



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 1: 8-15

Romans

“Prayer and Providence”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our passage this morning is Romans 1, we're going to look at verses 8 through 15. I've just begun this study, as you can see and we're in the introduction to the book, the second half of the introduction. And Paul writes in verse 8, “First I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God whom I serve in my spirit in the peaching of the gospel of His son is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you. Always in my prayers make Him request if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you that I may impart some spiritual gift to you that you may be established, that is that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you and had been prevented so far so that I may obtain some fruit among you also even as among the rest of the gentiles. I'm under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish, so for my part I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” May the Lord bless this reading of His word and our time together in it. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this great book of Romans that the apostle Paul write so long ago but that is so relevant today. That deals with such profound issues, such profound questions and yet deals also with very practical realities of life and so we pray that implications of life and so we pray, Father, that

was we continue our study in it this morning you guide us and direct us in our thinking.

We are a privileged people, we who have believed in Jesus Christ. We've done that by your grace. We take no credit for our faith, we take no credit for our understanding of the Christian faith, of the truth of God because we have within our hearts the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity. You seal our hearts with Him at the moment of faith and He guides us in our understanding of the things that you have revealed in your word. And we look forward to that this morning. May His ministry in our hearts go forward unhindered.

Prepare our hearts for our time of study and enable us to think clearly. We live in busy times, Father. We live in times when our minds are occupied with so many of the details of life, with business that presses in upon us, with schoolwork, with the details of family life. Clear our minds, Father, help us to put all of those issues aside, important issues, trivial issues, whatever they are, all the things that can cloud our thinking. Help us to put them aside, to clear our minds that we might focus our attention upon your word and think clearly and be taught of you. Look to you to do that.

We not only have busy lives, we also have many times in our lives, disrupted lives, lives that are filled with concerns and care. We live in a difficult world, Father, and we face trials all the time. We pray for those who are going through particular trials. They may be trials of a family nature within the home. We pray for those individuals, that you give them peace in their home, that you enable them to look to you and trust in you and receive great blessing from you. We pray for those who are sick, those who have gone through surgery or in stages of recovery. We pray that you'd bless them with speedy recovery and health.

What a blessing health is, Father. We take it for granted. We take all of the good things of life for granted because they come so easily, so consistently and they do so because you're so faithful to us. You provide for your people. The problem with that is we forget that you are the provider. We forget or we fail to even understand that as Paul told the Athenians we live and move and we exist within you. You give us everything we have, every breath of life, every beat of our heart, it comes from you. It's all a gift. It's all of grace.

And so we pray that you'd remind us of that and help us to be a thankful people because at times when we go through distress, when there is upheaval in the family or there's a lack of health that we come to face the reality that every good and perfect gift comes from above. And sometimes it's withheld that we know these things. And yet for your people, for your children, when good things are withheld, it's for our good always and thank you for that. And so we pray, Father, that you give encouragement to those who are in times of distress, great trial as we know many are. Bless this church now as we study together. We pray that you bless us and not only us, we're reminded from Paul's example that we're to pray for others besides ourselves, that we're to pray even for those we've never met but we don't know.

We pray for the church of Jesus Christ in this city, wherever it is meeting, wherever men and women are opening the word of God and studying and throughout the state and throughout this land and throughout the world. Pray for your church, that your people would be built up in the faith and that we would go forth from our churches to be good and faithful witnesses in the midst of a dark and an evil age. So bless us now to that end. We pray for our time this evening as well as we come back to this place and remember our Lord's death as we celebrate the Lord's supper what a privilege it is to be able to do that and help us to think clearly about Him and bless those who will participate in that meeting. To pray for your blessings on this Lord's day. And now bless our final hymn, may it be used well in our hearts to prepare us for a time of study together we pray in Christ's name, amen.

[Message] All of us know the experience of frustration and disappointment, even as Christians we have that. Sometimes it comes with unrealized hopes and expectations. We make careful plans for a business trip or a vacation and then unforeseen circumstances come along and prevent them from happening, that's disappointing. Sometimes we're disappointed by unanswered prayers. We pray earnestly for something without receiving an answer. That's perplexing and discouraging.

Paul experienced all of that. He had a great desire in his life to visit Rome and quite understandably Rome was the natural, it would seem the inevitable destination for him. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles and Rome was the center of the gentile world. So he made plans to go there. He prayed earnestly about it, but his plans were cancelled, his prayers unanswered. That's a frustrating and disappointment

experience, but Paul wasn't frustrated and Paul wasn't disappointed by that because he understood that God had a sovereign purpose and all that happens in our life and it always for our good.

Solomon taught that, Proverbs 16:9, “The mind of a man plans his way, but he Lord directs his steps.” Paul understood that. But there was a lot that the Christians in Rome didn't understand. They didn't know about Paul's planning, about his praying and about his interest in coming to them. His absence in Rome was conspicuous to them. They wondered why after so many years this apostle to the gentiles had not come to their city, the capital of the empire and visited them. And so in the last half of his introduction to the book, Paul explains that his absence was not due to a lack of concern or a lack of effort on his part. He had planned, he had prayed and been prevented from coming.

And in all of this we learn something about prayer. We learn something about providence. We are reminded of the importance of prayer. We are reminded of how we are to pray. We're to pray as Paul did, with persistence. But that also raises some questions, the kind of questions that arise quite naturally for a serious student of the Book of Romans which is a book that lays a great deal of stress on the sovereignty of God. Had that later on in the book seen very clearly in chapters 8 and 9, God causes all things to work together for good. That's God's providence, He's in control. We even see His sovereign in our text, our passage this morning.

So we might ask in light of all of that, why pray if God does cause all things? Why pray if, in fact, He does direct our steps? And how are we to respond to prayer that goes unanswered? Why do prayers seem to be unanswered? After all, Paul prayed to go to Rome and his prayer to do that was good. It wasn't a selfish prayer that he made. He tells us in verse 15 the reason he wanted to come, it was to preach the gospel there, preach the gospel among the gentiles. So what better motive and better desire could there be than that? But his prayer wasn't answered.

So these questions come up. They come up quite naturally in the Christian life and I think they come up within our passage and we will try to answer them where Paul refers to his prayer for the church in Rome. As I said, it comes up in a text where Paul is explaining his reason for not being there, his absence in Rome. He starts by reassuring the Christians there of his genuine interest in them and his great affection for them. Then he tells them of his intention to come and have a ministry to

them. But it begins with heartfelt thanks for their ministry to him and to Christians throughout the world.

Verse 8, “For I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.” In the beginning, the Church of Rome was known for its faith, not its gold. The treasure vaults of that 1st Century church were in heaven because it had a vital, genuine faith and that gave Paul great job. He thanks God for them and for their faith.

It was an encouragement to him and to Christians, he says, throughout the empire that there was a church in the capital, just as it is always an encouragement to us when we learn that God is doing a work in some significant part of the world. Before the fall of Communism in Europe, we were encouraged by reports of the church behind the Iron Curtain, the church in countries of Romania and other places. And we’re encouraged today by reports of the underground church in China, what are known as the house churches and how in spite of the fact that there is great repression here and there is persecution there, the gospel continues to spread and the church continues to grow.

Well, it was the same in Paul’s day. He and Christians all over the world were gladden by the news that God was doing a great work in that place, the seat of gentile power and civilization. Rome was the New York and Paris of its day, a city of culture and pleasure, a city of idolatry and vice of all kind. Its dominion stretched across Europe from the Atlantic ocean east into western Asia, from Britain south to the north of Africa, millions of people were under its rule. And in the capital of all of that, God has His people. A witness was present there. A church was thriving there in that dark place and it was an example of God’s grace and power and the reason that Paul gave thanks to Him.

He was thankful for the believers in Rome, but he didn’t thank them for believing. He thanked God for them because God made them believers. He created their faith which is God’s gift. Why else would Paul thank God for them, thank God for their faith unless they were God’s work, unless faith is, in fact, God’s gift? Calvin recognized that, he wrote, “Whoever thanks God for faith acknowledges that is His gift.” Now we might expect that kind of logic from John Calvin, but he’s not alone in that. The British scholar C.E. B. Cranfield makes the same point. The implication of

Paul thanking God for their faith is, he wrote, that he recognizes it to be God’s work, God’s gift. And so it is.

And the faith that God gives, the product of His grace is faith in Jesus Christ. That’s how we can know that we have His gift of faith if we believe in His son who is the Jesus that Paul preached. So the important question is not, do you have faith, but who is your faith in? Everyone has faith. Everyone believes in someone or something. Even the most secular of individuals, the most non-religious of people have faith. The faith may be in themselves, it may be in their party, it may be in something that is tangible. They have faith in the unseen though. They have faith that tomorrow’s going to be there for them. They have all kinds of faith.

Everyone has faith, but it is the object of faith that is essential. It is the object of faith that distinguishes truth faith, saving faith from false faith. And the object of saving faith is Jesus Christ as Paul explained Him in verses 1 through 7. We discussed this at some length last week, who Jesus is. Many people who are very religious, who have faith in what they would say is Jesus, but is it the Jesus that Paul preached? Is it the Jesus that He is unfolded in the first seven verses who is both God and man, who became a man in order to die for sinners. A saving faith believes in Him, believes the gospel.

That’s the faith that God gives, so it’s appropriate for us to ask ourselves, do we have that faith? Do we have faith and who is it in? Who are we trusting in? Is it the Lord Jesus Christ? And if you say yes and I suspect most everyone here would say yes it is, then we can thank God for that. It is His gift to you. Before you loved Him, He loved you. That is the teaching of the word of God. John makes that very clear in 1 John 4:10-19. God takes the initiative. In His grace, He gives faith.

These Roman Christians, they had that faith. They believed the gospel preached by the apostles and Paul was thankful for that. There was a church in Rome and it was active. Now Paul doesn’t really say that. He doesn’t comment on their faith in terms of its depth or strength, its commitment, whether it was great or active. But the implication seems to be that they had a very active faith. It was well-known, he says, throughout the whole world. Now that, of course, doesn’t mean it was known to every individual in every corner of the globe. The gospel had not spread that far. It was known to people throughout the empire. It was known in cities, small

and great, in provinces that were distant from Rome. Wherever the gospel had gone is what he is saying. It was known to the world of the apostolic age.

But this statement is a witness to how widespread the gospel as by the middle of the 1st Century, some 30 years after the Resurrection, the gospel had spread throughout the known world. And that was due to Christians like those in Rome who were open about their faith. Certainly the apostles had spread the gospel. They had gone far and wide, but no apostle had taken the gospel to the Church of Rome. And the work that was going on, it was not a work of the apostles, certainly consistent with the apostles but what had taken place there was the reason that the gospel had spread in so many directions and so many places, these people were open about their faith. They spoke about Jesus Christ to others. They were very open about their witness to Him and that was a great encouragement to the apostle. He saw in that the genuineness of what they believed and what they professed and what the word of God had done and what was taking place among them through God’s grace.

That’s a good reputation to have, the reputation this Roman Church had, to be known for your faith, be known for your trust in Christ, to be known for right doctrine and consistent living and for holding to the truth and telling others about it. Wealth may impress the world and 1st Century church in Rome seems to have had little of that and probably didn’t impress the world very much in its day, but it is faith that lasts. And that church had faith, active faith and that is what impressed the apostle and Christians throughout the world. And even though Paul was not responsible for bringing the gospel to them, he was thankful that Rome had been evangelized and he gave thanks for that work and he gave thanks for those people. In fact, he prayed fervently for them.

He says that in verse 9, “For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you.” For Paul, preaching and prayer went together. Scottish commentator Robert Haldane wrote many years ago, “Both prayer and labor ought to go together. To pray without laboring is to mock God; to labor without prayer is to rob God of His glory.” Let me read that again. “To pray without laboring is to mock God; to labor without prayer is to rob God of His glory.”

We must be active and work. Christian life is not a life of mere contemplation. God has not called us out of darkness in order for us to seat ourselves in some ivory

tower and isolate ourselves from the world and simply reflect and meditate on the things of God, not that there isn't a place for that. There certainly is. Fundamentally, we must be people who meditate and reflect and think about the things of God. But the Christian life is an active life as well. We are the Lord's laborers wherever we may be. The labor of the Lord is not one who simply stands in a pulpit like this, it's you who go out into the world particularly. You do the work of the ministry. You're equipped for it in this place, but you go out into the world the other six days of the week in your places of labor, in your jobs or in your schools, in your neighborhoods, wherever it may be and you're lights among the darkness of this age.

So you're to be very active. You're the Lord's laborers, but we cannot do that effectively, we cannot labor effectively if we don't look to the Lord in prayer and if we don't seek His glory first in the things we do. Paul did both. He was a man of action. He was a man of tireless service. He preached and established churches throughout the empire. He was pressed for time. I can just imagine how busy Paul's schedule must have been wherever he was, in Ephesus or Corinth, whatever city he was ministering, there were people always clamoring to speak with the apostle Paul.

He was short on time and yet he spent time daily in prayer. He prayed unceasingly for the Romans as he did for Christians everywhere. He told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11 of the daily pressure that he had of concern for all the churches. Burdened for the churches daily and yet he took his concern and he put it into action. He brought his burden for all Christians throughout the world to the throne of grace. He did that for the Christians in Rome, people whom he'd never met. He'd not been to Rome before. He didn't know these people other than knowing them by reputation. But he prayed for them earnestly, daily.

That's an example for us, an example for us about prayer, praying for ourselves, of course, but for others well, praying for one another, praying for those we don't even know personally but whose work we know, we're to pray for them. Paul prayed for the Romans whom he never met for a work that wasn't his. Doesn't tell us what he prayed, but we can well imagine that his prayers were directed to their spiritual condition, their physical protection, their witness. He prayed that they would remain firm in the faith, that they would be safe from Satan's attacks, that they would advance in the faith, that they would mature in their knowledge of the Lord, that they

would have an effective witness in the capital. Paul was diligent in prayer. And that is one of the great challenges of the Christian life, our prayer life.

The Lord knew that. He was a great man of prayer. Diligent in prayer. If Paul was an example, certainly our Lord was even a great example. You read through the gospels and you see that Jesus had this very busy schedule, people were pressing in to be healed by Him or to hear Him teach. And what would He'd do? He'd rise early in the morning and He'd withdraw to quiet place and he would pray. He was a man of earnest, consistent prayer, but He knew the challenges that face us in our prayer life. He knew what a difficulty that was for His disciples and so He gives them instruction in Luke 18:1 where He tells them to pray at all times and not lose heart.

We do that, don't we? We lose heart. We get discouraged because prayer is unanswered or we get too busy. We become distracted or sidetracked by the details of life and our busy schedule and we don't have a regular prayer time. I know I do. I'm very guilty of that. Paul didn't. He knew the source of his faith, he knew the source of his strength and he looked daily to the throne of grace for his needs and for the needs of those, others such as the Romans. Prayer is essential for effective service. “Unceasingly I make mention of you,” he said.

So if there was any concern that Paul's absence from Rome was due to a lack of affection for the Christians there, he states clearly that he cared very much for them. And it wasn't due to a lack of planning or of praying that he was not in Rome. He says in verse 10 that he was always requesting that perhaps by the will of God he might succeed in coming to them. The reason he hadn't succeeded, he explains in verse 13, was because he had been prevented. But he didn't lose heart. He kept praying about it.

And we learn a lot from Paul's example of prayer. What he prayed about was a desire that he had, but a desire that was repeatedly frustrated by God's providence. Still, he didn't stop praying because he believed that his desire was consistent with God's will. And so he kept praying and he trusted in God to give him an answer, to give him an opportunity. He didn't know for certain that would happen, but convinced that he was praying according to God's will, he continued to pray for that. That's importunate prayer, unrelenting prayer, prayer that is persistent, that is tenacious, that is how we are to pray.

And Paul could do that because he was convinced that he was praying according to God’s will, that going to Rome was consistent with his apostolic ministry. Circumstances had prevented that from happening, providence had closed a door, but Paul was praying still that he would be able to come. He was praying that God would change that situation which raises some questions, very natural questions. Does prayer change circumstances or can prayer change God’s mind? Circumstances are the outworking of providence of God’s sovereign control of all events. Can we change His purpose or His plan?

And if we do believe that God governs and guides all events, that He directs everything its appointed goal for His glory, well, then we might ask the question, why pray at all if God’s in control? Isn’t it going to happen anyway? Well, Paul believed in providence. He believed in the sovereignty of God. Paul says more about unconditional election and predestination to salvation than any other biblical writer. He has already made clear by implication that faith is a gift of sovereign grace. He firmly believed and taught the sovereignty of God, but that didn’t keep him from evangelizing and that didn’t keep him from praying. In fact, it encouraged him to do both. It is only a God who is absolutely sovereign who can answer prayer and give success to evangelism.

If God is not in control, if it is we ourselves who are in control, then why would we pray to God anyway if it’s all left up to us, if it’s our work, our labors that bring things to pass then of course we won’t look to the throne of grace because it’s not a matter of God doing things, it’s a matter of us doing it all. The fact that Paul looks to God is the very evidence itself that he believes in an absolutely sovereign God who can answer all of the questions that he has, enable him to do all the great chores and responsibilities that are laid upon and so he evangelized and he prayed and we are to do both and we’re to do them just as earnestly as the apostle Paul did.

But we can answer the questions that we have raised. Yes, prayer does change circumstances and no, prayer does not change God’s mind. That prayer does change circumstances is clear from other passages of scripture. James, for example, speaks a great deal about prayer and James 5:16-17, he writes that the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much and then he follows that with great illustration of Elijah who prayed that it not rain in Israel for three and a half years and it did not. The heavens were shut up and there was a great famine in the land for that long a

time, but then Elijah got on the mountain and began to pray again and pray that God would open the heavens, that it would rain. And there was not an answer to his initial prayer and he prayed again and again. He persisted in prayer and then a cloud the size of a man's hand rose out of the sea and Elijah knew that was the answer. God was answering his persistent prayer and it rained and it rained hard.

Prayer changes circumstances, but prayer does not change God. Let me cite a few texts. Just four or five texts that you can consider. Numbers 23:19, God is not a man, that He should repent. 1 Samuel 15:29, “He is not a man that He should change His mind.” Isaiah 14:27, “For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? As for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?” Well, no one can do that. That's the point of the question. Isaiah 46:11, “Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.” Psalm 115:3, “God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” Daniel 4:35, “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. And no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’

These are just a few of the verses. We could go on into the New Testament and look at Romans 9:14-15, He has mercy on whom He has mercy, He has compassion on whom He has compassion. So then it does not depend on the man who runs or the man who wills but on God who has mercy. We cannot bend God's will or frustrate His decree. We cannot change His mind. So then we ask the question again, if that's the case, if God's in complete control, what part does prayer play in a universe that is governed by God's almighty sovereign hand?

It's a fair question. It's a question that you will ask if you've not asked it already. I can remember asking that question when I was in college, puzzling over that so long ago. Well, there are good answers to it, at least answers that I feel are good and adequate. Bingham Hunter who has written a very good book on prayer entitled *The God Who Hears* answers that question. He writes, “Prayer has been ordained by God as a means to accomplish aspects of His will.” Put another way, the God who ordains the end also ordains the means to that end and prayer is a means. He brings about His will through His creatures. He brings about His will by means of our prayers, just as He brings about His will by means of evangelism and other means of grace that He has given to us.

So prayer does work. It does have an effect. It changes circumstances, but always and only according to God’s will which never changes. Paul knew that and was encouraged by that to pray earnestly, to pray persistently because he knew that prayer, which is according to God’s will, will always be done. And so he was greatly encouraged to pray. God will answer a righteous prayer, a burden that He has put upon our heart, a desire He has given us will come to pass as we look to Him and pray to Him.

But what are those occasions when prayer isn’t answered? Well, what are we to think? What about persistently praying according to God’s will, according to scripture and not receiving an answer? What are we to make of that? Well, there are different reasons for that. Perhaps because we’re not really praying according to His will. Maybe we should ask ourselves, is my request, is my desire really what God would have? Maybe not. Maybe that we’re asking with the wrong motives, with selfish motives.

Then again, James, who speaks a great deal about prayer mentions that in James 4:3, “You have and you do not receive, because you ask wrong motivates.” Sin hinders prayer. We know that from other passages in 1 Peter 3:7, the apostle writes that husbands who mistreat their wives and certainly that would include a husband that would abuse his wife physically or emotionally, but I don’t think that Peter’s actually talking about that. He means husbands who simply don’t honor their wives, who don’t treat them with respect, who don’t encourage them in the faith, who don’t do the right things that a husband should do or indifferent towards their wives, he says that those who don’t honor their wives will not receive answers to their prayers. Maybe that’s the problem, that we don’t have our prayers answered.

But sometimes unanswered prayers are just answers that are delayed because God has a better time and a better way to fulfill our desire than we realize. And so Paul continued praying knowing that God blesses prayer. Now the reason he prayed and the reason he wanted to visit Rome is given in verse 11. He wanted to come so that he might impart to the Christians some spiritual gift. He means some spiritual blessing, not a spiritual gift like prophecy or service since those are given by the Holy Spirit and each Christian has one at least.

He’s speaking here in a more general sense, probably of his ministry of teaching by which he hoped to benefit them and help build them up in the faith. He

wanted to do that. He wanted to come and be a blessing to them. But that’s not the only reason he wanted to visit them. It wasn’t simply for them, it was also for himself. He wanted to be benefitted by them, to receive a blessing from them, to be encouraged with them he says, each of us by the other’s faith.

So Paul was not so self-confident that he thought that he would do all the strengthening without receiving any strengthening without receiving any strengthening himself. The greatest apostle could receive some benefit from the least of the saints because the spirit of God who dwelled in him dwelled in them and ministers in simple but real ways through the simplest of saints. He expected that. He expected to receive a blessing from these people. He looked forward to that. He looked forward to being encouraged by their testimonies, by learning how God had worked in their lives and what He was doing in their lives. Looked forward to that.

And he would have come earlier and enjoyed that, experienced that, but he says in verse 13 that he’d been prevented from coming. What prevented him, he doesn’t say, but it may have been the demands of his ministry in Greece and Asia that had kept him occupied, but it was his plan to come and obtain some fruit, he said, among them. And so he wanted to preach the gospel in order to harvest souls. And I think it’s significant to note that he wanted to obtain some fruit, not produce fruit. He wanted to gather in and we know from what Paul says elsewhere that the ministry is one that we engage in. Some plant seed and others water. We have different functions in the ministry.

But it’s God who produces the fruit. Paul didn’t plan on coming to Rome and produce fruit. He knew that that’s God work, salvation is of the Lord, but he wanted to come and gather it. He wanted to come and obtain some fruit and he was looking forward to that. And this is what he had been called to do. This was the great duty that had been placed upon the apostle Paul. “I am under obligation,” he says, “both to the Greeks and to the barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.” In other words, to all kinds of people to preach the gospel.

Those terms, Greeks and barbarians had to do with language and culture rather than race. Everyone who spoke Greek and shared Hellenic civilization was considered Greek, at least Greek in terms of their culture. They were within the orbit of the Greco-Roman culture and so those in Rome who spoke Latin but also were part of that Greek culture were part of this term Greek. Barbarians were those who didn’t

speak Greek. They were those outside of that culture. And so he says that he wants to go to the culture and he wants to go to the Greek but not just them, he wants to go to the barbarian as well. And to make it clear that there are others as well that barbarians might be wise and cultured in and of themselves and Greeks might be unwise, he says to the wise and to the foolish. In other words, to all kinds of people.

Paul was a man who was interested in the entire world. He was interested in all kinds of people. We get a sense of the kind of spirit that the apostle Paul had from the fact that he was willing to learn from the simplest of saints. He was not a man who was plagued by prejudice or pride. He was a man who understood God’s grace. He understood God’s providence. He understood that the world was divided into languages and races and cultures according to the providence of God. And he wanted to go to all of these kinds of people and he wanted to preach the gospel. He was a man who was filled with Christ and the attitude of Christ and the perspective of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not class conscious. He was open to all men everywhere and the gospel is a message that can be preached to all men everywhere because Christ’s death is sufficient for all men.

It is adapted to the men of all men. It is for sinners and as Paul will go on to explain, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and it’s designed for believers. All who believe, regardless of who they are, the Greek, the barbarian, he’ll mention the Jew shortly, Jews, gentiles, male, female, slave, free, regardless of who that person may be, regardless of how great his or her sin may be, all who believe are saved. So Paul could offer to all people and he longed to do that in the great cosmopolitan capital of the empire. All roads led to Rome, all parts of the empire and beyond were represented there and he saw that great opportunities lay ahead of him in Rome.

So he planned to go there and planned and prayed for that opportunity. But his prayers went unanswered. Circumstances, providence had closed all the doors. But he continued to pray and God did answer his prayer in His time and in His way. Three years after writing this letter, Paul arrived in Rome in chains, a prisoner of the emperor. Now that’s not how Paul had envisioned coming to the capital and it would certainly seem to have been a hindrance to any ministry that he could have had there in Rome. But God’s wisdom is beyond all tracing out, Paul’s ministry from prison was actually greater than it otherwise would have been.

We read about this in the Book of Philippians, chapters 1 and chapter 4. His presence in Rome was actually the catalyst for a lot of evangelistic activity, some of it was done out of improper motive, it was done out of jealousy toward Paul. Paul didn't care. He rejoiced that regardless of the motive, the gospel was being preached and the gospel was being preached purely and people were being saved. So he rejoiced in that. And within the prison he had contact with people he otherwise would not have met, soldiers, important soldiers. Because of his connection with them and his witness to them, the gospel spread throughout the whole Praetorian Guard, the emperor's guard. It even entered the palace, probably entered the palace through those soldiers and as a result, members of Caesar's own household were brought to faith.

So God answered Paul's prayer beyond all that he had asked or thought. And we can have confidence that he does that for us. In His way and in His time, which is always best. His providence always works for our good. So when our prayers go unanswered we should not be frustrated by that. We should not be discouraged by that. We're to continue praying. It does change things. Prayer is effective. It is God's means of carrying out His will.

There's a very interesting example of that from the life of George Muller who had a long and successful faith ministry with the orphans of England in the 19th Century. When he was a young man, he began praying for three friends who were not Christians and he prayed for them all of his life. He lived a long life, too. He lived into his 90s. Prayed for them all of his life without an answer to his prayers. Some who knew about his concern questioned whether God was gonna answer his prayers or not, but Muller never wavered. He was convinced, as he explained to them, that God had put that burden for those men on his heart and because God had put the burden on his heart, God was gonna answer the prayer.

And so he continued in prayer throughout his long life for those three young men. Well, shortly before his death, two of them were converted. It may have happened in the last public meeting in which Muller spoke, but two of those three friends, after years of prayer, were converted. Within a year after his death, the third was brought to faith. It didn't happen in Muller's time and in his way of thinking, it was in God's way and God's time and it was the right time. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Or there may be a young person here this morning whose mother and father have been praying for your salvation for years. Maybe an older person is here whose friends have been praying that you would see your need of salvation and turn to Christ and believe. If so, the message that you are to believe is very simple. You're a sinner. We all are. You're no exception. You're a sinner and Christ died for sinners. He bore the penalty that was justly ours. It's what we deserve, but He's the substitute and He took it in our place so that all who believe in Him might be saved. So believe in Christ.

He has accomplished the work of salvation at Calvary. It is finished, and it is for us to simply receive it by faith. May God help you to do that and help all of us who have to be encouraged to labor and pray and not lose heart. God bless us faithful servants. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace. Come to a text like this and this magnificent book of Romans and we're reminded of the importance of prayer. We consider it in light of other great truths that the apostle unfolds, in fact, that all of the writers of scripture unfold and we ask questions. But we do know this: while we may not understand everything and we may not be able to put it all together, we know that you are absolutely sovereign. You're God, how could you not be? Only God – the only God that there is must be sovereign and you are.

And yet we have great responsibilities. We are to prayer, we are to evangelize, we are to study, we're to teach, we're to do all of the things you require of us knowing that they are the means of accomplishing your will in this world and in our lives. So, Father, make us diligent and faithful to the responsibilities you've given us and enable us to do them with joy and with confidence, the confidence that the apostle Paul had that you are all-wise, sovereign and good and working out your will in this world. We thank you for that. We thank you most of all for the gift of life in your son in whose name we pray, amen.

“ Prayer and Providence” by Dan Duncan

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