

## Romans 15:30-33 Answered prayer!

In this final paragraph proper of this epistle, Paul urges the Romans congregation to pray for him. He has two specific prayer requests: a) *that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea*; b) *That my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints*. So he anticipates that he will, *by God's will, come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company*.

Paul reached Jerusalem, and Rome, his prayers answered. We serve a prayer answering God! But he was very much aware of his need for prayer support, because of the opposition and danger he believed he would face from the *unbelievers in Judea*.

Paul's journey to Jerusalem and all that happened when he arrived in Jerusalem are recorded in Acts 20-22. Luke (the author of Acts) records the advance of the gospel into all the world, and Paul's ministry was central to that mission.

Paul was keen to arrive in Jerusalem for the Feast for Pentecost (Shavuot) (Acts 20:16). No doubt he wanted to celebrate it; but it would also be a great opportunity to testify to the gospel of God's grace to all the Jews and Gentile proselytes who would be gathering in Jerusalem for the Feast.

**Acts 20:22-24** *And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit [lit. bound by the Spirit], not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

Paul felt bound by the Spirit, as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, to go to Jerusalem, even though he also had a revelation that he would face great difficulties. The map below shows the route Paul took.



The disciples at Tyre were very concerned for Paul's safety, because surely they knew of the opposition of the Judeans to the gospel. Paul's reputation had gone before him; Paul was known as a heretic worthy of death. Nevertheless the warnings of the believers at Tyre were *through the Spirit* (Acts 21:4). This did not faze Paul, and he and his companions travelled on to Caesarea, staying at the house of Philip the Evangelist (see Acts 6:5, Acts 8).

**Acts 21:10-13** *While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.*

I don't know about you, but if I was Paul I'd be changing my plans at this point! He had had two independent prophetic warnings within a few days of each other, and all the believers were urging him not to go up to Jerusalem. Surely some else could take the gift! A Baptist style church meeting would surely have 'discerned' that Paul should NOT go to Jerusalem, and voted accordingly! But.

**Act 21:13-14** *Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."*

I conclude that although these warnings were *through the Spirit*, Paul understood them as a confirmation of what he already knew rather than telling him not to go to Jerusalem. After all he had already asked the Roman believers months beforehand to pray for him as he went into the 'lion's den'. May be the prophetic warnings were more for the believers, so that they could be more earnest in prayer for Paul. It seems to me that it is one thing to hear from God, but another thing to interpret His word. We are better at the former than the latter.

When Paul and his co-workers arrived in Jerusalem they were received gladly (Acts 21:17-20). His prayers, and those of the Romans believers, were answered. He had been successful in building bridges between the Jewish believing community in Jerusalem and the now heavily Gentilized communities of the Diaspora.

But the *unbelievers in Judea* certainly did not receive him gladly when they heard Paul was in town. They instigated a riot in which Paul was almost killed (Acts 21:30-31). However Paul was saved by being arrested by Gentile Romans soldiers so fulfilling the prophecy of Agabus. His being *delivered into the hands of the Gentiles* was a deliverance from the hands of the *unbelievers of Judea*.

Then Paul had an opportunity to address the crowds and *testify to the gospel of God's grace* (Acts 22:121). It did not go down well! In a way reminiscent of the trial of Jesus, *the crowds raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth"* (Acts 22:22). This was about a decade before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD. Could history have been different if the *unbelievers in Judea* had repented at Paul's message? But I can imagine at this point Paul was hoping against hope that the Christians back in Rome really were praying for his deliverance!

Paul had anticipated trouble. He was ready to die, but his confidence of reaching Rome and his request for prayer (Romans 15:30-33) make me believe Paul also anticipated his deliverance. He faced the Sanhedrin, governors, kings and two years in prison (Acts 23-24). But eventually he appealed to Caesar, and he was taken to Rome, the very place he desired to go! God moves, and answers prayer, in mysterious ways.

This whole episode in Paul's life emphasises two seeming irreconcilable things, both of which are true in our experience. First, we see God's sovereign hand directing circumstances. Second, we see the vital place of prayer. Would Paul have made it without the prayers of the saints? We can never know for sure, but we do know that God delivers through prayer.

*Four things let us ever keep in mind: God hears prayer, God heeds prayer, God answers prayer, and God delivers by prayer. (E.M. Bounds)*

I'd go so far as to say that redemption from any situation, but especially redemption from sin, begins with a prayer – from a human point of view. From a God perspective redemption begins and ends with God. We cannot save ourselves; He initiates and completes all His works of redemption and deliverance on our behalf. But from our point of view deliverance begins with a prayer.

**Exodus 2:23-34** *During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.*

He heard because He is the Living God, who has ears to hear and eyes to see, and nothing is too hard for Him. The prophets frequently mocked the idols of the nations who cannot hear because they are just dumb idols. But concerning the Lord, *Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear (Isaiah 59:1).*

This is why Paul appeals to the Christians in Rome to pray,

**Romans 15:30** *I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.*

This is why E.M. Bounds (1835-1913) made an appeal to the church to be a praying church,

*What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men [and women] whom the Holy Ghost can use— men [and women] of prayer, men [and women] mighty in prayer.*

This is why God through the author of 2Chronicles makes an appeal for prayer,

**2Chronicles 7:14** *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

If we ever needed a praying church it is today. You may be the only person ever likely to pray for your family!

There are different kinds of prayer, but the kind of prayer Paul refers to is a *striving* kind of prayer. The verb *to strive* means *to wrestle* or *to agonize* (cf Jacob wrestling with God, Genesis 32:22-32). It requires work, and it is vulnerable, which is why we don't easily do it. But may the Lord continue to stir us up to be a praying people; may His promises to hear and act be realised.