

YOUR MOST STRATEGIC
INVESTMENT

DANIEL HENDERSON

Your Most Strategic Investment

Hidden away at the end of the fifteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the believers in Rome, we find a powerful and very practical guide for praying for our Christian leaders – whether they be pastors, missionaries, church staff or lay leaders in the congregation. In Romans 15:30-33 (ESV), Paul writes:

"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, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen."

Churches Help Their Leaders Succeed

One of my treasured ministry colleagues is Leith Anderson. Leith pastored for years in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, where I also had the privilege of pastoring a church across town. Over the years we've had numerous conversations about life and ministry. He now serves as the President of The National Association of Evangelicals, representing Christians to the secular culture of our day.

Recently we had a discussion about what makes pastoral ministry so difficult in today's environment. Leith made a statement I'll never forget. He said, "The biggest difference between pastoring today and 100 years ago is that back then the only way to compare your pastor with another pastor was by going on vacation. Today every pastor in America is compared to a composite of the 'best of the best'." Think about that statement.

Typically every pastor in America is sized up by his congregation within minutes. Often parishioners conclude that the pastor is not as deep as John MacArthur, or as interesting as Charles Swindoll. He's not as caring as Charles Stanley or as clever as Andy Stanley. On top of it all he certainly doesn't have the hair and the teeth of Joel Osteen. Of course none of those notable pastors are actually as good as we think they are because we get the edited versions.

And so it happens all across America. People in the pew look at their own pastor and wonder, "Where did we get this guy? Can't we do better?" It's not an easy day to be a pastor.

Leith said something else in that same conversation that I'll never forget. He said, "I'm convinced that churches do more to help pastors succeed than pastors do to help churches succeed." That's very counterintuitive because we always think it's all about the leader and his influence in the congregation. But there are environments that churches can develop that make fruitful pastoral ministry easier to achieve than in other settings. With that in mind, I believe we all have a role.

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TWO OBSERVATIONS FROM THE JOURNEY

I am passionate about this. Over the course of about 25 years I pastored three churches. In two of those churches I followed scandalous moral failures. In both cases the fallout led to serious financial problems, which left the congregations in a very tough position. Of course, these were very challenging leadership assignments.

There were two things I learned to be true in both of those situations. First, these were good men who, over time, made bad decisions that ultimately cost them their ministry and much more. Secondly, their congregations failed to pray for them as they should have.

At one time, *Focus on the Family* estimated that 1500 pastors leave the ministry every month in the United States. These departures are typically due to conflict among the leadership. Sometimes the resignation is attributed to marriage problems, challenges in the family and, sadly, moral failure. Many more studies have noted the many pressures and perplexities faced by today's pastors. ¹

The real battle today is not focused in the White House or Congress. It is centered on the Church. Satan is going after pastors, not because they are more important than other Christians but because they are a strategic target.

In Romans 15:30-33, Paul calls us all to make a strategic investment. This is a call to powerful spiritual counterattack. The battle is fought in the prayer room, where we can partner with God in making a real difference in the health and vitality of the church.

The Battle is Won or Lost in Prayer

I'm not much of a bowler but I've learned one thing: It's almost impossible to get a strike if you don't hit the head pin. And I've learned about church work and the spiritual battle, and the ministry of the Gospel. The enemy is always trying to get a strike. Not because spiritual leaders are more important, they're just more strategic. Whether it's a pastor, a missionary, an elder, a staff member, or a ministry leader, we are in an all-out war and the enemy knows his game.

As Paul was writing his letter to the believers in Rome, he'd been collecting an offering, or "love gift", among the churches in an area called Macedonia, which is modern day Greece. He was going to take this offering and deliver it to the persecuted believers in Jerusalem, because they were in a tough situation and needed resources. The church in Jerusalem was the mother ship of sorts, so Paul planned to take this love gift back to them to help and encourage them.

From there he planned to go to Rome, then onto Spain. He describes his intentions in Romans 15:22-29. We know that Paul never made it to Spain; in fact the journey is quite interesting as you'll see. The Bible says, *"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps."*

Paul knew that talking to men about God is a great thing, but talking to God about men is the first thing. And so before Paul sets out on this journey, he essentially says: *"I need you to pray for me because the battle is won or lost in prayer."*

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Why Should You Pray For Your Leaders

OUR DUTY TO PRAY

Notice Paul's opening admonition, "Now I appeal to you, brothers." The familiar Greek word here is *parakaleo* which means "to come alongside." Paul essentially says, "I'm coming alongside to encourage and strengthen you, and asking you to pray for me." Now, we all know that we have a duty to pray. We know we ought to pray for our leaders.

But 'ought' doesn't always work, does it? In reality we could all frankly admit, "Man, I've really blown it. I haven't remembered to pray for my leaders. In fact, I struggle to pray at all." Paul knew that there had to be something more than just a sense of duty.

OUR REGARD FOR CHRIST

This leads us to his further encouragement in verse 30: "...by our Lord Jesus Christ." This is literally a reference to praying because of our regard for Jesus. *The Amplified Version* reads, "for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Of course, we know that prayer is impossible apart from the work of Christ. How could unholy people come into the presence of the Holy God? It is possible only because Christ died on the cross. And when he did, the veil that separated us from the Holy One was torn from top to bottom based upon Christ's finished work. And now we have access to the very presence of God.

But here we find a different application. This is the idea of praying because of our regard for Christ. This is the idea of a worship-based approach to prayer. We don't just pray for our leaders because we feel guilty when we forget. We pray for our leaders because of who Jesus is.

Of course, that's what's really in focus here: the renown of Jesus was the real issue of Paul's efforts. This is also what is at stake in your community and around the world. It is our worship and love for Jesus that motivates us to pray. Our zeal for His name and fame compel us to intercede for our leaders.

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OUR LOVE FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

There's one more compelling motivational trigger here. Notice Paul's words: "...and by the love of the Spirit." This literally is a reference to our love for the Holy Spirit. We know the Holy Spirit loves us, we know the Spirit gives us love in our hearts, but the most literal idea here is our love for the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying, "I want you to pray because you love the person and work of the Spirit."

There's an amazing connection between prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, so Paul is saying, "I'm encouraging you to pray, and you know you ought to. But really, I want you seek the Lord on my behalf because you regard Christ and you love the person and work of the Holy Spirit." This provided enduring motivation for this most strategic investment.

How You Should Pray For Your Leaders

So then “How should we pray?” What kind of commitment does this demand of us? Paul answers in verse 30 when he says, “I want you to strive together with me in your prayers to God in my behalf.” Now, this is a little beyond our normal prayer routines. This exceeds our typical prayer nod: “Lord, thank you for this burger and fries and bless our leaders, amen.” Something much greater is in view here.

The Greek word Paul uses is *sunagonizomai*. The preposition *sun* means “together with.” Of course, *agonizomai* is our English language equivalent of “agonizing.” In the New Testament this word carries the meaning of “contending with adversaries; to fight, to strain.” This is pretty serious stuff. Paul is basically saying, “I’m feeling such deep agony in my heart about what God is calling me to do and about what’s at stake here. I sense the serious spiritual battles we’re facing. I’m asking you to feel that same passion in your heart as you pray.”

The late David Wilkerson, a well-known pastor and the founder of Teen Challenge, spoke about our need for a greater sense of spiritual agony in a powerful message titled “*Anguish*.” I highly recommend you watch it. Wilkerson declares:

Whatever happened to anguish in the house of God? Whatever happened to anguish in the ministry? It’s a word you don’t hear in this pampered age. Anguish means, extreme pain and distress – the emotions so stirred that it becomes painful; acute, deeply felt inner pain because of conditions about you, in you, or around you. Anguish ...the sorrow and agony of God’s heart.

We’ve held on to our religious rhetoric and our revival talk, but we’ve become so passive. All true passion is birthed out of anguish. All true passion for Christ comes out of a baptism of anguish. You search the scripture and you find that when God determined to recover a ruined situation He would share His own anguish for what God saw happening to his people. He would find a praying man and he would take that man and literally baptize him in anguish.²

We all wonder how we can pray with this kind of intensity. The answer is again rooted in our great regard for Christ and our love for the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is as much God sharing his heart with us as it is us sharing our heart with Him. Paul is saying “I want you to let God share his heart with you as he has with me and I want us all together to agonize in prayer for the work of the Gospel.” Prayer is a high and holy calling that requires a passionate and agonizing heart.

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What You Should Pray For Your Leaders

Now it gets very practical. Often we wonder exactly how to best pray for our spiritual leaders. In this passage, Paul gives us three very specific and important prayer targets.

PRAYERS FOR PROTECTION

In verse 31 he says, *"I want you to pray that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea."* Remember, he's taking a love gift from Greece into Jerusalem. And Paul is not the most popular guy in Jerusalem. In fact, these Jews despise him and have tried to kill him in various locations and numerous times. Paul knows he's walking right back into the lion's mouth when he does this and he knows his life is on the line.

We should note, however, that Paul really doesn't care whether he lives or dies. That's not his motivation in asking for prayer. In fact in Philippians he says, *"To live is Christ and to die is gain."* (Philippians 1:21). If you look at Acts 20, it actually tells us that while he's journeying from Greece to Jerusalem, he stops in a place called Miletus. There, he meets with the elders of the church in Ephesus. Knowing the risk involved in this assignment, he asserts, *"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."* (Acts 20:22-23). In light of these dangers Paul declares, *"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."* (Acts 20:24) So Paul is praying for protection, not for the sake of his own skin, but so that he can complete the mission that God has assigned to him.

Today, we have brothers and sisters all around the world who are being jailed, tortured and brutally murdered for their faith. We've seen the horrific videos and news reports. This world is increasingly an enemy of the Cross. We must pray for the protection of national Christian leaders in other places and for missionaries who serve all around the world. But what about here in North America?

Western believers often do not feel so compelled to pray this way since our leaders are seldom threatened. Yet, I am reminded of a story told me by a church member named Ted. While on a plane in California, Ted sat

next to a man who appeared to be praying and fasting during the flight. Ted eventually asked the gentleman about his evident devotion. Indeed, the man was praying and fasting – to Satan. Ted learned that this man had joined other Satanists in a commitment to fast and pray once a week for the downfall of the marriages of Christian leaders. Indeed, the battle is real, the attacks are subtle and our prayers are vital.

Pastor John Piper has reminded us that *“Until you believe that life is war you cannot know what prayer is for.”* Piper goes on to say, *“The number one reason why prayer malfunctions in the hands of believers is that they try to turn a wartime walkie-talkie into a domestic intercom.”*³ Let’s admit it. Many believers view prayer as a room service intercom to get a refill of lemonade and another pillow under their arm. The fact of the matter is prayer is a war time walkie-talkie to call in spiritual reinforcements for the battle. Paul is aware of that, and pleads for the believers in Rome to gather and pray for him as he heads back into Jerusalem.

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PRAYERS FOR PROSPERITY

Paul’s second prayer focus is given in hopes that the Lord will God will bless his ministry efforts. Notice what he says, *“And that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.”* (Romans 15:31b) To understand this we must remember there were some in Jerusalem who didn’t even think Paul should be preaching the Gospel to non-Jews. They felt that any who became Christians also needed to be circumcised like the Jews and follow many of the Old Testament regulations. These “Judiazers” were skeptical and suspicious of Paul’s very ministry.

Paul knew this whole endeavor could go upside-down quickly. They could reject the love offering. Some might question his methodology. Controversy and division could break out. The entire effort could blow up in his face. Earnest prayer was needed that the hearts of God’s people would be receptive.

This is the reality pastors face today. When I was young in the ministry, in my late 20’s, I was part of a church planting team in the Seattle area. We were new to ministry and struggling in our assignment. We brought in a wise and experienced consultant to help us navigate our young and fledgling church plant. His name was Al Broom. I will never forget the day when we were sitting at the table with Al when he asked, “Young men, do you know what the number one problem of the local church is?” We had lots of smart answers, but we were wrong. He said, “The number one problem of the

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local church is the toleration of known sin." Then Al inquired, "And you know what the number one sin of the local church is?" Again, our speculations were incorrect. Al affirmed, "The number one sin of the local church is a critical spirit." More than 30 years I am thoroughly convinced that Al was right.

I've heard it said, "If the devil doesn't get you outside of church, the saints will get you inside the church." We are all aware of the devastating impact of internal divisions and church splits. What do we do? We pray. We ask God to work in hearts, making them open, receptive and supportive toward the ministry of the leaders.

PRAYERS FOR PROVISION

Paul's third prayer request gets very personal. Paul writes in verse 32, "So that by God's will I may come to you with joy." He's saying, "Pray that I keep my joy." Hebrews 13:17 says joyless leaders are unprofitable leaders.

Paul is being very transparent here as he completes his request that he will "*find refreshing rest*" (Romans 15:32) among the believers in Rome. Essentially Paul confesses, "When I arrive I'm going to be tired. This journey is going to be hard. It's going to be a battle. If I survive and if the love gift is delivered – I will need some refreshment by the time I arrive in Rome."

After a long, demanding journey Paul anticipated making it to Rome, by God's will and with his joy intact, but needing personal refreshment from the saints there. Whether they speak openly about it or not, our leaders today need the refreshment of encouraging words, thoughtful actions and supportive expressions of kindness

HIGH IMPACT PRAYERS

When we review Acts 21:17 – 28:31, we find the unfolding of this amazing story that demonstrates the answers to these prayers. In summary, Paul's gift to the believers in Jerusalem was accepted. In addition, the Jerusalem church rejoiced in the work of the Gospel and wanted to learn more about the spread of grace. This is an answer to the passionate prayers of the believers in Rome.

However, while Paul was in Jerusalem, the antagonistic Jews attacked Paul again, seeking to kill him. The Roman military, seeing the violent scene, decided to sequester and question Paul. In the meantime 40 of

the Jews vow to not eat or drink anything until they have murdered Paul. Providentially, Paul's nephew overhears their plot and reports the scheme to Paul and the Roman guards. Learning of their murderous plots the Romans decide to send Paul to Caesarea under the guard of 470 soldiers! (Acts 23:23) While in Caesarea, Paul appeared before several Roman magistrates. Eventually, Paul appealed to Caesar, since he was a Roman citizen, and was placed on a ship to Rome. On the way, they encountered ship wreck. Everyone aboard the ship survived only because they complied with the advice of Paul in the midst of the storm. While on the Island of Malta, Paul was bitten by a viper – only to survive it all. Throughout each stage of this amazing story we see Paul's life being preserved by God. And we cannot forget, the Roman church was agonizing in prayer for Paul's protection.

Eventually, Paul was able to sail to Rome but was under house arrest during the entire time, so he did not make it to the 11:00 a.m. worship service to enjoy the refreshment of the saints there. However, it is apparent that believers were able to come to him and refresh his spirit. Most notable was a man named Onesiphorus, of whom Paul spoke in his final letter (2 Timothy 1:16-18). Again, this businessman from Ephesus, who was not ashamed of Paul's chains, became an answer to prayer as he often "refreshed" Paul.

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THE BLESSING OF INTERCESSION

Paul's appeal for prayer ends with this benediction, "*Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen*". Paul knew that a praying church experiences divine peace, even through the storms of life. Paul learned and taught that prayer replaces worry. (Philippians 4: 4-6). Prayer produces a Christ-alignment in our hearts that results in unity, trust and spiritual health. For the sake of the Gospel, for the good of our leaders and for the spiritual health of our own hearts – let's resolve to pray for those whom God has appointed to shepherd our souls. It is our most strategic investment.

¹ <http://www.standingstonementors.org/ourguest.htm>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGMG_PVaJol

³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/prayer-the-work-of-missions>

Your Most Strategic Investment Prayer Guide

Romans 15:30–33: 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 appeal to you, brothers"

Lord, today I want to respond to your call to pray for _____
_____(leader's name) recognizing my solemn duty to make this most strategic investment through my personal intercession.

REVERENCE

"by our Lord Jesus Christ"

First, I pray because of my regard for Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus, I praise you today because You are ... (Reflect on the person, names and work of Christ as you worship)

"and by the love of (for) the Spirit,"

I also want to pray because of my love for the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit of God, I love you today because ... (Reflect on the person, names and work of the Holy Spirit as you express your love)

RESPONSE

"to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,"

Today, I want to "agonize" in prayer. I confess my lack of passion and concern because of ... (Confess those things that have been a distraction or in any way have detracted from your spiritual zeal)

I ask that you give me a deeper sense of the serious reality and consequences of the spiritual battle in today's world ...

I also ask you to now fill me with YOUR burden and heartbreak for the lost. Give me a heart to feel what you feel toward this broken world ...

REQUESTS

“that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,”

Today I pray that you will protect _____
from the schemes of the enemy. (Pray for spiritual, mental, emotional,
family, moral, financial protection – as the Spirit directs)

“and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,”

Today I pray that you will prosper the ministry efforts
of _____
(Pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal His plans to your leader. Ask the Lord
to create receptive hearts, a willing spirit and an authentic unity among
the people this leader serves)

*“so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed
in your company.”*

Today, I pray that you will provide for the persona needs
of _____
(Pray for a spirit of refreshment and that individuals will be
prompted to minister to this leader in radical ways)

READINESS

“May the God of peace be with you all.”

Lord, I pray that your peace will rule in the hearts of your people as
we encounter ... (Anticipate the many temptations and evils that will
confront the church, as you trust the God of Peace to overcome all
turmoil and guard His people in every situation)

“Amen.”

Notes

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6:4

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