



## **Paul's Prayer for the Church**

Romans 1:8-10

*Rev. Fred Greco*

---

We have made our way through Paul's opening address, and we're now at the actual opening of the content of the letter, starting in verse 8. This morning we'll look at Romans 1:8-10. Please give attention to God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 1, beginning at verse 8.

*"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. 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, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we pray that you would open up your Word to us. Lord, we desire to see Jesus, so we ask by your Holy Spirit that you would illumine our hearts, enlighten our minds, that we might see the Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Prayer is important to the apostle Paul. Therefore, I think, it should be important to all of us. We are ready now to dive into all that Romans can teach us. We're about to start the book proper. We've made our way past the address. There are so many wonderful theological topics Paul will unfold: faith, justification, sanctification, election, spiritual gifts.

But I think there can often be a sense that prayer doesn't need to be one of those topics. It's not a deep theological matter. We don't need to study deeply about prayer. After all, we could think that prayer is pretty easy. There's nothing to it. All you have to figure out is how to get down on your knees, clasp your hands, and close your eyes. That's all there is to it. Right?

Yet it's interesting that Paul begins this letter with the topic of prayer. He opens it up for us that there is much we can learn about prayer. I would like us to see two main things about prayer this morning. First, I would like us to see the *essential elements of prayer*. What is prayer about? What is prayer involved with? Then secondly, I would like us to see the *benefits of prayer*. Here's a spoiler alert: The benefits of prayer are not primarily getting answers. There are benefits that come to us from prayer itself.

## Essential Elements of Prayer

Let's start, then, by looking at the *essential elements of prayer*. The very first place Paul begins is with thanksgiving. That's how verse 8 starts. "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." Paul starts this letter with prayer, and he starts the idea of prayer with thanksgiving.

Now, if I were to give you a homework assignment this afternoon, I would say to you that Paul says "First..." Now look through the book of Romans and find "Second." You'll be looking for an awfully long time, because Paul actually doesn't say "Second" anywhere later. The word that is translated *first* means first, but I don't want you to think Paul is simply going through a list of things. He's doing something more here.

We might perhaps look at this as, "I must begin this way. This is how I have to start. This is of first priority. Before I get into all of the things you want to hear about and plumb the depths of, we have to start *here* with prayer, specifically with thanksgiving." This is interesting, because Paul is starting out by showing his connection with the Romans, with those he is going to teach, and, in essence, you and me as well.

He's showing the connection he has with his audience, and he's showing *their* dependence and *his* dependence on God. He shows the importance of prayer, and he shows this by example. Thanksgiving is the first thing he addresses. This itself is instructive because we often begin with petitions. This is natural for us, because we start thinking about ourselves, but thankfulness is a grace of God that takes us beyond ourselves.

It reminds us we have received mercy, so as we begin in prayer we start from a position of undeserved blessing. Think about how important this is for us in our prayer life. You begin praying, knowing God has already answered prayers you haven't even offered up yet, that you weren't *able* to offer up. God came to you first. He poured out his mercy upon you without you even asking for it.

What kind of a God is *this*? How much more should we expect if we come to him in prayer that he will answer our prayers? He has shown his mercy. He has poured it out upon us before we have even begun to follow him. This is a very practical way for Paul to sum up what he has been saying about the gospel, that the gospel is for sinners, that those at Rome are loved by God. They are called by God because of the action of God.

So he starts this letter by thanking God. This is also interesting, because we might have expected Paul to thank the Romans. We might have expected him to say, "I'm thankful to you that your faith is so great it can be seen throughout all of the world," but Paul doesn't say that. That would be the American epistle. We would look and say, "God, thank me for being such a great follower of you. Isn't it great that I reached out and caught you, God, and decided to follow you and be a Christian?"

Paul takes it completely on its head. Again, this is the gospel. What he says is he is thankful to God for the faith of the Romans. I don't know that there's any way to get around this except to say that God is the one who has given the Romans their faith. He's talking about the Romans' faith, but he's thanking God. This just

asserts for us the gospel truth that the faith we have comes from God. It is not something we work up. It is not something we can be proud of or boast in. Paul says, "I thank God that you have the kind of faith you have."

When you heard the sermon was to be about prayer, you thought this was all going to be just practical points to help you to pray, and here we are starting with really deep theology, that God is the author of faith, that God calls his people, that God gives mercy. Prayer reminds us that all of our blessings come from God, especially faith.

Now why would Paul be thankful for their faith? I think, first, he might be thankful for the fact of their salvation. This is something we should think about in our own lives. Paul is thankful they have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is something that should mark *our* lives as believers. If we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we should long to see others embrace Jesus.

We should not be satisfied if *we* believe on Jesus. We shouldn't just want those who are closest to us to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. No, we should want everyone in our neighborhood, everyone in our town, our state, throughout the world... We should want everyone to know who Jesus is, to trust him, to put their faith in him so they might find the forgiveness of sins. That's what Paul is saying.

I also think it's interesting he says their faith is proclaimed throughout the world. This word *proclaimed* means announced, spread abroad. There is a growing movement in world missions that must be combated. It is the idea of secret church and secret Christians. Throughout the world there are missionaries advising Christians not to be too public with their faith lest they suffer persecution. This is especially true in Middle Eastern countries.

Some missionaries are even advising new Christians to continue going to the mosque, to not have baptism, to not profess or share their faith because there's too much risk. The interesting thing is that Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us the exact opposite. He says, "You, Roman Christians, are at the center of secular worldview, the capital of a heathen empire. Your faith is so known it is proclaimed throughout all the world."

Paul is writing this from Palestine, and he's saying, "We've heard all the way over here of your faith." When this word *proclaimed* is used in the New Testament it is almost always used of the gospel or God's Word. The gospel is proclaimed. God's Word is proclaimed. What Paul is doing here is thanking God that God has so ministered to, has so equipped, so blessed the Romans their faith is a gospel proclamation throughout all the world.

It is a faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and this is set up by the opening verses of this letter. It is not some vague faith, a vague wishing that things would go better, some vague belief in a higher power. It is very common in

America today when you ask someone about Jesus or about the Bible for them to look at you and say, "Well, I'm a very spiritual person." What does that mean? "Well, I like spiritual things. I like to think good thoughts. I like to have positive outlook on life."

Thinking vague good thoughts will not save you from your sins. It will not make you right before a holy and just God. The only hope we have that Paul begins this letter with is the gospel and faith in Jesus Christ alone and what he has accomplished on the cross. Paul says, "I thank God that you have that kind of faith." What an encouragement to us.

Are you thankful for what God has done in *your* life? Are you thankful for what God has done in others' lives? Are you thankful that God is at work in the world? Does that give you hope in the midst of all of the bad news that surrounds us? Prayer is the antidote to discouragement. We go to the Lord in prayer, and it takes away the discouragement that surrounds us, because it reminds us God is in control. Not the world, not the government, not society, but God. God is in control.

Paul is not just praying to be thankful for what Jesus has done. He also acknowledges that prayer itself needs Jesus, that a part of prayer is the Son's mediation, that Jesus Christ mediates our prayer. He makes it possible. The language Paul uses is instructive. The very first thing he does is he prays to "my God." Then he prays *through* Jesus Christ.

I think we would understand that prayer means nothing if it's not heard. We don't pray for the sake of talking or hearing our own voice. Sometimes we just assume, perhaps, that God hears us when we pray, but why do we assume that? Should God hear all prayers? Should God hear the prayers of the wicked who pray for murder or robbery or wicked power? Should God hear the prayers of those who hate him and hate his Word? Of course not. But Paul is sure he has been heard.

You see, he doesn't just pray to God. He prays to *my* God. It's emphatic in the Greek, and it's actually emphatic in the English too. It's up at the front end of the sentence. He says, "I thank *my* God for this." There is a great boldness in Paul to speak this way. We'll learn more about this as the letter goes on, but you have to understand Paul is not *hoping* that he's heard. He is *sure* he will be heard, because God is his and he is God's.

Well, how does he come to have a relationship with God? He has told us that already in condensed form, and he'll expand it out in chapters 3-5. He has come to know the Lord through Jesus. Apart from Jesus Paul was a wicked murderer. He was a blasphemer. He hated God. He didn't know the extent of his hate, but it was when he met Jesus that God became *his* God. He carries this through even in his prayer life, because his prayers come to God through Jesus Christ.

This preposition *through* has personal agency to it. Let me give you two biblical examples. It is said that creation was created through or by Jesus Christ. He is the one who made creation happen. It is *through* him.

Here's a little bit more down-to-earth example. When Peter writes his first letter and sends it off, he says, "I am sending this letter *through* Silvanus to you." That is, they only got the letter because Silvanus brought it.

If Silvanus had forgotten the letter or hadn't brought the letter or if Peter hadn't have gotten to Silvanus, what would there be? No letter. It's the same way here with prayer. God hears our prayers *through* Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot pray to God. Jesus is the one who makes heard prayer possible. This makes sense with what Paul has been teaching. He has just outlined the gospel for us, that we are separated from God by our sin and that God is perfectly holy and we cannot stand before him as we are.

Isaiah puts it this way in chapter 59: "...but your iniquities have made separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face...so that he does not hear." Isaiah is saying exactly what Paul is saying. Apart from Jesus, God does not hear us, but Jesus has bridged the gap created by our sin. He brings us to the Father not just once but always.

When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me," he doesn't just mean the first time. He means every time you go to the Father. You can't go to the Father apart from Jesus. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 3: "[In Christ] we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him."

Do you want to pray? Do you want to have your needs put before God, to have him help? Then you have to start with Jesus. You don't start with asking God to fix you. You go to Jesus, and he will save you. Then you can go to God with confidence. There is nothing more practical for your life than starting with Jesus.

Prayer begins with thankfulness and is only possible through Jesus, but there is another thing Paul wants us to see: prayer is a way of life. There is a constancy to prayer. Paul uses very strong language about his prayer life. He says he prays *without ceasing* and *always* in his prayers. This language is so strong our first reaction is to immediately start to qualify it.

"Well, *always* can't really mean always. Right? *Without ceasing* can't mean he never stops. We know Paul can't be praying every second of the day. He has to eat. He has to sleep. He has to go to work. That can't mean what Paul is saying it to mean." But what if we looked at it in another way? What if instead of finding ways to excuse a lack of prayer we used it to be challenged to a *life* of prayer?

I understand you can't pray every second of the day, but you already have something you do always, that you do without ceasing. I know it because I do it too. It's called *life with a smartphone*. I want you to think about how you use your smartphone. I know all of you are law-abiding citizens and none of you text while you're driving, and I'm thankful for that, but what do you do the minute you hit the red light?

You pull the phone out, don't you? You look and see if there are any messages, any emails. If it's a long light... "Well, let me look and see if anybody has posted any pictures I want to see of cute babies on Instagram, any new stories on Facebook. Oh, what else can I look at? What can I do? I don't want to waste this time at the light."

Or if you're in the store and you're in line and you have to be in line for two or three minutes, what do you do? You pull out your phone. It's always with you. You don't even think about it anymore. You don't want to waste that time. "I'm being efficient," as if somehow scrolling and scrolling and scrolling and scrolling and scrolling is making you a better, more efficient person.

We don't ever dare just stand there, do we? We use two minutes here, three minutes there, five minutes here, no matter where we are. It's a running joke that it is now incredibly and unbelievably common for people to take their smartphones into the restroom with them. We are never apart from them. I want you to think about prayer like you live with your phone.

What would life be like if you stopped at a red light and prayed for the neighborhood around you or thanked the Lord for the safety he has given you in travel or prayed that he'd give you success when you reach your place of journey's end and have to accomplish whatever you have to do? What if when you were standing in line at the store instead of flipping through Facebook you prayed that God would give you an opportunity to witness to someone or to encourage someone who might be downcast or to help someone else or how you can be used by God in the situation?

That's what prayer is like. It is a part of our day *all* of our day. You don't need to plan a specific prayer time to pray. Now there's nothing wrong with that, but let me tell you this: prayer *does* happen outside of morning quiet time. It does. I'm going to give you a secret, especially you young people. You actually are allowed to pray when you're not sitting at a meal. Again, think of your phone. How many of us are sitting at the dinner table, and while we're waiting for the food to be brought over we're all on our phones?

What would be better if while we spent five minutes waiting for the potatoes to finish boiling or the meat to finish browning we prayed...prayed for our friends, prayed for our neighbors, prayed for our nation? That's what constancy in prayer looks like. This is what Paul is teaching. It's hard, isn't it? There is an aspect of "Do what I say, not what I do." Right, parents? This is the hardest part of parenting. You know your kids should be doing something, and you tell them what they're to do, and then you realize *you* fall short.

What that means is we need to redouble our efforts. We need to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us, and we need to realize we *will* fall short. So we just get back up again, count on God's grace, and go to that throne of grace. A lack of follow-through does not make the command of God false. Paul shows us how important it is to live a life of prayer. This is a part of the busy lives we lead.

One of the excuses we make to ourselves... I don't think we ever would dare walk up to the pastor and say, "Well, Pastor, I'd love to pray more, but I'm just too busy," but I think we say that to ourselves. I want to tell you who is saying that he prays always and without ceasing. It's Paul. If anybody is busy, it's Paul. He's planting churches all over the place. He's writing the Bible. He's running from towns to escape with his life. He's getting wrecked by a ship. He has snakes attacking him.

If anybody is busy it's Paul, and Paul is saying, "I have time to pray." So what's *your* excuse? Martin Luther put it this way. He said at the height of the controversy of the Protestant Reformation that there was so much work for him to do and it weighed down so heavily upon him there was no way he could accomplish his work unless he spent at least three hours in the morning in prayer.

Stop and think about that for a minute. Our first reaction when we hear that is "Do you know how much I could get accomplished in three hours?" Yes, I do. You could be with your Lord for three hours. Do you know how much God can get accomplished in *your* life in three hours? We need to understand that if we pray God is at work in our lives.

Are you given to prayer? Do you pray for the needs of others throughout the day? Do you pray for world missions? Do you pray for justice and righteousness in the world? Do you pray that you would grow closer to God? There is so much to pray for we have to be constant in prayer.

## **Benefits of Prayer**

The second thing I want us to see are the *benefits of prayer*. The first benefit, the most obvious benefit is that we must rely on God. We've already touched on this a bit, but let's think about it greater in depth. Prayer is a declaration that we are not in control. Prayer is like saying, "I need help." It is a declaration that we need God. This is so simple we teach it to our youngest children.

We teach our children to pray that God would help them to go to sleep, that God would help them to obey their parents, that God would help them to feel better when they're sick. The simplest of things we realize are outside of our control and we have to trust God. That's what prayer is about. Prayer is about relying on God, and all aspects of prayer show our dependence upon God.

We pray for what we need because it's beyond us and we know God is the giver of all good things. We pray to confess our sins because we know we can only find forgiveness and restoration from God. We pray to thank God for all that we have because he gives us all good things all the time. Prayer, in essence, is a practical exercise of faith.

You may remember that last week we said faith is the empty hand that receives from God. Well, prayer is what keeps us focused on that empty hand all throughout our lives. That's why Paul tells us to be constantly in

prayer. It helps to keep us grounded in the mercy of God, it helps to keep us focused upon God's grace, and it helps to kill pride and sin.

Do you have any idea how hard it is to be proud when you are on your knees, pleading with God that he would bless you, that he would help you? You see, prayer is not only an antidote for discouragement; prayer is a weapon against pride and sin, because when we pray we are aware of God's greatness and our unworthiness. There's no place for pride there.

This starts from the very first prayer of our lives. Do you want to know this kind of life of prayer? Do you know that you need help in time of need? Then start by going to the Lord and asking him to show you grace, to open your eyes that you might see Jesus, to show you forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. That prayer depends upon the Lord, and you can have it. It can be yours. It all starts with relying on God, but prayer is more than relying on God. Prayer is also submitting to God.

Prayer is not some kind of "open sesame," magic language that gives us whatever we want. Some look at the verse, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" from John 14 and think, "All I have to do is attach Jesus' name to my prayer, and whatever I want I get. I want a new car? 'In Jesus' name.' I want a million dollars? 'In Jesus' name.' I want a new job? 'In Jesus' name.'" As if somehow God is bound, that just because we say "In Jesus' name" he stops being God.

The problem is God never stops being God. The key here is that Jesus says "In my name." The name of Jesus Christ is the Word of God. When we pray in Jesus' name, we pray in Jesus' character. We pray according to his Word. Prayer is not primarily about getting stuff. Again, we often tend to look at prayer from *our* perspective. We look and see we need things. We go to God. God gives us things. "Isn't that our deal, God? I have to come to you, and then you have to give me what I want."

That's not biblical prayer. That's why we are so weak in our adoration, in our confession, and in our thanksgiving, and that's why prayer meetings often are called *organ recitals*, because we pray for Betty's heart and John's lungs and Tom's foot. We pray for all of the things we need and we don't see prayer as communion with God, as submitting to his will, as knowing that he is God and is in control of our lives.

Prayer certainly involves requests. Paul is doing exactly that. He clearly wants to come and see the Romans, and he has been praying about this for some time. Paul is fervent in prayer. One commentator puts it this way: we tend to talk about God closing a door, because we theoretically walk up to a door and jiggle the handle and go, "Well, *that* door is closed. I guess I've got to do something else."

That's not how Paul prayed. Paul goes up to the door and turns the handle, and then when it doesn't open he gives it a swift kick, and then when a kick doesn't open it he gets a running start and lays his shoulder into the

door. Paul brings his prayers before God. He doesn't give up easily. He says, "I keep praying continually, always, that I might come to see you."

Prayer knows that God is God. So Paul includes this important phrase in his prayer: *by God's will*. This is not a throwaway phrase. This is not a polite line. It's Paul's prayer that he is only able to receive his request if it's God's will. Now why is that? It's because Paul knows that God knows what's best for him and what's best for the Romans. You see, we often think we know better than God. This is hard for us.

We know how we want things to go, and our prayer is "Just do it, God. Come on, get after this." "God, I've got to go to this certain college. If I can't get into this college, my whole life will be ruined." "Lord, you need to send me a husband, like, right now. The perfect husband, like, right now, God. I can't live another minute single." "No, Lord, I need a wife. I need the perfect wife for me. I'm not meant to be single. You've got to do this, Lord, and do it quickly."

We might even say, "Lord, I've got to be free from this suffering I'm under. How can I possibly go on any longer with this pain and anguish?" I want you to think about Paul for a minute. Paul prays that he would be able to see the Romans if it's God's will. Paul gets to go to Rome, but do you remember how God fulfills that prayer? Paul goes as a prisoner in chains, as a man who is condemned and eventually executed.

Why is that? Why couldn't God just send Paul now when he wanted to go and had his liberty? It's because God knew what was best for Paul and for the Romans and for you and me. Just think for a moment with me. If Paul had gone to Rome now and had not gone as a prisoner, do you know you would not have your entire Bible? You wouldn't have any of the Epistles that are called the *Prison Epistles*. They wouldn't exist because Paul wouldn't be in prison.

You wouldn't have the example of how to bear up under suffering that we have of Paul in the Scripture, of how the Bible is so important to Paul that in 2 Timothy, as his life is ending, as he can see his death approaching, he tells Timothy, "Bring me the Scriptures. It's all I need." We would not have that. God knows we need that. God knows what's best. That's why we have to be ready to submit to God.

The last benefit of prayer is that it connects us to God's people. That is, the Lord has not saved us as individuals. He has redeemed for himself a people, a people who are different, a people who look different, a people who dress different, a people who talk different, but all people who need each other. If you think about it, we could do theology by ourselves. We could even read the Bible by ourselves and memorize portions of Scripture by ourselves, but prayer forces us to go outside of ourselves.

Prayer forces us to think about others, both when we ask others to pray for us and when we pray for others. Look at how connected Paul is to the Romans. He is praying constantly for them always. Do not forget Paul has never met them. That's hard to get your mind around. I know, for me, in past years I could know to pray

for the church in China because I knew there were Christians there and I should be praying for them, but how much easier is it now that I have been there and met them and I have names and faces and voices in my mind?

Prayer connects us to each other, even when we do not know each other. Paul loves the Romans and wants to serve them. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone. When we pray for others we know we have the same God, when we pray for others we know we have the same hope, and when we pray for others we know we have the same Jesus.

In conclusion, prayer is a central part of the Christian life. It is how we talk with God. It is proof that we need Jesus. It brings us blessings, not just in the answers but in the communion with God himself. Will you ask the Lord to strengthen you in prayer today? Will you look to the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who can carry your prayers to the Father? Prayer gives us hope. It is a reminder that the gospel gives us a relationship with God. Beloved, pray without ceasing. Amen.