

Chapter 1
PRAYER
AND PRAISE

Romans 1:8-12

As for Paul's prayers, we shall not take them up in their chronological order but according as they are found in his epistles in our present-day Bible. The Thessalonian epistles were written before the Roman letter, but as the book of Romans, because of its theme and importance, rightly comes first, we shall begin with Paul's prayers recorded therein. Opinion is divided as to whether the verses before us chronicle a particular prayer actually offered by Paul at that time, or whether he is here informing them how he was accustomed to remembering them at the throne of grace. The distinction is such a fine one to us that it makes little practical difference which view is adopted. Personally we incline to the former concept. This epistle was taken down by a helper (16:22). As the apostle dictated the words "to all that be in Rome, beloved of God" (1:7), his heart was immediately drawn out in thanksgiving that some of God's elect were to be found even in the capital of the Roman Empire, yea, in "Caesar's household" (Philippians 4:22).

PAUL'S AFFECTION FOR THE SAINTS AT ROME

The position of Paul was somewhat delicate, as he was a stranger to the saints at Rome. No doubt they had often heard of him—at first as a dangerous person. When assured of his conversion, and they learned that he was an Apostle to the Gentiles, they probably wondered why he had not visited them, especially when he had been as near Rome as Corinth. So he made known his deep personal interest in them. They were continually upon his heart and in all his prayers. How his “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all” (1:8a) would draw out their affections to the writer of this epistle! How it would move them to read with warmer interest what he had sent to them! Nothing more endears one Christian to another than to know that he is remembered by him before the throne of grace. In a letter to the author a Christian brother once wrote, “I prize the prayers of God’s dear saints more than I would all the riches of the world. The latter would only prove a curse, while the former reaches to blessings in the highest heaven and lays me even lower before God’s holy throne.”

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (1:8). There are five things here which claim our attention. First, the manner, or method, of Paul’s praying: The first note struck is one of praise. This is made very emphatic: “First, I thank my God” takes precedence over the “making request” of verse 10. Thus we see how blessedly the apostle practiced what he preached: “In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6). Thanksgiving ought to have a prominent place in our prayers; to say the least, it is due to God. As one of the Puritans expressed it, “It is rent due Him for the mercies received.” Thanksgiving is an effective means of strengthening faith, for it puts the heart into a more suitable frame to petition Him for further favors. It is conducive to joy in the Christian life: “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy” (Philippians 1:3–4). Nothing is more calculated to dispel a spirit of gloom from the soul than the cultivation of gratitude and praise. The same will cheer and encourage our fellow Christians. Piety is not recommended by sadness and sourness.

PAUL BLENDED THANKSGIVING WITH PETITIONS

The above example is so far from being exceptional that it rather indicates the usual custom of the apostle. It is blessed to observe how frequently Paul blended thanksgiving with petitions. (Compare 1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 1:16; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 4.) Remember that these examples have been recorded for our learning. Does not failure at this very point go far to explain why so many of our prayers remain unanswered? If we have not owned the goodness and grace of God for previous mercies, can we expect Him to continue bestowing them upon the ungrateful? Praise and petitions, thanksgiving and requests, should ever be conjoined (Colossians 4:2). But we see here in the apostle much more than this—something nobler and more selfless. His heart was continually drawn out in gratitude to God for the wondrous things He had done for His people, and this emboldened him to seek further blessings for them.

Second, note the One whom Paul invoked, termed here “my God.” It is indeed blessed to observe how the apostle regarded the Deity: not as an absolutely, infinitely removed, unrelated One. There was no formality, no sense of remoteness, no uncertainty. Instead, God was a living and personal reality to him: “my God.” This was an avowal of *covenant* relationship. The grand covenant promise is “I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people” (Hebrews 8:10), which looks back to Jeremiah 24:7; 31:33; they in turn have their roots in Genesis 17:7 and Exodus 6:7. On that ground, Moses and the children of Israel sang on the farther shores of the Red Sea, “The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is *my God*” (Exodus 15:2, italics added). For that reason David exclaimed, “O God, thou art my God” (Psalm 63:1). In like manner we find that Caleb (Joshua 14:8), Ruth (1:16), Nehemiah (6:14), Daniel (9:4, 19), and Jonah (2:6) owned Him as “my God” in avowal of the covenant relationship.

“My God”: expressive of a *personal* relationship. God was Paul’s God by eternal election, having loved him with an everlasting love. He was Paul’s God by redemption, having purchased him with precious blood. He was his God by regenerating power, having communicated spiritual life to him and having stamped the divine image upon his heart, making him manifestly His own dear child. He was Paul’s God by personal choice, for when God was revealed to Paul and in him, Paul had surren-

dered to His claims, saying, “What wilt thou have me do?” (Acts 9:6). God, by bestowing upon Paul His own nature after the apostle’s acceptance of His claims, had become Paul’s everlasting portion, his all-satisfying inheritance. “My God”: the One who had shown such sovereign and signal mercy to Paul. Their relationship was also *assured*; there was no doubting, hesitation, or uncertainty. Paul could say with Job, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee” (42:5). And theirs was a practical relationship: “whom I serve” (Romans 1:9).

Now put the two phrases together: “I thank . . . my God.” What a fitting combination! Is not such a God worthy of infinite thanks? And if I know Him personally as my God, will not, must not, thanksgiving issue spontaneously from my heart and lips? The union of these phrases both opens the meaning of and gives due force to the opening word, “First, I thank my God”—not first in enumeration, but in emphasis, in spiritual order. If God Himself be mine, then everything that is pure, holy, lovely, satisfying, is mine. If that glorious fact, that infinitely grand truth, be the subject of constant meditation and adoration, then my heart will not be cold and dull, nor will my mouth be paralyzed when I draw near to the throne of grace. It is not an absolute and unrelated Deity whom I approach, but “my God.” And that blessed and blissful relationship is to be duly acknowledged by the Christian when he bows the knee before Him. So far from being the language of presumption, it would be wicked presumption, insulting unbelief, to deny it.

PAUL’S GROUND OF APPROACH

Third, note *the ground of approach*: “through Jesus Christ.” How thankful is the writer (and the reader too, if regenerate) for this clause. Though God be “my God,” yet He ever remains the ineffably Holy One. How can I, conscious of pollution and utter unworthiness, think of approaching infinite purity? Ah, here is the blessed answer, the all-sufficient provision to meet my need: I may obtain access to the Most Holy God “through Jesus Christ.” But suppose my assurance be dampened, and through sad failure in my walk I no longer enjoy the conscious relationship of His being “my God.” How can I then give thanks to Him? Again, the answer is “through Jesus Christ.” As it is written, “By him [Jesus Christ] therefore [because of the merit and power of His sanctifying blood; see verse 12] let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving *thanks* to his name” (He-

brews 13:15, italics added). Whatever my case may be, however burdened with a sense of guilt and defilement, that should not keep me away from the throne of grace; neither should it deter me from giving thanks for Jesus Christ and God's provision of Him.

Grammatically, the "through Jesus Christ" is connected with the giving of thanks, but theologically or doctrinally there is a double thought. God is "my God" through Jesus Christ. As He declared to His beloved disciples, "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (John 20:17*b*)—"your" God because "my" God. And I give thanks unto my God "through Jesus Christ," for it is both the duty and the privilege of the regenerate, who are members of the holy priesthood, "to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5*b*). There is no approach to God save "through Jesus Christ" the lone Mediator between God and men. Our worship is acceptable to God only through His merits (Colossians 3:17). This fact must be the subject of the believer's constant meditation and adoration, for only thus will the blessed assurance of "my God" be maintained in the heart. Jesus Christ changes not: His mediation changes not. However deeply despondent I may be by my sense of unworthiness as I approach the throne, let me turn to and believingly ponder the infinite worthiness of Jesus Christ. Then I shall "*thank my God.*"

"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ." Upon these words the late Handley Moule most beautifully said, "'My God' . . . it is the expression of an indescribable appropriation and reverent intimacy . . . it is the language of a personality wherein Christ has dethroned self in His own favor. . . . And this holy intimacy, with its action in thanks and petition, is all the while 'through Jesus Christ' the Mediator. The man knows God as 'my God' and deals with Him as such, never out of that beloved Son who is equally one with the believer and with the Father, no alien medium, but the living point of unity." In proportion to the soul's realization of this truth, in proportion to the faith mixed with the declarations of the Word thereon, there will be liberty and freedom, holy boldness, as we draw near the throne. Only thus will the Christian enjoy his birthright and live up to his blood-bought privilege; and only thus will God be honored by the praise and thanksgiving that must issue from such an individual.

THE SUBJECTS OF PAUL'S THANKSGIVING

Fourth, consider the *subjects* of Paul's thanksgiving: "for you all." This will appear strange to the natural man who is wrapped up so much in self. The carnal mind is quite incapable of appreciating the motives that activate and the principles that regulate those who are spiritual. Here was the apostle thanking God for those whom he had never met. They were not the fruits of his own labors, yet he rejoiced over them. How that condemns the narrow-minded bigotry and sectarian exclusiveness which have brought such a blight upon Christendom. Though these saints at Rome were not his own sons in the gospel, though he had never met them in the flesh, and as far as we know had not received any communication from them, yet he praised God for them. It was because of what *He* had wrought in them, because they were trees of His planting, the products of His husbandry (1 Corinthians 3:9). This principle is for our instruction. Do not expect the assurance of "my God" unless you have a love for and unless you pray for "all saints" (Ephesians 6:18).

Fifth, observe the *occasion* of Paul's thanksgiving: "that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." These good tidings were spread abroad by travelers from Rome, the capital. They told of the humble reliance of the saints there on the Lord Jesus and their loving allegiance to Him. Wherever the apostle went, this blessed information was given him. Not only had these people believed the gospel, but their faith was of such a character as to be everywhere spoken of, and Paul's thanksgiving for them was the recognition and acknowledgment that God was the Giver of their faith. Paul's notification of the same was not to induce complacency, but to quicken the saints in Rome to answer to the testimony borne to them and the expectations awakened thereby. Again we would remark, how blessed to behold the apostle praising God for what His grace had wrought in others. What an insight it gives us into his character. What a spirit of love for the brethren was here revealed. What gratitude and devotion for his Master. What an example for the servant of Christ today when tidings are received of the fruits of the Spirit in distant places.

A PERSONAL APPLICATION

Before passing on to the next verse let us seek to make application to ourselves of what has been before us. It was not the doubting and un-

belief of these Roman saints but their faith which was noised abroad. Is our faith known to others and talked about? Does it evoke praise and thanksgiving to God? Theirs was no formal and lifeless faith, but a vigorous and fruitful one that compelled others to take notice. It was a faith that transformed their character and conduct. Lest it be thought we have read into our verse more than is there, we refer the reader to 16:19: "Your obedience is come abroad unto all." The two declarations are to be placed side by side, for the one explains and amplifies the other. If our faith does not produce the type of obedience others will take note of, there is something seriously wrong with us. We regard, then, the word *faith* in 1:8 as a generic expression for the graces of the Spirit, but the employment of this specific term was probably a prophetic rebuke of Romanism, in which the chief thing lacking is saving faith!

"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers" (1:9). "For God is my witness"; the opening "for" signifies that the One above knew how much these Christians were on Paul's heart. This was an act of worship, a due acknowledgment of God's omniscience. It was a reverent appeal to Him as the Searcher of hearts (compare 2 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20). "Whom I serve": Paul was at His entire disposal, subject to His orders. "With my spirit": not hypocritically from greed, nor formally, but from the very depths of Paul's being—willingly, heartily, joyously. "In the gospel of his Son" is the counterpart of "a servant of Jesus Christ . . . separated unto the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1). "That without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers" made known Paul's constancy. His rejoicing over and praying for them was no evanescent spasm but an enduring thing. Paul had called upon God as his Witness that his "without ceasing" was no exaggeration. Though these saints were in a flourishing condition, they still needed praying for.

We cannot do the saints a greater kindness, or exercise our love for them in a more practical and effective way, than by praying for them. Yet we do not regard the verses before us as establishing a precedent for Christians or ministers to proclaim abroad their praying. To parade our piety is but a species of Pharisaism. Praying is not a thing to advertise; as it is a secret exercise before God, it should as a rule be kept secret from men. True, there are exceptions: when believers are in trouble or isolated, it is a comfort for them to know they are being remembered before the

throne. Paul's mentioning of his praying was to inform the saints that his not having visited them (v. 13) was not due to indifference on his part. He wanted to assure them they had a constant place in his affections and to pave the way for his coming to them by acquainting them of his deep solicitude for them.

PAUL DESIROUS OF MEETING THE ROMAN SAINTS

"Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you" (v. 10). Paul's love for the Christians made him desire to meet them, and he prayed that God would make this possible. Let it be duly noted that he refused to take matters into his own hands and act upon an inward urge. Instead, he subordinated his own longings and impulses to the will of Him whom he served. This is very striking and blessed. Paul did not consider what many would regard as "the Spirit's prompting" a sufficient warrant. He must first be assured, by His providences, that this journey was ordered by his Master. Accordingly, he spread his case before God, committing the matter to His decision and pleasure. Observe too that there was no "claiming," still less demanding, but a humble and submissive request—"if possible" or "if it may be." This was an acknowledgment that God is the Orderer of all events (Romans 11:36).

"Now at length" shows that Paul was exercised about the timing of his journey and visit. "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). It is of great practical importance for us to heed that fact, for it means the difference between success and failure in our undertakings. Unless we "rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7), only confusion and trouble will ensue. We agree with Charles Hodge that the "prosperous journey" signified "that his circumstances should be so favorably ordered that he might be able to execute his long-cherished purpose of visiting Rome." It is blessed to note that a little later, before this epistle was completed, Paul was given divine assurance of his request being granted (Romans 15:28–29). The journey itself is described in Acts 27 and 28. After a most trying and hazardous voyage, Paul arrived in Rome a prisoner in chains! Yet see Acts 28:30–31 for the measure of liberty accorded him.

"For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established" (Romans 1:11). This is not a part of Paul's prayer, yet it is intimately connected with it, for it makes known

what prompted his request, why he so desired to see them. Paul's longing was that of spiritual affection, as a comparison with Philippians 2:26 and 2 Timothy 1:4 shows (the same Greek word occurs in all three). The word *long* tells how strong was Paul's desire to visit the Roman saints, and how real and commendable was his subjection to the will of God. We see the heart of an undershepherd in his burning zeal, yet at the same time we see his blessed submission to the Chief Shepherd. Paul sought not to take a pleasure trip, nor to obtain variety in his labors, but to be made a blessing to these saints. Though their faith was well-spoken of, yet he wished them to be established, strengthened, and settled (1 Peter 5:10). Paul's object was to expound the Way more perfectly to them, to add to their spiritual light and joy, to open to them more fully the unsearchable riches of Christ. Pastors, be not content with seeing sinners converted: Seek their growth and establishment.

"That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me" (Romans 1:12). This was to avoid giving offense lest they should feel he was reflecting upon their immaturity. Handley Moule has said, "Shall we call this a sentence of fine tact: beautifully conciliatory and endearing? Yes, but it is also perfectly sincere. True tact is certainly the skill of sympathetic love, but not the less genuine in its thought because that thought seeks to please and to win. He is glad to show himself as his disciples' brotherly friend: but then he first *is* such, and enjoys the character, and has continually found and felt his own soul made glad and strengthened by the witness for the Lord which far less gifted believers bore, as he and they talked together." It is beautiful to see Paul employing the passive form: "to the end ye may be established" (v. 11)—not "that I may establish you." He hides himself by expressing the result. Equally gracious is his "that I may be comforted together with you" (v. 12). Contact with kindred minds refreshes, and "he that watereth [others] shall be watered also himself" (Proverbs 11:25).