

On Your Mark, Get Set . . . Pray!

Holy Obsession – Part V

Romans 15:30-33

Introduction

Steve May recorded an interesting story in one of his books some time ago, about a young boy named Gilbert. When he was eight years old, Gilbert joined the Cub Scouts. He had only been a member for a short time when, during one of his first meetings, he was handed a sheet of instructions, a block of pine wood, and four little tires. He was told to take all of this home and give it to his dad.

This was not an easy task for Gilbert, since there was no dad at home. So the block of wood remained untouched for weeks. Finally, his mother stepped in to help figure it out and the project began. Having no carpentry skills, she simply read and explained the directions to Gilbert and let him do all the work – which he did happily. They read the measurements, the rules of what could and could not be done, and within a few days, his block of pine wood turned into a “pinewood derby car”. It was a little lopsided, but it looked okay to them, and they proudly named it “Blue Lightning”.

Finally, the big night arrived. With Blue Lightning in his hand and excitement bursting in his heart, Gilbert and his mom headed to the race. Once there, it was obvious that Gilbert’s car was the only one made entirely by a Cub Scout. All the other cars had slick paint jobs and sleek body styles designed for speed. Some of the other boys laughed when they saw his crude little lopsided car.

Gilbert was undeterred however, and waited his turn. The race was a process of elimination – a car was kept in the race as long as it was a winner. And Blue Lightning kept winning. In the final run, it was

Blue Lightning against the sleekest, fastest looking car Gilbert had seen that night. Just as the final race was about to begin, Gilbert asked if he could pray. The race stopped. With a wrinkled brow and a hand clutching his little derby car, Gilbert bowed his head for a very long minute and prayed to his Heavenly Father. Then he announced, “I’m ready now.”

The crowd cheered with anticipation. Gilbert watched his block of wood swoosh down the ramp with surprising speed and cross the finish line a fraction of a second in front of the other car. Gilbert jumped into the air and shouted, “Thank You!” as the crowd roared in approval.

The Scout Master, with microphone in hand, asked Gilbert, “So, you prayed to be the winner, huh, Gilbert?”

To this, Gilbert responded with a surprising answer, “Oh, no sir, that wouldn’t be fair. I just asked God to help me so I wouldn’t cry when I lost.”

I wonder how much of our praying is motivated by a desire for winning in life, rather than responding to life. I wonder how much of the believer’s prayer life is directed to life working out, rather than how to act when it does not.

If the Christian life could be analogous to a Pinewood Derby, we would all look a lot like Blue Lightning. Some of you are thinking, “As long as it’s Carolina Blue, that’ll be fine with me!”

There is no Christian alive who is not like Gilbert’s car – a little lopsided; a little rough around the edges; unevenly painted; anything but sleek and impressive. The body of Christ is not made up of

engineering perfections, but blocks of common pine in need of shaping and molding and refining.

Frankly, we need to pray more, not to come in first, but how to race, no matter what place we come in, with a Christ-like spirit.

If ever there was a sleek model of Christianity – spiritually aerodynamic, perfectly balanced – it was the apostle Paul. If anyone knew how to win, it was this converted Jewish attorney who became the pioneer missionary for the cause of Christ.

Yet, over and over again, the apostle Paul begged the church to pray for him as he began a new lap in his race. Paul asked:

- the Ephesians for prayer that he might be able to speak boldly for the sake of,
. . . the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains . . . and pray on my behalf, that . . . I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:19 & 20)
- the Corinthians to be,
. . . joining in helping [me] through your prayers . . . (II Corinthians 1:11)
- the Thessalonians, concerning the entire missionary team, to,
. . . pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly . . . and that we will be rescued from . . . evil men [who seek to do us harm] (II Thessalonians 3:1-2)
- the Philippians to remember that their prayers for him would be,
. . . the reason for my [effectiveness] . . . (Philippians 1:19)
- the Colossians to be,
. . . praying . . . that God will open . . . a door for [me in the ministry] (Colossians 4:3)

You might think that Paul would see doors open automatically; that sermons and speeches would flow effortlessly from his lips; that he would never shrink back in fear, but would naturally speak with boldness. However, over and over again, Paul stood beside the race track of life with his little blue car, about to hear the race master say, “On your mark, get set . . .” and Paul would say, “Wait! Can we pray?!”

Why? Is Paul praying so that things will work out? Sure, but more than that, Paul is praying in case things *do not* work out.

Paul was obsessed with prayer for God’s will to be accomplished in his life – no matter what it was.

Beginning with Romans 15:14, we have already discovered Paul’s:

- obsession with godly living;
- obsession with the glory of God;
- fixation on the grace of God;
- passion for the global cause of God.

Today, as we reach the end of Romans 15, we discover Paul’s:

- obsession for intercession before God.

Paul’s Obsession With Prayer

Let us look at Romans 15:30.

Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,

We get the idea that Paul does not view himself as a spiritual “Lone Ranger”. He is part of the body of Christ and is asking for the body’s help.

I mentioned in our last session that this letter to the Romans was, among many other things, a missionary letter, in which Paul is asking for support.

Earlier, in Romans 15:24, Paul asks,
. . . to be helped on my way . . .

This is a word for financial assistance; for food.

Now, as in any good missionary letter, Paul asks for prayer. However, he does not just ask! His words, in verse 30, are packed with intense vocabulary.

The words “I urge you” could be translated from “parakalw,” meaning, “I beg you; I exhort you”.

Donald Grey Barnhouse said, “This word carries the urgency of an SOS” – I am calling you to pray for me.ⁱⁱ

However, remember the prayer is not just on my account, but is ultimately, as Paul writes in Romans 15:30, for the namesake of,

. . . our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the [Holy] Spirit . . .

In other words, Paul is asking for prayer, but reminding the believers that true prayer ultimately seeks the glory of Jesus Christ and obeys the unifying call of the Holy Spirit to love one another.

Paul wants people to join him who want to see Christ honored and the Spirit of God demonstrated through the love of the body for Christ.

“I urge you,” or “I summon you; I beg you”. This is the same verb Paul used in Romans 12:1,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

How important is it for the believer to give their lives to God? It is really not optional, is it?!

Paul employs the same verb in Romans 15:30, as if to say, “It cannot be an option that you pray for me, for the glory of Christ and the love of the Spirit.”

However, Paul goes even further in Romans 15:30, saying,

. . . strive together with me in your prayers to God for me,

I will not bore you with all the details, but I can remember being in the delivery room with Marsha when we were about to have our fourth child. I say “we” rather generously.

If it were up to men to have babies, the world would have none – not one - ever! All the men are saying, “Amen!”

We would not be able to take the incredible pain, not to mention the physical demands and emotional strain of carrying and then delivering a baby. Forget it! We could never do it!

In the delivery room we were in, on that Halloween night nearly thirteen years ago, I will never forget the intensity of my wife’s pain. She gripped my arm – that would never be the same again – and looked up with her blue eyes filled with a mixture of pain and fear, and said, “Help me.”

I have never felt more helpless in the face of my wife’s utter agony.

This is the word Paul uses in this verse, translated, “strive together with me”. It is the word, “sunagonizomai,” from which we get our word, “agony”. He is literally saying, “agonize with me”.

This is the only time this compound word is found in the entire New Testament. Other derivatives are used, however. For instance, when Christ said,

. . . My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting . . . (“agonizomai” John 18:36)

Paul used a shorter derivative of this word when he said,

I have fought the good fight . . . (II Timothy 4:7)

Paul is not asking the believer to say a couple of short prayers on his behalf, with words like, “Well, Lord, please bless Paul out there somewhere . . . Amen.”

This is the same word used of Jesus Christ when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Luke records,

And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. (Luke 22:44)

Imagine that – Paul is asking the Romans to agonize with him like Christ agonized before the Father.

This is not the kind of prayer that is limited to a prayer meeting at the church from 6:30 to 7:30 pm. This obsession is not restricted to the bulletin or the prayer sheet or the online prayer list.

This is spiritual labor. This is entering the contest of life and every time you hear the game keeper say, “On your mark, get set . . .” you want to say, “Wait . . . not until I’ve prayed.”

I will confess to you, dear flock, that I usually get passionate about praying only after Blue Lightning is in fourth gear.

Frankly, I think this kind of obsession for intercession is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Thessalonian believers to,

pray without ceasing; (I Thessalonians 5:17)

Why should we pray like this?

For the glory of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, for starters.

R. A. Torrey once wrote ten reasons that we should pray like Paul exhorts us to pray. We should pray in this way because:

- there is a devil and prayer is the God appointed means of resisting him;
- prayer is God’s way for us to obtain what we need from him;
- the apostles considered prayer to be the priority business in their lives;

- prayer occupied a prominent place and played a very important part in the earthly life of our Lord;
- prayer is the present ministry of our Lord, since He is now interceding for us;
- prayer is the means God has appointed for our receiving mercy from Him and help in time of need;
- prayer is the means of obtaining the fullness of God's joy;
- prayer with thanksgiving is the means of obtaining freedom from anxiety and peace which passes understanding;
- prayer is the means by which we are to keep watchful and be alert;
- prayer is used by God to promote our spiritual growth, bring power into our work, lead others to faith in Christ, and bring all other blessings to Christ's church.

After reading a list like this, the question is not, "Should we pray?" but, "How can we afford not to?"!

I wonder if Reuben Torrey was especially passionate about prayer because of his own story. He never forgot that one night as an unbelieving student at Yale, overwhelmed with grief and guilt over his sinful lifestyle, he decided to take his own life. That night, in 1875, he stumbled to the wash basin in his dormitory room, looking for his razor to cut his wrists, in such guilt over his rebellious life, having rejected the gospel of his mother and father. He could not find his razor and suddenly became overwhelmed with conviction to pray. Unknown to him, his mother, at that very hour, was inwardly compelled to get on her knees and begin praying for the salvation of her son . . . miles away. At the same hour, Reuben knelt by his bed and gave his life to Jesus Christ.

R. A. Torrey went on to become the president of Moody Bible Institute, and later, Dean of Biola in Los Angeles. He would remain passionate about prayer his entire life.

Paul's Specific Prayer Requests

Now, as any good missionary letter will model, Paul becomes extremely specific in this urgent matter of prayer. In fact, he will deliver three specific prayer requests for the church in Rome to pray over.

1. Paul's first prayer request could be summarized in one word – safety.

This prayer request appears in Romans 15:31a.

that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, . . .

Paul was "enemy #1" of the Jewish people. His face was plastered on bulletin boards in every post office in Jerusalem.

The Jews in Jerusalem had already killed Stephen out in the open after he delivered his first and only sermon. They had thrown Peter in prison, only to have lost him in a miraculous escape as an angel came and delivered him. The blood of the Christians had already stained the soil in and around the city and into other regions.

Paul, the former prosecutor of Christianity, is now the famous preacher of Christianity. The Jews are infuriated at his conversion to Christ and his doctrines of this new thing called the church.

Paul fully understood that he was headed for trouble. He was, in fact, walking into the path of a tornado.

In this verse, Paul says, "Agonize with me that I might be rescued from the unbelieving Jews."

His word translated "rescue" or "deliver" ("rhuomai") is a word that means, "to be preserved".

Our Lord used this word as He taught us to pray to be delivered from the lure of the evil one,

. . . deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:13)

It is also used to describe the redemption of believers who are,

. . . rescued from the domain of darkness, and transferred . . . to the kingdom of His beloved Son, (Colossians 1:13)

Paul knew that he was a wanted man and that unless the Lord protected him, he would die in Jerusalem.

The evidence of the Jews hatred for Paul was seen in the events that occurred soon after Paul arrived in Jerusalem. According to Acts 21, Paul is indeed recognized by some Jews as he goes to the temple. His enemies see him and stir up the masses of the people, shouting,

. . . "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." . . . and all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him

***out of the temple and . . . [began to beat him]
(Acts 21:28-32)***

Can you imagine this riot that breaks out? Paul will nearly be beaten to death by this mob who want to pay him back for betraying Judaism and for openly declaring that Jesus was the Messiah. They would have killed him had the Roman soldiers not rescued him from this mob.

So Paul's first prayer request for safety was answered – although not exactly the way Paul expected. And probably not the way the Roman believers had prayed, right?

We would expect God to answer our prayers for safety in a way that does not involve getting nearly beaten to death. Safety usually does not involve near-death experiences at the hand of a bloodthirsty mob!

However, God did have Paul's protection in mind – protection by Roman soldiers, who will safely store him behind bars.

As I have thought about the assassination attempts on Paul's life, I have no doubt that he would have never survived had he remained in the care of Christians. It would require the Roman empire to defend his life.

Roman soldiers would be assigned to guard Paul for the rest of his life. Without them, I do not believe he would have had the opportunity to write his letters and guide the church with his inspired doctrine.

The first prayer request was answered – in an unusual manner. Maybe this is exactly what God is doing in your life, as well.

Perhaps God is answering your prayers, but in a way you would not have chosen or even thought of. You would never have scripted an answer in the way it played out, but after time and growth and insight, through the tears and travail, you are beginning to understand.

Perhaps you have just begun to know what this kind of agonizing prayer is all about.

Let me tell a humorous story told about three friends who were discussing the proper posture for prayer.

The first one said, "Christians ought to be on their knees with their heads bowed in reverence to God."

The second friend said, "No, Christians should stand with their head raised, looking into the heavens, and speaking into the face of God."

The third spoke up and said, "I know nothing about that, but I do know this: the finest praying I've ever done was upside down in a well that I'd fallen into!"

Suddenly, the meaning of "to agonize in prayer" dawned on this third man, and it did not matter if his eyes were open or closed – he did his finest praying upside down in a well.

2. Paul's second prayer request is equally, if not more, significant to the cause of Christ and the love of the Holy Spirit than his first. The first prayer request had to do with his safety; the second prayer request has to do with his service.

Notice Romans 15:31b.

and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints;

Remember that the relationship between the Jew and the Gentile was abominable. Throughout the ministry of Paul, there were Jews who never came around – they argued with Paul and debated his insistence that Gentiles did not have to become Jews to enter the church.

So Paul had unbelieving Jews who wanted to kill him and believing Jews who would be cool toward him. Paul was hoping that the offering he was delivering to the church in Jerusalem would help heal the rift and encourage the unity of love in the Spirit.

Would the Jews be offended? Would they think the Gentiles were being superior in their gifts? Would they think the Gentiles were trying to buy their affections? All of these were possibilities.

Ladies and gentlemen, so much of this is lost on us because of time and distance and culture. Imagine what it was like.

The temple of Paul's day had been built by Herod the Great. Much of it was overlaid with gold. It sat on a raised earth platform, known as the temple mount, and was surrounded by courts. The innermost court was called the Court of the Priests because only members of the priestly tribe of Levi were permitted to enter. The next court further out was the Court of Israel and could be entered by any Jewish male. The court beyond this was the Court of the Women which could be entered by any Jewish woman or any Jewish person for that matter.

Now note this: although there were differences, these three courtyards were all on the same level. However, this changed past the Court of Women. One had to descend five steps to a level area where a

five foot stone wall was built that went around the entire temple. Gates were installed through which the Jewish people could take stairs up to the Courts of Women and Men and Priests, but no Gentiles were allowed.

From this level ground, where the stone wall was built, one had to descend fourteen more steps to another level space, called the Court of the Gentiles. Nineteen steps below the Jewish courts, and on that stone wall, by the way, Josephus, the Jewish historian, informs us, there were inscriptions warning the Gentiles. I have seen pictures of these. One was unearthed in 1871, which read, “No foreigner is to enter within the wall and embankment around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The signs were clear, “Gentile trespassers will be killed.”

It is no wonder that the orthodox Jewish man would rise every morning and thank God that he had not been born a Gentile.

Now, however, this Jewish man comes to faith in Christ. Now he discovers that the ground at the foot of the cross is level. There are no nineteen steps in the church that separate Jew and Gentile. Jew and Gentile alike have been born into a new race,

... a chosen race, ... a holy nation, a people of God's own possession, so that [they] may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light; (I Peter 2:9)

It was all so new – grace was intimidating; the gospel was humbling. Would they accept Paul's gift of money, collected primarily from Gentile churches?

This is the reason Paul asks the Roman believers, in Romans 15:31b,

... [pray] that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints;

This prayer request was answered exactly as Paul had hoped! Luke records the event in Acts 21. Note that we read,

After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly . . . After [Paul] had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles . . .

I'm thinking, “Uh oh! Don't push it, Paul, don't push it!”

No, they need to know.

Luke reports the Jewish believer's response,

And when they heard it they began glorifying God; . . . (Acts 21:20a)

Paul's service to the saints was acceptable.

Praise God!

3. Paul's first prayer request dealt with his safety; his second prayer request had to do with his service; his third prayer request has to do with his spirit.

Look at Romans 15:32.

so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company.

In a tender and open manner, Paul refers to the Roman church as a safe harbor he cannot wait to sail into. One author said,

Paul desperately wanted to drop anchor in the quiet haven of the assembly in Rome and rest. He had left Ephesus in an uproar; he had conflicted with Corinth over their immaturity and sin; he had written sharp words to the Galatian churches . . . he just wanted to rest – to spend time refreshing his spirit and recharge his batteries with joy . . . that was the longing of his soul.^{iv}

Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem and several years later, arrive in Rome – not the pioneering missionary, but the prisoner who will one day become a martyr for Christ.

How did the church in Rome receive him? I wish I could tell a different story, but we know that when he first arrived in Rome, only a few believers came to meet him. The rest of the believers were afraid to make themselves known because of the chains and the Roman guards and the potential of persecution.^v

In his final letter to Timothy, Paul wrote of the Roman believer's fear and timidity, if not cowardice. Listen as he writes,

You [Timothy] are aware that all . . . turned away from me . . . The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me – the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord . . . (II Timothy 1:15-18)

So Paul was refreshed after all. Not by the assembly, but by one family who came and visited him – risking their own safety.

Did Paul lack joy? No. That prayer request was answered.

It would be in Rome, under house arrest, that Paul would write his letter to the Philippians – a letter drenched with joy. In fact, the word joy will appear sixteen times in this letter.

Paul had discovered God's will was vastly different than his earlier prayer list. He was willing to allow God's spirit to change his spirit, so that, even in the face of dramatic reversals, Paul indeed came to Rome and found joy.

Conclusion

Paul ends this paragraph with a customary Jewish benediction, in which he references the peace of God that would be able to blend Jew and Gentile into one harmonious body. He writes, in Romans 15:33,

Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Let me make three closing observations about this scene.

1. Spiritual maturity does not automatically erase the pain of an unsettled heart.

Paul was facing danger, battle, hatred, prejudice, conflict, and possibly death. Such unsettled feelings brought an agony that he needed to share. He needed others to pray – yes, pray for the great apostle Paul.

We are most often tempted to use prayer for God to change our circumstances, when God is using circumstances to change us.

Spiritual maturity does not erase times of struggle with an unsettled heart.

2. A disciplined prayer life does not automatically erase the potential of unanswered questions.

In other words, intimacy with God does not alleviate times of wondering and confusion and even discouragement.

Walking with God does not always mean your Blue Lightning Pinewood Derby car comes in first place – sometimes it comes in last. You cannot figure out the reason – and God chooses not to give you answers.

An obsession with intercession is surrendering to a sovereign God who has the right to answer in any

way He pleases – even if He chooses not to answer at all.

E. Stanley Jones wrote,

Prayer is simply surrender to God. If I throw out a boat hook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to whatever God wants.^{vi}

A disciplined prayer life does not automatically erase the potential of unanswered questions.

3. A commitment to serve Christ does not automatically erase the possibility of an uncertain future.

As the apostle Paul was about to set sail for Jerusalem, in a very touching scene, he bade farewell to the elders of the Ephesian church. In his comments, he made this remarkable statement,

. . . I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, (Acts 20:22)

Imagine that! “I’m on my way to Jerusalem . . . and I don’t know what’s going to happen to me there . . .”

On your mark, get set . . . wait! Let us make sure we pray before and during and after the race.

Then we can say with Paul, in Romans 15:33,
Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Peace! Perfect Peace! The old poem reads,
Our future is unknown?

But Jesus Christ we know, and He is on the throne!^{vii}

Peace, perfect peace,

Our future all unknown?

Jesus Christ we know, and He is on the throne.

Sing:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/11/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Steve May, The Story File (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 243.

ⁱⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 4 (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 108.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker, 1995), p. 1905.

^{iv} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of Romans (Augsburg Publishing, 1936), p. 896.

^v Barnhouse, p. 110.

^{vi} Charles Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 453.

^{vii} John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 260.