wasn't his primary concern. If his safety was his primary concern, he wouldn't have been doing what he was doing. His primary passion was to declare the mystery of Christ, and he wanted the church to pray that God would open a door for that word to go forth.

Coming back to Romans 15, notice earlier in the chapter that Paul points to the ultimate aim of all this. Look at Romans 15:8-9. *“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.””* (Romans 15:8–9, ESV)

This is a God-centered way to pray for missionaries and for missions, because this is God’s design in being faithful to His promises and sending the Good News to all the nations. This is the ultimate goal—that the nations will glorify God for his mercy. That’s the purpose of the universe! God extends mercy and kindness to undeserving sinners like us, and the radical transformation of our lives, the joy and peace and love, gives testimony to the infinite greatness of who God is and what He has done. We get mercy. He gets glory and honor and praise. That’s what it’s all about.

### **Fellowship and Refreshment**

In the prayer at the end of Romans 15, Paul then mentions another very practical prayer, in verse 32. He wants them to pray that he could come visit them, and enjoy fellowship with them, and be refreshed in their company.

Mission work is draining. It can be isolating. Many missionaries sorely miss the kind of fellowship we enjoy together on a weekly basis. They are pouring out their lives in the service of others, but there are not always the same opportunities to have others pouring into you.

So we need to pray for missionaries in these very tangible ways. Pray that they will have opportunities for fellowship with other believers, that God will give them Christian friends serving alongside them, encouraging them, holding them accountable. Pray that they will have groups who come and visit them (and maybe you’ll be part of one of those groups). Pray that they will have opportunities to come and visit us. Pray that they will have times of refreshment, times of rest and rejuvenation.

At the end of Paul’s short letter to Philemon, he tells him, *“prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”* (Philemon 22, ESV)

Paul made requests in that letter concerning Onesimus. But he also makes a request here for himself. He is in prison. This

letter was written around the same time as he wrote Ephesians and Colossians. And he's hoping that through Philemon's prayers, and the prayers of many others, that he will be released and be able to come and visit Philemon.

### **By God's Will (1:10; 15:32)**

The last point to make, briefly, is that we pray according to God's will, not always knowing exactly what God's will is in a particular circumstance. We know what His revealed will is, that He desires for us to live holy lives in accordance with His commands. These are the clear instructions we have in His Word. And we pray according to His revealed will. But we do not know His secret will. We do not know all the specifics of what His will may be for where we go or what happens to us.<sup>2</sup> And Paul alludes to this two times in Romans.

In Romans 1:10 he says that he has been praying, "asking that somehow *by God's will* I may now at last succeed in coming to you." His desire is to go visit them. He hopes and prays that it's God's will for this to happen. This is just the attitude that James tells us to have regarding our future plans. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"<sup>3</sup> (James 4:13-15) This is the manner in which Paul prays. He asks that somehow by God's will he could visit them.

And again in our text in Romans 15:32, "so that *by God's will* I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company." This is a humble and God-honoring way to pray, and to ask for prayer. We don't know all the details of what God has for us. So we strive together in prayer, asking for protection, for fruitful ministry, for fellowship and refreshment, and we say it all with the understanding, "if the Lord wills."

We see this point in a striking way in Paul's own life, in the outcome of these very prayer requests. Acts 21 tells the story. Paul arrived in Jerusalem, as he was planning to do. And he was received warmly by the brothers (v. 17). But then the Jews stirred up a riot in protest to Paul's teaching, and they were about to kill him. And Paul was delivered from those unbelievers—an answer to prayer! These prayers in Romans 15 were answered, but probably not quite in the way Paul had in mind—although I don't know what he had in mind. In the exciting and painful adventure

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<sup>2</sup> See John Stott's discussion of this. Romans, 389.



of his life, he may not have been at all surprised by the events which transpired. The means which God used to deliver Paul on that occasion was the Roman soldiers. The crowd stopped beating Paul when they saw the soldiers, and the soldiers arrested Paul and bound him with chains, and thus he was delivered. And then, again in God's mysterious providence, it was through that imprisonment that Paul finally got to Rome (Acts 28), after he appealed to Caesar (Acts 25).

These are the wonderful, painful, glorious adventures of frontier mission work, and it's why we ought to be fervent in our prayers for these missionaries. At the end of the service, after we hear from Stephen about some specific ways we can be praying for them, we will gather around their family to pray and send them off. They leave Pittsburgh on Tuesday, and they'll be spending 2 months in Virginia in training. And then they'll be heading overseas for language study and then, Lord willing, many years of fruitful mission work in an area of the world where there are very few Christians. And it's our joyful responsibility, as their home church, to be lifting them up in prayer, striving together with them in prayer, for their protection, for fruitful ministry, for fellowship and refreshment, and for God's will to be done in and through them.