

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans -
Part sixty-one - Sunday, November 8th, 2020 - 6:30 p.m.
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HOW JESUS IMPARTS HIS LIFE THROUGH HIS CHURCH

Romans 15:22-33 - "This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. [23] 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, [24] I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. [25] At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. [26] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. [27] They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. [28] When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. [29] I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. [30] I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, [31] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, [32] so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. [33] May the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

It is striking to note that Paul, though one of the dominant leaders in the New Testament, and only second to Luke in the volume of *writing* in the whole New Testament, didn't consider his own office or ministry apart from his need to be nurtured by the local church. So all through this text we see Paul in his *relation* to fellow disciples in the church of Jesus Christ.

I point that out because these are very tough days for the local church. Many in the emergent church movement are open and vocal in their praise for Jesus and their coolness to the local church as we know it. More and more evangelicals treat their commitment to Jesus and their commitment to the church as two *separate* commitments.

So it's a bit encouraging and increasingly counter-cultural to see the Apostle Paul, knowing better than most, all of the faults and blemishes and sins of local churches, expressing something of his longing for participation and involvement in a specific congregation.

He seems to say he can't survive without these precious brothers and sisters. He can't wait to be with them - not to preach a sermon - not to compose his next letter - but to get *with* these members of a local church and be, in his heart-felt words, "*refreshed in your company*"(15:32). For all its faults, he tells us church is *good*. And he tells us, by his own hunger for association, that church is *necessary*. He's a

world traveler and Christian spokesman extraordinaire. And he **craves** church. I love it.

1) **EVERYTHING ABOUT PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST IS BETTER *IN THE CHURCH* THAN *OUTSIDE IT***

Romans 15:22-24 - "[22] This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. [23] 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, [24] I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while."

These are **heart** words, not just **head** words. ***"I have longed for many years to come to you" - "I hope to see you" - "I long to be helped by you" - "I want to enjoy (literally be "refreshed") by you.*** Paul has deep emotional attachment to believers in a local church. You don't get the impression he can take or leave them. He's filled with a sense of **anticipation** at the prospect of their prayers and their fellowship.

You can see the same longing in earlier portions of this same letter - **Romans 1:9-15** - **"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you [10] always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. [11] For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— [12] that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. [13] I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. [14] I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. [15] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome."**

"I pray I will be able to see you" - "I long to see you" - I want us to encourage each other with our spiritual gifts. How many times do you **pray** you will be ready for all God has for you in your church on Sunday? Do you **pray** God will enable you to be done work in time to get to Bible Study on Wednesday? I'm not asking this to condemn anyone. I'm simply saying Paul was **passionate** about joining with other believers in the church.

And you get the clear impression, not at all commonly expressed in evangelicalism today, that Paul's enjoyment of the fullness of God in his own life was tied to his gatherings with other Christians in a local church who shared his passion. You get the impression Paul would **see** more of God, **experience** more of God, and **enjoy** his walk with God **more** in the church than on his own. In other words, if you try to relate to God on your own, you will encounter more doubt, discouragement, failure, and spiritual drought than you would with other disciples in a local church.

2) **WE NEED THE SPIRITUAL REFRESHMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH BECAUSE SERVING CHRIST, WHILE ALWAYS FULFILLING, CAN COME AT A HIGH EXPENSE OF EFFORT**

Romans 15:25-28 - "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. [26] For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. [27] For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. [28] When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you."

How quickly we can read that paragraph without feeling the workload in it. The only thing that makes Paul's assignment of charity look simple is his uncluttered resoluteness in describing it. Paul writes these words from **Corinth**. From Corinth to **Jerusalem** was about 800 miles. Then from Jerusalem to **Rome** was about 1500 miles. That's 2300 miles - much of it by very rough and slow sea voyage.

This wasn't on the Concord. There were no high-speed passenger trains. This trip would take Paul **months and months**. Here's what we know for sure. For Paul to execute this assignment he would end up **shipwrecked on the island of Malta**, this in addition to **three other shipwrecks**, experiencing **one full night in the deep**. All of this to get an offering to a local church at Jerusalem.

What does it take to serve Christ? A lot. The call of God is never to be measured by which road is easiest to travel. It can be a dangerous thing to measure God's will for your life **solely** by which doors are the widest open and easiest to go through.

If Paul measured God's will for this assignment by what might have looked like the closing of doors - **several times!** - he would have turned back after his first shipwreck. Not to even mention the fact that when he finally **got** to Jerusalem with his love gift he was thrown into **prison!** When you follow Jesus, you do things because you know you **should**. Not because you discover they're **easy**.

"Then why did Paul bother, Pastor Don?" Because everyone has to put **something** at the center of his or her life. **Everyone**. And if you don't choose something big and real and exciting and consuming and challenging from **God** at the center of your life, you'll put pets or your BlackBerry, or your Facebook friends, or your party buddies, or the Leafs, or the Argos, or "Dancing With The Stars", or the next promotion at work that's going to make it even harder for you to find time for God.

But you'll put **something** at the center of your life. You're going to do **something** with your time - either something **fleeting** or something **eternal**. You'll do something you can **keep forever** or something the **corrosive rust of mortality will steal away**. Don't look for something **easy**. Look for something **big**. You can't **keep** your life. You can only **spend** it. **Spend yourself on God!**

3) PAUL TRUSTED IN THE POWER OF UNITED PRAYER TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S STUBBORN WILLS

Romans 15:29-33 - "I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. [30] I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, [31] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, [32] so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. [33] May the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

I see **two themes** running through these verses. And they're very **different**. And then I see a **common thread**. The two themes are **warring intercession** and **spiritual refreshment**. And the common thread in both is the **corporate ministry of the church**. We should note these. First, Paul wants the church to "**strive together**" in prayer (30). And then Paul wants to be refreshed "**in their company**"(32).

A) **STRIVING TOGETHER IN PRAYER - ROMANS 15:30-31**

"I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, [31] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints...."

I know it seems a bit obvious to point out, but Paul pleaded for intercession with the conviction that the corporate prayer of the church could change the actions of people stubbornly opposed to Christ. There were people violently opposed to Paul's ministry in Jerusalem and Paul wanted the church praying together that they wouldn't overpower the advancement of the Gospel.

Don't we still live in this kind of world? Aren't there powers that labor specifically to discredit the cause of Jesus Christ? Aren't there places where nations officially rise up with false gods and false religions designed to stamp out the very name of Jesus Christ, God the Son? Believers have already died **today** around the globe at the hands of such enemies of the cross of Christ.

Where is the intercession - the **united** intercession - of the church? I think we have actually come to the place where we believe our prayer assignment is completed with our **personal** devotional times. But that's not the kind of prayer Paul writes about in these precious verses - "**Strive together with me in your prayers!**"(30).

I know Paul wasn't **with** the church at Rome at this point. But we **are** together. We live in the same region - usually in the same town. And we're called to recognize that our **praying together** has a special capacity to bring resistance to those who would oppose

Christ.

The idea here is that Paul saw corporate prayer as the **front line** offensive in the battle of Christ's kingdom in this hostile world. I've been almost haunted by Paul's words in **Ephesians 6:12, 18-19** - "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places....[18]....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, [19] and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel...."

I know there are other parts of the armor mentioned. But I think the attitude the church takes to corporate prayer best identifies our level of understanding as to **what kind of battle we're actually in**. And Paul calls us all to prayer because we get so prone to other forms of engagement. And we do so because we constantly focus our attention on "**flesh and blood**" enemies.

But when we corporately bow in intercession - when we "**strive together**" in prayer - we are forced to recognize that the real enemy isn't the gay rights lobby, or the school board, or the courts, or the television stations. How we expend energy in these areas! "Look at the way you're fighting for the kingdom of God," says Paul. "Does the one you're fighting have **flesh and blood**? If he or she does, that's **not** the real enemy. And you're probably using that **visible** enemy to dodge your corporate responsibility in intercession!"

It is simply a fact of New Testament congregational life that one of the **primary** duties of the local church is to "**strive together in prayer**."

B) **BEING REFRESHED TOGETHER IN FELLOWSHIP - ROMANS 15:32-33**

"....So that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. [33] May the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

Yes, there are battles to be fought. And yes, that can be extremely tiring to body and soul. And one of the most common errors in the church is the idea that we can **draw away** from the fellowship of the local church **because** we are spiritually drained and worn out. And there **is** a time for secluded rest from normal routines. We all need this. But we also need the reminder that there is another form of **spiritual weariness** that mere seclusion and silence won't relieve.

Paul explained how this worked in **Romans 1:12** - "**...that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.**" Those who are growing weary are to be fed by the faith of others. And then, at some other time, the roles will be reversed. **Everyone** needs refreshment of faith from the ministry of the local church.

That's why we're meant to see the emphasis in Paul's thought on his being "**refreshed in your company**"(32). This isn't just the peace of personal rest. There's a place for that, to be sure. But Paul's teaching here is that kind of rest will never do for your faith what the church can do. Physical rest can help you overcome physical weariness.

But there's another **kind** of refreshing described in the New Testament. It's a **spiritual** refreshing that goes deeper than physical rest. It touches another part of your being - **Hebrews 10:23-25** - "**Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**"

Note those words carefully. They get to the core meaning of what Paul described as being "**refreshed by your company**" in Romans 15. You can rest physically by **laying down**. The **refreshing of the church** that Paul describes in verse 32 is a refreshing to help you **stand**.

So here are the key thoughts of today's text. Let the Holy Spirit apply them deeply in your heart. **First, every experience of grace is deepened in the corporate life of the**

church. Cherish the church. **Second, fill up the center of your life with service to God.** Keep the center of your being for God alone. **Third, remember that even stubborn hearts can be moved by corporate prayer.** The battle is never ultimately with flesh and blood. And only stance of prayer shows we understand that truth. And **fourth, stay refreshed in faith with the company of the saints.** Cherish these times and use them to fortify your own faith, or to fortify the faith of someone else. Always have these **goals** in mind when you go to church.