

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #38

October 24, 2021

The Most Unusual Intercessory Prayer in the Bible

Romans 9:1-5

I sometimes wish the Bible were like *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Although it would lose its literary flare and beauty, at least we would have precise definitions for all the doctrines of the faith. We could look up under "T" the Trinity and find an inspired definition. Or we could turn to "S" and discover the definition of salvation.

Prayer is yet another reality in Christian living for which I wish we had a pat definition. The best way to learn the nature of prayer is by looking at how the biblical authors and other people actually pray. When we do, we discover that prayer comes in several different expressions: (1) praise; (2) confession; (3) thanksgiving; (4) petition or supplication; (5) meditation on Scripture and God; and (6) intercession. B. H. Palmer, in his book on prayer, said that intercession is appropriately called the "language of love" because "in no part of prayer do we so grandly approach the priestly office as when breaking through the crust of selfishness, and forgetting our own wants and sins, we can take up the cares and woes of others – putting our souls in their souls' stead, that with priestly fervor we may lay them on the heart of God."

If we do not intercede in prayer on behalf of others it may be that we have misunderstood what intercession is all about. Intercession is not first me placing my burdens on God's heart, but rather God placing his burdens on our hearts. In other words, it is not so much our love for one another that prompts us to pray for each other. It is rather God's love for us, as he prompts us to pray for each other. When God desires to help one of his children, he prompts us to pray for that person. In this way there is a spiritual bonding of sorts between Christians. Intercessory prayer becomes the spiritual glue, as it were, that preserves unity within the body of Christ.

Today, though, as we turn to Romans 9, I want us to look at another aspect of intercessory prayer. I want us to consider prayer on behalf of the lost, the unsaved. Jesus himself prayed for the lost in John 17:20 when he said, "I do not ask for these only [these, being the disciples], but also for those who will believe in me through their word." In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul urged Timothy that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people." But there is no intercessory prayer for the lost that can compare to the one in Romans 9:1-5. But before we turn to it, I need to make two observations about Romans 9.

First, in our previous two studies in Romans 8:29-39 we saw that God is sovereign over the salvation of the elect. He foreknew them in eternity past and predestined them to be conformed to the image of Jesus.

And those whom he predestined, he called, and those whom he called, he justified, and those whom he justified, he glorified. And the question that many ask is understandable: If God is sovereign in the salvation of sinners, why pray? What role does interceding for others play in God's saving purposes?

One might conclude from Romans 8:29-39 that prayer is useless, a waste of time, that it simply does not make any difference. Why bother praying? But clearly, Paul disagrees. He is the one who affirmed God's eternal election and his determination to save his people. Yet Paul obviously believed that one of the primary means by which God accomplishes his eternal purpose is through the prayers of his people. God's ordained end, the salvation of the elect, will not occur apart from his ordained means, intercessory prayer. But our intercessory prayers are just as much a predestined feature in God's purpose as is his predestined end. If you still can't reconcile these two realities in your mind, don't worry. Paul can. Paul has. And God is calling us not so much to understand and decipher it all but to trust his wisdom and power and purpose to make it happen.

Second, I need to say something briefly about the purpose of Romans 9-11. Some argue that it sustains no relation to Romans 1-8 or Romans 12-16. It is just an excursus or theological bunny trail on which Paul launches out. But I believe chapters 9-11 are intimately and directly and organically related to Romans 1-8. You may recall that back in Romans 3:1-6 Paul introduced the problem posed by Jewish unbelief. He asked the question, "If some Jewish people reject Jesus and the gospel, will not their unbelief nullify the faithfulness of God?" Paul didn't directly answer the question. But now, in Romans 9-11, he does!

We also see the connection between 1-8 and 9-11 in another way. In Romans 8:28-30 Paul said that God's purpose for us is dependent on his calling us to himself through faith in Christ. But how can we believe this or have any confidence that it will come to pass if God's "call" to Israel or his commitment to Israel fails? The unbelief of Israel and their separation from Christ appears to call into question or to jeopardize the faithfulness of God in fulfilling his word. As Charles Cranfield put it: "If the truth is that God's purpose with Israel has been frustrated, then what sort of a basis for Christian hope is God's purpose? And if God's love for Israel (cf. e.g., Deut. 7:7f.; Jer. 31:3) has ceased, what reliance can be placed on Paul's conviction that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ (v. 38f.)?" (2:447).

Do you see the problem? If God's chosen people Israel were cut off from God, how can we today trust him when he says that nothing can separate us from his love for us in Christ? The integrity of God's promise is in jeopardy. The very goodness and faithfulness of God to fulfill his word to his people seem to be at stake. So, Romans 9-11 is designed primarily to assert and defend the goodness and faithfulness of God in spite of Israel's failure to turn to Jesus as the Messiah.

There are two parts to this paragraph, and we will look at the second one first. In vv. 4-5 Paul lists the many benefits and blessings that were granted to Israel as God's old covenant people. In vv. 1-3 Paul describes in graphic terms his love for them and his prayer that they would be saved. So let's look first at who it is that Paul prays for and why their unbelief poses such a threat to God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises.

The Blessings and Privileges of Israel (vv. 4-5)

The main reason for describing the privileges of Israel is to show how tragic her condition is as accursed and cut off from Christ. Israel is God's chosen people, with unparalleled privileges, and yet they are accursed and cut off from Christ. How can this be if God is faithful? What is it about Israel that makes their unbelief in Jesus so grievous and disturbing? Paul tells us by mentioning nine things.

- First, "they are Israelites." By this Paul is making reference to the title itself. It was considered an honor to bear this name. It was used with some measure of pride by the Jews. It is their way of saying, "We, not you, are the covenant people of God" (cf. Gen. 32:28).
- Second, "to them belong the adoption." It was a theocratic, national, corporate adoption, but still a matter of great privilege. You may recall what God told Moses to tell Pharaoh: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve me'" (Exod. 4:22-23).
- Third, there is "the glory," a reference to God's manifest presence among his old covenant people (see Exod. 24:16-17; 40:34-38; Lev. 16:2; 1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 7:1-2).
- Fourth, it was only Israel that had been given "the covenants." Paul is undoubtedly referring to the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the covenant God established with David. No other nation was in covenant with God.
- Fifth, "the giving of the law." It was only to Israel that God provided the Mosaic Law. No Gentile nation was so blessed.
- Sixth, there is "the worship" or "the service." This is a reference to all that was entailed by the temple and the activities that transpired there, especially the sacrificial system described in Leviticus (see Heb. 9:1-7).
- The supreme "temple service" was the Passover (Exodus 12:25-27).
- Seventh, "the promises" somewhat overlap with "the covenants" noted earlier. See Gal. 3:16; Rom. 15:8; Eph. 2:12; 2 Cor. 1:20.
- Eighth, "the patriarchs." This would include Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, among others.
- Ninth, the Messiah! The supreme privilege and honor is that the anointed one, Jesus Christ, descended as far his human nature is concerned from the Jewish people. Jesus was Jewish! Although he is not less than human, he is assuredly more. He is, as Paul says, "God over all."

The Burden and Passion of the Apostle (vv. 1-3)

Paul does not hesitate to speak his mind concerning the Jewish nation and their widespread rejection of Jesus (see Rom. 2:9, 17-29; 3:9, 29; 4:9-18; 9:25-10:5; 10:19-21). But there can be no question about his love for his fellow kinsmen according to the flesh. He loves the Jewish people, as he himself is Jewish. His love is expressed in Romans 10:1 where he says, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [the Jewish people] is that they may be saved." The depth of the apostle's love is nowhere more clearly seen than in what he says here in Romans 9:1-3. Here he goes far beyond what one might think is

required to affirm how sincere and genuine and passionate he is about the spiritual condition of the Jewish people who have rejected Jesus. Notice that he does it in five expressions.

(1) **“I am speaking the truth”** (v. 1a). This in itself should have been enough. Paul is committed to speaking the truth in every circumstance. Most of us are inclined to say, “Well, of course you are, Paul. None of us ever doubted that you would always tell us the truth. So why are you making such a big deal of it here?” Paul knew he had a good reputation among the people. He knew the Christians in Rome had confidence in him. But something was weighing so heavily on his heart that he couldn’t help but declare, “If you ever doubted me before, don’t doubt me now. I am speaking the truth.”

In just a moment you will see that there’s a good reason why Paul speaks this way. He is about to say something that will **stretch credulity to the breaking point**. He’s going to make a claim that he knows most people, even those who trust him implicitly, will think is a lie. The temptation they will face is to say: “Paul, come on, you’ve gone a bit too far this time. Cut out the exaggeration. Be real. Be honest. You obviously can’t expect us to take your words at face value.” That is why Paul insists: “As much as you may think I’m lying, as much as you may think I’ve lost my perspective, I assure you that I am speaking the truth.”

(2) “I am speaking the truth **in Christ**” (v. 1b). He seeks to ground or root his utterance in his personal relationship to Jesus as Lord. He means that his union with Christ, his relationship with Jesus, is, as it were, the orbit within which his emotions and beliefs move. His union with Christ is the spring from which his statement proceeds. What he is going to say derives its impulse and authenticity from the Lord Jesus himself. His statement is guaranteed accurate because it emerges from the one who could never lie: Jesus. Jesus is himself the personal guarantor of the truth of Paul’s words. Jesus is more than a character witness to Paul’s integrity. He has himself staked his own reputation on the accuracy of Paul’s declaration. It is as if Christ himself has come up alongside the apostle, placed his arm around him and his hand on Paul’s heart, and says: “I vouch for this man. I testify that his words are true. They are a perfect representation of what is in his heart.” But even that wasn’t enough! He continues.

(3) “I am speaking the truth in Christ – **I am not lying**” (v. 1c). It sounds a bit redundant. After all, if you are telling the truth then you are obviously not lying. Perhaps Paul includes this as the negative counterpart to the opening assertion. It is once again designed to reinforce the accuracy of what he is about to say. You may be inclined at this stage to say to Paul, “Hey, fella. Enough is enough. We believe you. Settle down. You’ve made your point.” But when you finally hear what he says about his love for the Jewish people, you will be sorely tempted to say in response, “Paul, you’re lying!” So, he goes on.

(4) “I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; **my conscience bears me witness**” (v. 1d). In Scripture the “conscience” is that faculty or dimension by which we judge ourselves and bring our own souls under moral scrutiny. At one time, conscience may accuse us. At another time, conscience may excuse us. It either approves or disapproves. Here Paul appeals to a clear conscience. It is as if he says, “I’ve searched my heart; I’ve laid it open before the Lord; I’ve beseeched him to alert me to anything wrong in what I’m about to say, and I’ve only received from conscience and Christ, ‘You’re spot on Paul. Your conscience is clean.’”

Paul makes reference to his conscience and the role it plays in holding him accountable in such texts as Acts 23:1 (where he testifies before Ananias the high priest) and 2 Corinthians 1:12 (where he appeals to “the testimony” of his conscience). He appeals to his son in the faith, Timothy, to hold “faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1:19). One of the qualifications for a deacon in the local church is that he/she “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9). And in 2 Timothy 1:3 Paul declares that he has served God “with a clear conscience.”

“Ok. Paul. We believe you. We really do. For heaven’s sake, get on with it.” That may be easy for you to say now. But wait until he actually makes his statement. That is why he seals it all with the fifth expression.

(5) “I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness *in the Holy Spirit*” (v. 1e). Earlier the guarantee came from his union with and relationship to Christ. Now it comes from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit himself enters into the issue to confirm and certify that Paul’s conscience in this matter is clear and upright. It’s as if Paul says, “You have to believe what I’m about to say because the Holy Spirit of God indwells me and governs my thoughts and even now gives shape to my words.”

But why all this elaborate, prolonged, repetitive, emphatic reassurance to us that his statement is the truth? Why appeal to both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as guarantors of the veracity of his declaration? It can only be because what he is about to say is utterly contrary to the natural instincts of human beings. Our immediate reaction to what Paul is about to say is: “You’re a liar!”

How deeply does Paul feel about what he is going to say? He says in v. 2 that he has “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” in his “heart.” Not only is this emotional distress crushing, it is “great,” it is also constant or “unceasing.” There is a burden that Paul carries that is oppressive and ceaseless. What can account for this? Moments earlier in chapter eight we find Paul at the pinnacle of joy, the mountaintop of exhilaration. Now we see him in the valley of sorrow and distress. Why? The answer comes in v. 3.

An Indescribably Heartfelt but Confusing Prayer (v. 3)

Paul is clearly burdened over the lost spiritual condition of the Jewish people. But is what we read in v. 3 an actual prayer? I think so, and for two reasons.

First, this verse is clearly parallel with the prayer of Moses in Exodus 32:11-14, 31-32, where Moses interceded for the Israelites following the incident in the wilderness of the golden calf. Second, the verb translated “wish” is used six other times in the NT, five of which clearly describe prayer (Acts 26:29; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; James 5:16; 3 John 2).

So, do you see now what Paul appears to be saying? He is praying: “Lord, if it were possible that sending me to hell would save my Jewish countrymen, do it!” There are several ways students of Romans have made sense of this bizarre request.

Some contend that Paul is saying at some time in the past, perhaps during a weak moment, he prayed such a prayer. But later, on second thought, he realized that this kind of prayer would be inappropriate for a Christian to pray. So, he ceased. Thus, we might translate the verse: “for I used to pray” or “I used to wish that I might be accursed for their sake, but I don’t anymore. I know better now.” Others argue that what Paul means is that he contemplated praying this way but never actually did. The idea came into his head to pray such a prayer, but he immediately dismissed it.

I think there is a better way of understanding what Paul is saying. The particular form of the verb Paul uses here suggests he is saying that he *would* have prayed for this *had it been permissible*, had it been possible for such a prayer to be effective. Had the end in view been something genuinely attainable he would have prayed. *If it were possible* for Paul to be cut off from Christ, and *if* by doing so his Jewish countrymen could have been saved, *he would have been willing* to pray for it to happen.

But Paul knew all too well that in theological fact it was impossible for him to be severed from Christ. Even if he could, it wouldn’t avail to save Jewish souls. Each person must believe in Jesus for himself/herself. He clearly taught earlier in Romans 5:9-10 and 8:31-39 that the Christian was inseparably united to Christ. The security of the believer precludes any such prayer that has for its end the loss of eternal life.

Also, if it were an obligatory act of Christian love that not only Paul but all of us should pray such a prayer, then those who might be saved as a result would also have to pray such a prayer. The end result would be that no one is saved, because each person prayed to be condemned in order that others might be saved. They in turn would pray the same prayer, and the cycle would go on without end.

So, how do we know that Paul was contemplating the loss of eternal life? The word translated “accursed” in v. 3 is the Greek word, *anathema*. This word is used consistently in the NT to describe someone who is delivered over to suffer divine wrath and eternal condemnation. See especially 1 Corinthians 12:3; 16:22; and Galatians 1:8-9. It means to come under the curse of divine wrath and be consigned to condemnation. If there is any doubt that this is what Paul had in mind, the following phrase seals the deal. There Paul says that he envisions being “cut off from Christ.” Nothing less than utter exclusion from the blessed presence of Jesus himself is in view (see Matt. 7:23; 25:41). The early church father, Chrysostom put it this way:

“What meanest thou, O Paul? From Christ? From thy Beloved? From him, from whom neither kingdom nor hell could separate thee, nor things seen, nor things conceived, nor other things so great – dost thou now pray to be accursed and separated from Him?”

Unfortunately, the artificial chapter divisions in our English Bibles obscures the force of Paul’s statement. When the book of Romans was read aloud in the churches of the first century, Romans 9:3 would have

echoed throughout the congregation only seconds after the closing words of 8:39 – “nothing else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Paul, then, is saying that so deep and genuine is his love for his Jewish brothers and sisters that he *could wish* to experience what no Christian will ever experience, if it were possible. But it isn’t.

The full force of this confession must not be missed. Paul is willing, were it possible and permissible, to take the place of the lost in hell. He is not saying that he is willing to give up his home or his property or his health or his family or his fame or fortune. He is saying, were it possible, I would have my name erased from the Lamb’s book of life if it would result in the salvation of the Jewish people. I love them so much, says Paul, that I would voluntarily forfeit the comfort, consolation, and eternal joy of Christ’s presence if only they themselves could experience it.

Remember that Paul never actually made this a part of his prayers to God. He knew that it was impossible for him to be cut off from Christ. He knew that even if he were cut off from Christ it would not result in the salvation of the Jewish people. But *if* it were possible, he was willing to do it. The response of many would be something like this:

“Ah hah! See, Paul, it’s *easy* for you to say that you *would* pray that way because you know you *can’t* pray that way!”

Paul’s response would be as follows:

“And I knew that this is precisely how you’d react when I told you what was in my heart. That’s why I said it over and over again, ‘I’m not lying. I’m telling the truth. Christ bears witness to what I say. The Holy Spirit bears witness to what I say.’”

Now you can see why Paul went to such seemingly absurd repetitive lengths to confirm the truth of what he was about to say. Again, the reason for Paul going to such elaborate lengths to confirm the truthfulness of what he says is because it is so ***utterly contrary to the natural instincts*** of human beings that our immediate response is to accuse the apostle of lying to us.

How passionate are you for lost souls?

Many of you are faithful to share the gospel with non-Christians. But when it comes to the majority of us here at Bridgeway, that is to say, when I think of our church collectively, we fail at evangelism. And that *must* come to an end. We are committed to being a church where the gospel is not only proclaimed from a pulpit on Sunday but is a routine feature of our lives individually at school and in the neighborhood and at the office. So why is it that most of us fail when it comes to actually speaking to lost souls about the saving grace of Jesus Christ? Ask that question in evangelical circles today and you’ll get a lot of answers, all of which are to some degree true and accurate. You’ll hear things like:

- “I’m afraid of confrontation and it makes me uncomfortable to get into a discussion about religion with someone else.”
- “I don’t think I would have good answers to the tough questions an unbeliever might ask me, and I don’t want to look like a dufus for having to say, ‘I don’t know.’”
- “I don’t actually know many non-Christians so the opportunity to share my faith doesn’t exist.”
- “Even if I did know some non-Christians, I don’t know how to share the gospel. I’ve never done it, and no one has ever taken the time to explain to me how it’s done.”
- “I’m afraid of rejection.”

All these answers are, to some degree, accurate. But none of them touches the primary reason why we fail at evangelism. And what is that reason? Simply this: ***We have not been sufficiently gripped by the reality of hell and the fact that people without Jesus Christ are going there.*** I didn’t say that you don’t believe in hell. I said that our hearts have not been “sufficiently gripped” by the reality of hell.

If we sincerely believed in the reality of hell and that people without Christ are going there, our hearts would break. And if our hearts were broken for lost souls, our prayers for their salvation would be passionate and persistent and radically different from what they currently are. And if our prayers were different, both the opportunities and courage to share our faith would greatly increase. And if our opportunities and courage to bear witness to Christ were to increase, we wouldn’t stink at evangelism!

Needless to say, hell isn’t politically correct today. It’s not even religiously correct in some circles and in some churches. Some of you believe that it’s not polite to talk about hell. It makes people feel uneasy and uncomfortable. There are probably a few here today who are even now plotting their exit strategy. They’ve got one of several options, perhaps the best being: “I’ll make it look like I’m going to the bathroom or stepping out for a refill of my coffee cup, and then I’ll just slip out into the parking lot and go home and no one will even notice I’m gone.”

Let’s get to the bottom line. If there is ***not*** a hell and if people are ***not*** going there, ***evangelism is stupid.*** Worse still, it is a colossal waste of time, energy, and money. But if there ***is*** a hell and people ***are*** going there we simply cannot afford to fail at evangelism any longer. Some of you may think that evangelism is intolerant and intrusive and displays a lack of love for the person you’re trying to convince of the truth of Christianity. If that’s you, learn from the insights of a well-known atheist in our country, the magician Penn Jillette, of Penn and Teller fame.

“I’ve always said I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize. If you believe that there’s a heaven and a hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life – and you think it’s not really worth telling them because it would make it socially awkward, . . . how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed without a shadow of doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn’t believe it, there’s a certain point where I tackle you, and this [that is, eternal life and death] is more important than that [being hit by a truck].”

Dear friend, such is the depth of love and concern Paul had for his non-Christian friends and countrymen. Is it any wonder why he was so passionate and effective in his evangelistic efforts? Paul didn’t stink at

evangelism because he knew that hell was real, he knew that people were going there, and his heart was broken. He endured daily, hourly “sorrow and unceasing anguish” in his heart. So what should we do?

First, pray, but not just any prayer. Commit yourself today to pray every day like this:

“Oh God, illumine my mind to understand the reality and horror of hell. Give me insight into the inescapable certainty of eternal condemnation for those who die without Jesus Christ. And Lord, as you intensify in my heart the truth of an eternity separated from Christ, break my heart for lost souls! Give me the same ‘great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart’ that the apostle felt in his. Fill me with such passion for their welfare and your worship that I refuse to stink at evangelism any longer.”

Second, identify and locate a non-Christian. That is not something some of us do well. Pray that God would lead you across their path and into their lives, and then seize the opportunity to explain to them the gospel and commit yourself to intercede for their souls as Paul did for the Jewish people. Then do it again.