

## B. Paul and the Romans - Thanksgiving and Intention (1:8-15)

Though Paul had never ministered personally to the Romans, he had nonetheless been carrying on a ministry on their behalf, namely a ministry of *prayer*. This pattern of constant prayer for the saints marked Paul's apostolic ministry, even as it reflected both his gospel perspective and ministerial heart (1 Corinthians 1:4-8; Ephesians 1:15-17; Philippians 1:3-5; etc.). In all his labors as Christ's ambassador his great desire was that men would be presented complete in Him. For this reason the souls of men weighed heavy on Paul's heart, to the point that his "*concern for all the churches*" was the greatest burden he carried, more than his imprisonments, persecution, and personal hardships (2 Corinthians 11:23-28; cf. also 1:3-7). Paul was preeminently a man of intercessory prayer.

1. And fundamental to the content of his prayer on behalf of the saints was the matter of *thanksgiving* (1:8). It is mentioned in virtually all of Paul's references to his prayers, and he affords it a place of prominence in this epistle: "***First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.***" Some have concluded that Paul had merely intended to enumerate to the Romans several components of his prayer for them, and the absence of a *second, third*, etc., is the result of him developing the first point and never returning to his enumeration. What is more likely is that, by introducing his statement with the term *first*, Paul was indeed giving prominence to the matter of thanksgiving. Five things regarding it are important to observe:
  - a. The first is that Paul's gratitude was ***directed to God***. This is the case with all of his prayers of thanksgiving, and expresses his conviction that sanctification, and not simply justification, is a sovereign work of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, 15:56-58; 2 Corinthians 2:12-16, 4:1-15, 8:9-17; Ephesians 1:3-2:10; Philippians 1:3-6; Colossians 1:3-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; etc.). Therefore, whatever was to be commended in the saints and acknowledged with gratitude had reference to the grace and power of the triune God: the Father who had chosen them, the Son who had cleansed them and clothed them with His own righteousness, and the Spirit who had sealed and secured them in grace and was accomplishing their transformation into the image of their Savior.
  - b. The second thing to note is that Paul offered up his prayer of thanksgiving ***through Jesus Christ***. This can be interpreted in two ways. Paul could have been referring to the *ongoing intercession* of Christ by which the prayers of His people are continually mediated before God (Romans 8:31-34). The second interpretation is that Paul had in mind more specifically Christ's *work of atonement* by which men gain open and acceptable access to God (Ephesians 2:11-18, 3:8-12; Hebrews 6:13-20, 9:11-14, 10:1-22; cf. also Romans 8:12-17). This latter interpretation does not exclude the former one; in fact, it implies it as a consequence. But because it addresses the foundational issue in Christ's mediation it is to be preferred.

- c. Third, Paul's prayer of thanksgiving concerned *all the church at Rome*. This universal thankfulness does not indicate that he knew every person in the congregation there to be a true Christian. There is no way he could have such insight, especially since he had had no personal interaction with the Roman church. Rather, Paul's first concern was that the community of the saints at Rome know that he regarded them as a legitimate work of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the widespread testimony of their faith. But second, he also wanted them to know that his ministerial burden extended to the whole body of believers at Rome, and not simply those individuals whom he knew personally. Even those who had not met him were the objects of his gratitude and intercession (cf. Colossians 2:1-3).
- d. A fourth observation is that Paul's prayer of thanksgiving had reference to the Romans' *faith*, and specifically that their faith was being "*proclaimed throughout the whole world.*" That this would be the focal point of Paul's gratitude points to two considerations.
- 1) The first is that the widespread awareness of the faith of the saints at Rome bore witness to its *genuineness*. There would be no reason for their faith to be the object of discussion and praise throughout the Christian world unless it had shown itself to be the fruit of an authentic work of grace, and for that Paul was grateful to God.
  - 2) But a second consideration probably more closely captures Paul's thinking at the time, for it proceeds out of the redemptive-historical perspective that dominates not only the previous verses, but also the entire epistle. That consideration is the *remarkableness* of the Romans' faith. In verses 1:5-6 Paul emphasized that the opening of salvation to the entire world marks the new aeon of the Spirit, and that his own apostolic calling was to "*bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.*" Paul viewed the Romans' participation in the saving gospel of Jesus Christ as evidence that the promise of God regarding a global covenant people was indeed being realized. Furthermore, that God was bringing into the covenant community not merely pagan Gentiles, but those associated with the capital of the godless and indomitable Roman Empire, showed that Christ's kingdom was triumphing over the kingdoms of the world as revealed by God to His prophets (cf. especially Daniel 2:25-45, 7:9-28; also Revelation 11:15-19).

The profound significance of this new paradigm is easy for the contemporary reader to overlook, since he is so far removed from the period in which God was uniquely the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the covenant nation of Israel. But at the time that Paul wrote his epistles that Israelite structure had been in place for two thousand years, so that the concept of the New Covenant Church was still new and very radical.

Yet Paul understood the significance of the Romans' faith: *Christ's kingdom had come, and by the power of His Spirit was now moving inexorably toward the day when the knowledge of Yahweh would fill the earth as the waters cover the sea* (ref. Romans 11:1-36). And not only did Paul understand this, but increasingly so did the community of believers scattered throughout the Empire as the news of God's grace in Rome spread far and wide.

It is also to be observed that Paul's gratitude to God stood upon the *fact* of the Romans' faith, not its *fruitfulness*. He made no remark concerning the strength or maturity of their faith, but simply that its *existence* was being noted and proclaimed throughout the world. This observation, too, lends support to the conclusion that Paul's emphasis in thanksgiving was redemptive-historical. That "the obedience of faith" had reached even to the great city of Rome was for Paul cause for thanksgiving and exultation.

- e. Finally, it is crucial to note that Paul's prayer of thanksgiving was not an occasional phenomenon, but the *continual characteristic* of his prayer life. His grammar indicates this, but it is further supported by his repeated assertions to the saints in his various epistles. *In Paul's estimation, a heart filled with gratitude is fundamental to the Christian's inward disposition and interaction with God.* Perhaps the best proof of this is the contrast he painted in his Ephesian epistle between the "children of light" and those who walk in darkness (5:1-17). As those who are now "light in the Lord," the saints are to put off the "deeds of darkness" that consist in such things as immorality, impurity, greed, filthiness, silly talk, and coarse jesting (cf. Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:1-11). And in place of these the children of God are to substitute the "giving of thanks." The implication is clear:

*Even as all of these expressions of ungodliness are characteristic marks of the sons of darkness, so a disposition of thankfulness to God uniquely distinguishes the sons of light. For ingratitude, too, is a universal mark of the sons of disobedience.* (Romans 1:18-21; cf. 2 Timothy 3:1-5)

Of all the things that testify of a person's faith, nothing provides a greater witness to it than a life manifesting sincere gratitude. This was Paul's conviction, even as he declared that a heart overflowing with gratefulness to God through Christ is a characteristic expression of being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-20; cf. also Colossians 2:6-7, 3:15-17).

In summary, Paul's thankfulness concerning the Romans was focused upon the witness of their faith in all the world. It is doubtless true that he was grateful for God's renewing grace in their souls. *But his gratitude was compelled more by the fact that the widespread proclamation of their faith testified to men everywhere of the goodness, mercy, power, and faithfulness of the God who had now, in the fullness of the times, inaugurated the long-promised kingdom of His glorious Son.*

For many centuries Yahweh's prophets had proclaimed His sovereign excellence and goodness as evidenced by His ongoing faithfulness, lovingkindness, and preserving power toward Israel. But even more, the prophets insisted that God's past and present faithfulness provided the basis for Israel's confident faith that He would indeed keep His promise to one day bring the kingdom of His Servant, Shepherd, and Prince; the kingdom of all righteousness that would fill the earth and embrace men of every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. When God manifested His great power, mercy, and faithfulness to His oath to Abraham by delivering Israel out of her bondage in Egypt, the nation was provoked to sing the Lord's praises in the Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-21). How much more would men be moved to sing of His sovereign greatness when, as promised, Yahweh brought His great redemption - the final deliverance from sin, death, and hell which all previous acts of redemption only foreshadowed and eagerly anticipated? In that day the *Song of Moses* was to find its own fulfillment in the *Song of the Lamb* (Revelation 15:1-4).

And so Paul's profound and abiding sense of gratitude looked beyond the salvation of individual souls to what that salvation represented. He understood that every time a person was delivered from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ, it bore witness that David's promised seed had come and that, even as He had assumed His everlasting reign, so He was building the Lord's house (2 Samuel 7:1-16; cf. Matthew 16:13-18; Acts 2:1-36; 1 Peter 2:4-6). Yahweh's ancient and perpetual word of promise, settled and secured by His own sovereign power and longed for in faith for generations, had finally been fulfilled. As promised, He had "*set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all the kingdoms of the earth, but it will itself endure forever*" (Daniel 2:44).

God's promise to the prophets of a glorious, everlasting kingdom, now fulfilled in the Son, meant that men were no longer obligated to hope in eager anticipation. The day of God's visitation had come; He had "*accomplished redemption for His people, and raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant.*" Longing was to be replaced with shouts of joy and thanksgiving.

*"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord... 'My word shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up; and instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up; and it will be a memorial to the Lord, for an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.'"*  
(Isaiah 55:6-13)