

PAUL'S PRAYER AND VISION

Romans 1:8–12

Key Verse: 1:9–10a

“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...”

Have you ever wondered what you'd need for a life that doesn't just get by, but thrives? Maybe a great achievement, an epic event, or just a lucky break? Paul points to something much more personal. In Romans 1:8–12 he pulls back the curtain to reveal two things that didn't just help him get by, but propelled him forward in God's plan for his life. They were his fervent prayer and his focused vision. More than an interesting side note, prayer and vision are still essential for a full life lived under the Lordship of Jesus today. How can we have the same vision Paul had, and truly have his spirit of prayer? And why should we? May God speak to us through his word.

Read verse 8. Paul starts with a unique, powerful phrase: “I thank my God through Jesus Christ.” It's not just polite language: in fact, in the Bible it's the only place Paul uses the words “through Jesus Christ” to describe thanksgiving. He's saying that it's only through Jesus that we can be genuinely thankful. Real union with Christ is the source and enabler of all our gratitude.

Paul adds that he's thankful for “all of you” in Rome. Why? He says in verse 8b, “...because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.” The news of the believers in Rome, who made their faith public even there, traveled outward on Roman roads and inspired the other struggling churches Paul had planted across the empire. The courage of the Romans' faith created a ripple effect. What was their “faith”? In light of what Paul wrote earlier, it was faith in who Jesus is.

And who is Jesus? Paul just said it in verses 3–4. These verses tell us some key truths about Jesus. Jesus is God's Son. Jesus is descended from David. Jesus is our promised Messiah, our Savior King. And Jesus is our Risen Lord. We need to deeply digest each of these truths. To the Roman Christians, these were not just words; they really believed these truths about Jesus. Those with gospel faith believe in who Jesus really is. It's this simple, clear, shared gospel faith in Jesus that still unites believers all throughout the world. Paul sums up this faith in Romans 10:9. Let's read it: “...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This confession of faith in Jesus is what Paul had been teaching all throughout his ministry. The Roman Christians shared this same faith. And because of their influence, it was now being “proclaimed” in all the

world. “Proclaimed” is a strong word. Christians everywhere were gaining courage to declare publicly that Jesus is our real Savior King, our Risen Lord.

Gospel faith is not a ladder we climb; it’s a gift we receive. It’s faith in Jesus’ utterly one-sided grace. Paul received this grace for his apostleship (5), and this same furious, undeserved grace grants us forgiveness and launches us into mission. Think about the facts: We did not choose him; he hunted us down. He chose us by his lavish, scandalous favor, reaching down to rescue us even when we were dead in our sin—when we were actively living as his enemies. The Roman Christians had experienced this life-altering grace of Jesus. Gospel faith is always in the grace of Jesus alone, not our best efforts or meager works. His grace is what saves us and makes us God’s people.

Gospel faith in Jesus also means to respond to his grace by obeying him. When Paul wrote back in verse 5, “...to bring about the obedience of faith,” he was referring to the Roman Christians, too. So in verse 6 he quickly told them: “...including you who belong to Jesus Christ.” But how can we truly obey our Lord Jesus? Verse 7 explains that it’s when we ourselves receive love, grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And like Paul, who obeyed the calling of Jesus in his life and influenced so many people, our obedience of faith to Jesus also brings about the obedience of faith in the people around us. In fact, the influence of obedient faith reaches even farther. Let’s read the last part of verse 8 once more: “...because your faith is being proclaimed in all the world.” May God grant us gospel faith: faith to thank God, faith in who Jesus is, faith in his grace, faith to obey him, faith that’s a good influence in all the world.

Read verse 9a. Here Paul shares more about his own changed inner life through his faith in Jesus. In verse 1 he said he was “set apart for the gospel of God.” Now he says he’s serving God with his spirit in the gospel of his Son. As we saw, Paul was happy and wholehearted to be a slave of our Lord Jesus. But here he adds “with my spirit.” It means his service is not just an outward duty; it’s driven by the Holy Spirit living in him. It’s the Spirit who controls his mind and heart, the Spirit who inspires and strengthens his prayers. The phrase “in the gospel of his Son” also tells us the focus of Paul’s service. He’s fully dedicated to proclaim and defend the gospel of Jesus. In his new life in the Spirit, he’s praying fervently how best to spread the gospel, and for specific people in specific places to accept the gospel more deeply.

Next, Paul zeros in on describing more about his prayer life. Let’s read verses 9b–10. Paul is praying for two things here: first, for the Roman Christians; and second, that God would allow him to visit them. But he uses words to

describe his prayer life that really jump off the page. He says he prays “without ceasing” and “always.” He doesn’t mean he’s praying literally every second of every day. He means that for him, prayer was not just an occasional thought or duty; it was the central and continuous part of his life’s habits. It’s a life habit that all those who live with Christ as Lord need to learn. So Paul writes in 12:12: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Constancy in prayer keeps us in step with the Spirit. Constancy in prayer helps us serve our Lord Jesus with our spirits.

Paul’s prayer life also shows his practical life direction. He’s focused first serving God the Father and Jesus his Son, and then, with deep devotion, on building up others. He has died to himself with Christ. What a beautiful, unselfish person who prays like this! If we imitate Paul in this, we would complain about people less and pray for them much more.

And then there’s the phrase “by God’s will.” Paul is not living for his own desires or ambition; in his prayers he’s fervently seeking God’s will. Seeking God’s will renews our mind; it’s like a reset button that helps us to see, think and pray based on God’s will (Rom. 12:2). Seeking God’s will makes us wise (Eph. 5:17). Seeking God’s will makes us grateful (1 Thess. 5:18). Seeking God’s will makes us sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3). Seeking God’s will leads us to his blessing and guidance in ministry (Rom. 15:32). Who doesn’t want to be wise, grateful, sanctified, and guided by God?

Elsewhere Paul tells us to be “...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” (Eph. 6:18). To maintain such a prayer life, each day we need to make prayer a priority, include prayer in all we do and say, and keep our prayers focused on what God wants. May God reignite the spirit of prayer of Paul in and among us, and help us remember to pray not just for the people around us, but for his people and his salvation work all around the world.

Let’s read verse 11a. “I long to see you...” Where did Paul’s longing to see them come from? At the end of Romans he writes: “But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you...” (15:23). Paul had planted churches throughout the Roman Empire. At the beginning, he was at Antioch in Syria, called “the Queen of the East.” It was where Paul and Barnabas taught great numbers of people. There, God gave birth to the first missionary church, which spread the gospel to many Gentiles in the surrounding region and beyond. Paul’s longing to go to Rome may have begun in Syrian Antioch. But it definitely seems to have been reignited elsewhere. On his third missionary journey Paul planted a church in Ephesus, the major city of Asia Minor. What happened? “But when some became stubborn and

continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:9–10). Soon after this, Paul began sharing a God-given vision: “Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21). Later, the Lord Jesus confirmed to Paul that this was indeed God’s plan for his life (Acts 23:11).

But why Rome? Rome was the economic, political, and cultural center of the Empire. It was the consumer capital of the world. All the lands in its empire were exporting their products to Rome. Roman roads and Roman citizenship extended its governmental and military influence to all the nations in its empire. By Paul’s time, Roman architecture and urban planning had spread from Britain to Baghdad. To locals, it looked attractive and profitable to adopt Roman culture. Establishing a thriving, gospel-centered church in Rome, a church rooted in the gospel of Jesus, where people could explain it and live it out personally and in community, would create an influence beyond what could happen anywhere else.

In Paul’s “longing” to see the Romans, we also see his view of people. Read verse 11. “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you...” Paul knew a good number of the believers in Rome (see chapter 16). His close coworkers Priscilla and Aquila were now there. He also knew that there were new Gentile believers and Jewish believers in the Roman house churches. To human eyes they may not have seemed worthy of such intense prayer and longing. But Paul didn’t dwell on their weaknesses. He saw who they could become, if they deeply received and were transformed by the gospel of Jesus. It’s why Paul could see them with the hope of God.

Where did his hope for the believers in Rome come from? He writes in 15:13: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul himself was abounding in hope for these believers. He prayed for them, in turn, to see God’s great hope and vision for themselves and for the people in their own lives. If only people accepted the good news of Jesus, they could be transformed into spiritually strong, Christ-like servants who could be salt and light for all the peoples of the world (Matt. 5:13–16). What a vision!

When I was a college student, the late Dr. Samuel Lee had hope for me. He began training me when I was 20 years old to be a messenger of God’s word. He listened carefully to my self-centered Bible testimonies to try and understand me. He knew I was spiritually sick, but he believed Jesus could heal me. After finishing college a little early, I became a full-time UBF intern shepherd, the only

one in our church at the time. But I had not been deeply “gospelized.” Despite having lived a sinful life, I thought I was a good person. But I was so weak, I easily fell into sin when tempted. Then I became angry, angry at Dr. Samuel Lee and Sarah Barry—even though they were doing their best to help me—and angry at myself. Dr. Lee asked me to come to church every day, where he spent time listening to and even cooking lunch for me. He prayed fervently for me. Ironically, in June of that year he went to the World Mission Report in Korea and spoke on today’s passage from Romans 1. Afterwards, he asked me to speak on John 4 for our summer conference. Though I did it, because I was inwardly proud, I couldn’t accept his advice, and I failed badly. In August, through a Sunday message on Luke 9:22, I realized that it was me and my sins of rebellion that crucified Jesus. Finally, at Christmas I received Jesus as my Savior and Lord through Matthew 1:21, “he will save his people from their sins.” Through this one word of God, my inner person changed from sorrowful, fatalistic and full of guilt, to free and full of grace. My Bible teaching was transformed. God began helping me learn the mind of Christ. My Lord Jesus has been with me so graciously the past 43 years as a pastor. I pray to renew my hope in him for sin-sick people, and fervently pray for them before God. May God inspire us to practically care for spiritually sick people with hope and fervent prayer, one by one.

Let’s read verse 12. It seems Paul is backtracking, or toning down what he’s saying. But really he’s expressing the climax of his remarks, and showing the mature goal of his passionate hope, vision and longing. Paul wanted to impart to them some spiritual gift to strengthen them. He could do that because he had encountered the Risen Jesus personally, had worked so fruitfully to plant churches for many years, and taught with apostolic authority. But he didn’t want a one-way relationship with these believers. He wants that he and they may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. It shows his vulnerability and humility. It shows his goal of mutual partnership. And it shows the healthiest goal for any gospel ministry, to build a strong, reciprocal, Christ-centered community. Such a place could carry out God’s vision for the world and be a great support to a worker like Apostle Paul to reach even more lands and peoples.

So, what’s essential in having a life that thrives under the Lordship of Jesus? It’s simple. Through the Holy Spirit, we come to abound in God’s hope and vision for sinful people. Based on this hope and vision, we pray fervently for them every day. Such a focused vision and fervent prayer life can enable all of us to thrive in the Lord. Through our focused vision and fervent prayer, God can use us to build a Christ-centered community, a place of profound humility and spiritual encouragement, and a place that sends out gospelized workers all over the world. May God reignite our spirit of prayer and our vision, so we can constantly pray for people with hope, and for his salvation work all around the world.