

What Blesses God, Part 9 - Romans 15:30-33 – September 29th, 2013

9. Vulnerability before others (Verses 30-33)

- v30 Paul begs them as brothers, by the Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join him in his struggle by praying to God for him.
- v31 He asks for specific prayer to be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that his service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to them.
- v32-33 He says it's so that by God's will he can come to them and together with joy and be refreshed, then he prays God's peace on them.

- While I realize Paul is seen as intense and driven, this is one of several writings where we find him being rather vulnerable in his struggles.
- I can't help but notice in his plea for prayer he opens up about his struggles, and even his concerns about being rescued from unbelievers.
- Moreover, when he says by God's will, he's hoping to finally come to Rome, he reveals his need to be refreshed, as he shares in their joy.

Charles Spurgeon - "Does it astonish you that a man so rich in grace as Paul should be asking prayers of these unknown saints? It need not astonish you; for it is the rule with the truly great to think most highly of others. In proportion as a man grows in grace he feels his dependence upon God, and, in a certain sense, his dependence upon God's people."

- Before we roll up our arm sleeves and work through this, I should point out the meaning of the original Greek translation for the word "join."
- In verse 30, some of your translations render it "strive," together with me, which is the Greek word *sunagonizomai*, where we get "agonize."
- In other words, Paul is literally begging them to agonize with him in prayer, so much so, that he ends up repeating this word agonize twice.

As one commentator so aptly noted, "This same root word for *agony* is used of the anguished prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus asked His disciples to agonize with Him in prayer. They failed at that critical moment and left Jesus to struggle alone. We must not leave our ministers and leaders to struggle alone."

Another commentator wrote, "Ministers need the prayers of their flocks. With Paul I urge you to strive in your prayers for your pastors. We need your prayers and we thank God for them. Pastors are sustained by the power of the Spirit through the support of their congregations."

- Perhaps you'll indulge me for the remainder of our time, as I answer three questions woven into the fabric of Paul's three prayer requests.
- All three questions are "why" questions the first of which is why Paul would be begging them to agonize over three specific prayer requests.
- The second is, why God didn't answer Paul's prayers in the way he hoped, and third, why Paul was so vulnerable to ask for these three:

- Paul's first prayer request is that he might be protected from those in Jerusalem who in their opposition to the Gospel sought to kill him.
- Paul's second prayer request was that he might be accepted by those in Jerusalem who he would bring an offering to, from the Gentiles.
- Paul's third prayer request was that he might, by God's will, be able to finally come to them in Rome, so as to be refreshed together in joy.

- The answer to our first question of why Paul agonizes in prayer for this is because he was keenly aware of what awaited him in Jerusalem.
- Namely, he knew he would be met with imprisonment and hardships, at the hands of his Jewish brethren no less. Consider Luke's record:

Acts 20:22-23 NIV "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. (23) I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

Acts 21:4 NIV Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:10-11 NIV After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. (11) Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

- This brings us to the answer for our second question of why God didn't answer these agonizing prayers in the way that the Apostle hoped.
- More specifically, Paul's prayer for protection was answered by way of being stoned before he's taken into custody by a Roman centurion.
- Paul's prayer for acceptance wasn't answered initially rather, it was answered eventually, by way of an exhortation from the Apostle Peter.

2 Peter 3:15 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.

- Paul's third prayer request to go to Rome also was not answered in the way Paul thought, such that he would go to Rome as a prisoner.
- So, why does God answer his prayers this way? It's because God's ways are infinitely better and higher than we could ever even imagine.
- It's been said, "I may not get anything I ask, but I'll get everything I need; I may not get my way in my life, but I'll get God's best for my life."

- It's this third "why" question that I think I'd be grossly remiss were I not to focus our attention on; "why is Paul so vulnerable with them?"
- What's interesting about these three prayer requests is that they're basically the "Big Three," if you will, protection, provision, and direction.
- The common denominator in all three of them is that it requires humility and vulnerability to admit that we are struggling and need them.

- Herein lies the problem, we're too full of pride to be vulnerable and ask, this because we fear that others will think we are weak in our faith.
- Perhaps better said, we've been deceived and believed, weakness is synonymous with meekness, and as such we fake it till we make it.
- The fact of the matter is the opposite is true. I would suggest that it takes tremendous strength and courage to be humble and vulnerable.

- Here's the bottom line, it requires a daring, Apostle Paul kind of courage, to be honest and open in our vulnerability to say; "I'm struggling!"
- I have to be secure in who I am in Christ to take the risk that my vulnerability may not be met with another's empathy to say, I struggle too!
- I have to stop being afraid that instead my vulnerability will be met with, "don't let them see you sweat," or "don't let them see you weak."

- In closing, I'll do something a little differently, and practice what I preach, that's not to say that to practice what I preach would be different.
- Let me explain, I'm going to be vulnerable with all of you by asking you to pray for me about my struggles as your pastor in these last days.
- Please know your prayers bless me and my ohana. More importantly, they bless God like the fragrance of incense. (Psalm 141:2, Rev 8:4)