
Prayers

To God

Be quiet in God's presence. Still your mind and set to one side those things that trouble you

Think about the blessings God has brought to your life over the years, and in the simplest way possible, thank Him for it

Say a brief prayer of thanks to God your Saviour and your friend.

For Self

Merciful Lord, words are not enough to capture the variety of things I see; fascinating and mundane, beautiful and unsightly, excellent and poor, and so much more. Give me I pray true discernment, by which to judge the things I see and keep me close to You in this fascinating but tempting world. Thank You for the glory of Your wisdom. AMEN

For others

Pray for people who have been displaced by the tragedies in Eastern Ukraine, The Gaza strip and Israel, Syria, and various regions of Iraq especially those bordering on Kurdistan. Pray for justice appropriate to the evils perpetrated there in whatever name.

Pray for people who have been bereaved, and their families.

Meditation

Will You come and worship Him?

Will you come with love in your eyes?

Prepared to look at everything around you

And decide if you will fully back the truth of the love of God?

Will you come with open ears?

Prepared to hear the truth within the testimony

Of those whose lives now demonstrate the reality of His love?

Will you come with willing hands?

Prepared to take firm hold of God's precious truth,

And work at it, for love demands total commitment and work?

Will you come with a ready tongue?

Prepared to speak your testimony truthfully,

And not hold back the Word of God which liberates humanity?

Will you come with an eager heart?

*Prepared to identify yourself with all God's truth,
For as you do, your life will surely overflow with love forever?*

Come then and worship Him.

Bible Passage

Romans 1:8-15

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is spoken about all over the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son, is my witness that I constantly remember you ¹⁰ in my prayers, pleading that in God's will it might surely now be possible for me to come to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to make you stronger; ¹² or rather, so that you may have the encouragement of our sharing of faith, both yours and mine.

¹³ I would not wish you to be unaware, dear friends, of the fact that I have often planned to come to you, even though I have so far been prevented, so that I may work fruitfully among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish; ¹⁵ hence my eagerness to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome as well.

Bible study Review

Having introduced himself, Paul writes to the church at Rome with great warmth and eagerness, commending them in their faith, talking about the importance of the Gospel, and speaking about his desire to come to Rome. Paul was undoubtedly aware of the importance of Rome to the future spread of the Gospel. Rome was the cultural and political centre of the Empire, and Paul knew that a strong church at Rome would provide a natural focus for the expansion of the Gospel throughout the known world. The saying was used then and is known today, though only colloquially; 'all roads lead to Rome'!

In this passage, we are made aware that Paul was embarrassed by the fact that he had not been to Rome. In verse 10, he implies that God has kept him from going there, and that as a servant of the Lord, he can only travel where the Holy Spirit gives Him permission to go. Then, in verse 13, Paul offers the excuse that he had been 'prevented' from coming, but he does not say how this happened! It is possible that Paul had been unable to go because the Emperor Claudius had banned all Jews from Rome (49-54 AD – see Acts 18:2). In those days, the Romans hardly knew the difference between Jews and Christians, but because Paul was a Jew, this edict would have prevented him from travelling to Rome for as long as it was in force. In addition, Paul explains later in the letter (15:22-29) that he was previously committed to work in Greece, and he had also been led to gather a collection of money for the support of the church at Jerusalem, which was going through hard times. The burden of all this work and the need to go back to Jerusalem are all reasons for Paul not to go to Rome. He did not then know that in the providence of God, his return to Jerusalem would result in his arrest and eventual

transportation to Rome as a prisoner facing charges of sedition before the Emperor (Acts 21:17 to the end)!

Shining through the whole passage, however, is Paul's passion for the Gospel. Paul had preached the Gospel and founded churches throughout Asia (or as we know it today, Turkey), and also in Macedonia and Greece. Nevertheless, his heart was set on the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world, and this surely meant going to Rome. It is remarkable to think that Paul was driven by this vision only a few decades after the death of Jesus, and that he was speaking to a Gentile church in Rome that had not been founded by his own evangelistic work, but through the natural movement of people around the Empire. The picture we find lying behind this passage of scripture suggests a vibrant and lively church that was growing rapidly, and the Holy Spirit was working powerfully through many people, not just Paul.

In the middle of the passage, we find a few verses in which Paul says that he wants to share some 'spiritual gift' with the Christians at Rome (1:11, 12). After he says this, he seems to qualify what he has said, as if conscious that it might not be right for him to sound so dominating. Of course, Paul was not their leader and had no right to stand over them, so he quickly adds a phrase saying that the sharing of gifts should be mutual (1:12). He does not want to sound patronising by suggesting that he has some gifts that they do not!

Despite his high calling, Paul had to work with the church at Rome rather than preach at them, and it is good for us to see that Paul was aware of his own limitations. In a very real sense, God alone had raised up the church at Rome, and Paul knew that he needed to be a part of what God was doing through them because of the potential significance of a church in Rome. His 'eagerness to preach the Gospel' there (1:15) did not come from a simple desire to be a church leader in Rome, but to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world.

Going Deeper

Thanks and prayer (1:8,9,10)

As with many of his letters, Paul begins his greeting with thanks for the faith of the church (see Eph 1:16, Phil 1:3-4, Col 1:3, 1 Thess 1:2, 2 Thess 1:3, Phlm 4.). Some might think it a little false to use standard greetings especially to people he did not know; but Paul wanted the church at Rome to know it stood on an equal footing with other churches. As yet, there was no 'priority' amongst the churches of different towns; their fellowship was in the Gospel and Paul simply wanted to establish this fellowship.

Again, just as in other letters, Paul speaks here of praying for the people of the church to which he writes, and calls God as a witness (1:9). This sounds odd, for Jesus taught that we should not 'swear' or 'call' on God's name (Matt 5:37f.) and Paul himself teaches that our word should be a guarantee of our honesty (2 Cor 1:15f.). But this is no oath; Paul merely appeals to his readers to accept his integrity. It was common for early Christians to follow the Jewish practice of praying three times a day (see Daniel 6:11 and Acts 3:1, 10:3), and this gave Paul good opportunity for regular prayer for churches, people and situations. His prayers were not merely a way of saying 'I'm thinking about you', which is what it often means today.

As an addendum to prayer, Paul speaks of God 'whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of His Son'. There is some confusion about what Paul is trying to say here, because the word for 'serve' also means 'worship', and the addition 'with my spirit' does not help. In truth, this is a brief assertion of Paul's earnestness about the Gospel. For all, our spirit is the breath of God

within which makes us who we are, and Paul's phrase was his way of saying that his whole being was given over to the service and worship of God the Father.

The sharing of gifts (1:10,11,12)

Paul's prayer for the church at Rome is twofold; firstly he remembrances them in thanksgiving (1:8) and secondly he asks that God will grant him the chance to go to Rome (1:10). Paul was strangely apologetic in what he says about this, the words reading literally 'whether somehow now at last' he might come to Rome! This is an intriguing sign of hesitancy in Paul's writing, but the word Paul uses here means 'to be led along a good path'. So although verse 10 reads a little awkwardly to us, the original may have conveyed messages of goodwill to the church of Rome which simply do not translate well into English.

Paul then speaks directly about his desire to 'share with you some spiritual gift ...' (1:11). At first, he says he wants to use his own spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church at Rome, but this was not the right way to say it and it sounds a little forceful. Bearing in mind that something written on a letter could not simply be 'crossed out' or deleted, he corrects himself and speaks clearly (1:12) about sharing spiritual gifts for the mutual benefit of all!

Paul probably wants to share his gift as an evangelist, but he had to bear in mind that the church he was speaking to was already functioning and growing without him! If we look at the lists of spiritual gifts Paul talks of in Romans (12:6-13), 1 Corinthians (12:4-11) and Ephesians (4:11), then we can well understand that Paul would have been reassured through any mutual 'sharing' of these gifts, for his whole teaching emphasised that the spiritual gifts were for sharing; 'the same God ... grants all of them in everyone' (1 Cor 12:6). He was not about to suggest he had something they did not!

Paul's desire to come to Rome, and his ministry (1:13-15)

But still, why does Paul wish to come to Rome? Is it just to 'share gifts'? He has a wider mission to fulfil and explains this in a personal manner; 'I would not wish you to be unaware ...' a phrase he uses in other letters when he wants to stress what is coming next (see Rom 11:25, 1 Cor 10:1, 12:1, 2 Cor 1:8, 1 Thess 4:13). Paul wants to 'work fruitfully among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles' (1:13), that is, Paul is intent on continuing his evangelistic mission, by completing it in Rome.

The last part of this passage describes Paul's sense of evangelistic zeal. He starts with a call to preach to the Gentiles (1:13), but in his early missionary work he had based his work on Jewish synagogues, seeking to persuade the Jews he met to open their doors to embrace Gentiles; the Gospel was open for all through Jesus. Yet over the years he had fought many battles with Jews who had stood stubbornly in his way (see Acts 14:1f.), even though from the earliest, the Gospel was for Jews and Gentiles alike, according to all the apostles (see Gal 3:28 etc.). So now, speaking to the Gentile church at Rome, he is eager to express the open nature of the Gospel saying; 'I am under obligation to Greeks and Barbarians, both the wise and foolish' (1:14). In this way, Paul boldly declares that the Gospel is cutting across all the cultural boundaries of his day (see also Col 3:11).

Application

Discipleship issues

Paul's vision

Paul's vision was extraordinary. He was unstinting in his declaration of the good news of God freely available to all people, but his personal mission could never reach further than he could travel himself, given the physical and spiritual limitations of the day. Yet at the beginning of his letter to the church at Rome, he seeks to introduce himself and his message in a way that will help him gain access to this important and growing church. He is not bound by the limitations of the day as we might see them and sees before him only the call that has been laid on his heart. He wants to 'do the right thing' in pursuing God's mission and reaching out to a church far beyond his travelling and yet not beyond his vision.

Evangelism and the sharing of spiritual gifts

This passage, which is clearly still part of the introduction, nevertheless has much to tell us. It speaks of the regular prayers (1:10) important to Paul's life. They enabled him to be confident about what God was saying to him and were the means whereby the Lord was able to guide his great evangelistic servant. Then, starting with Paul's assumptions about the use of his spiritual gift (1:11), he goes on to make a very significant comment about the sharing of gifts. So Paul clearly holds evangelism close to the subject of spiritual gifts and the sharing of them. It is no wonder that we now regard the sharing of faith as a good description of evangelism!

Pursuing a vision

The main issue in this passage is the tension between what someone feels called to do, and the practical obstacles that appear to stand in the way. Paul was not the first person to feel strongly called to do something for which God did not open the doors, and history shows that God often uses our sense of calling to lead us in unexpected ways. We know that Paul ended his life in Rome, having lived under house arrest awaiting his appeal to the Emperor (Acts 28).

It may not have been the evangelistic opportunity Paul was seeking, but his vision was right. In time, Rome would become the centre of the church for many centuries.

Ideas for what to do

- How can we best capture a vision of the whole church and the great evangelistic tasks facing God's people today? Read a paper and think about how your faith relates to each story you read.
- Are there places to which you long to go to visit other Christians, either because you have always felt you would like to go there or because you feel that God is drawing you there? Plan to fulfil your desire if it is at all possible!

Questions for groups

1. *What disciplines of prayer would be helpful to people in the life of the church today, given the modern lifestyles that people lead?*
2. *In what ways can we be encouraged by sharing our faith? In what ways can we be encouraged in our faith by sharing spiritual gifts?*
3. *Paul talked of 'Greeks and Barbarians'. What contrasts would best express the range of people in your society?*

Final Prayer

Lord God, stir your people into action by the power of Your Holy Spirit, we pray. Even if we do not understand what You are doing in our midst, take us step by step through the work You would have us do for You in this world, so that we may be encouraged by the results of our obedience and Your faithfulness. Thank You, Lord God, AMEN