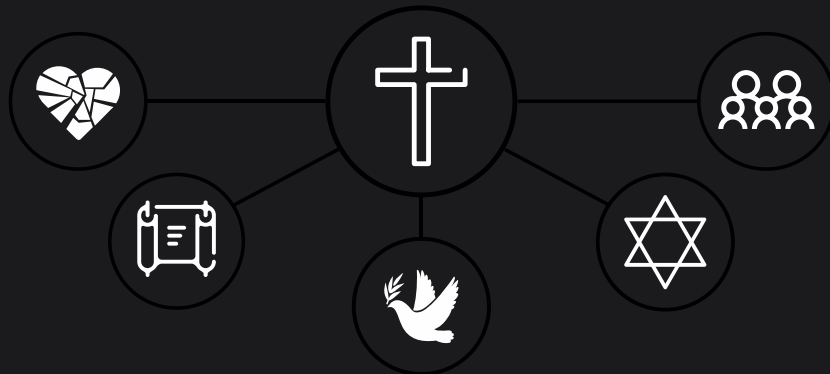




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Living with Purpose

Text: Romans 15:14-33

Date: July 16, 2023

Main Idea: A believer's call is to follow Christ, our ministry is an overflow of that walk with Him.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 15: 14-33

- **Review:**

The first 11 chapters of Romans are all about what God has done in providing us salvation and the final 5 chapters tell us how we should respond.

Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright makes the statement, "We ask, 'Where does God fit into the story of my life?' when the real question is, 'Where does my little life fit into the great story of God's mission?'" Paul continues to press into the reader of Romans that God's *Storyline* continues with us.

Highlight – What stands out?

1. According to Romans 15:14-16, for what purpose did Paul say he had “written boldly” to the Romans?
2. For what three things does Paul commend his readers?
3. What assignment did God give to Paul (Romans 15:15-21)?
4. Paul’s letter to the Romans was likely written from the church in Corinth at about AD 57. After reading Romans 15:23-33, what do these verses reveal about Paul’s travel plans? Why has Paul never been able to visit Rome?
- 5.. Why was Paul headed for Jerusalem (Romans 15:26-29)?

6. What Instructions for praying does Paul give to the Romans (Romans 15:30-33)?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Why is Paul referenced as a “priest of the gospel of God” in Romans 15:16?
2. What did Paul have a passion for, according to vv. 20-21? How does v. 22 prove that Paul prioritized his passion?
3. In review of Romans 15:25-33, how does the collection for the poor believers of Jerusalem reinforce what Paul has been saying throughout Romans concerning the church?
4. What have the Jews done for the Gentiles (see Romans 11:11; Romans 15:8-9, 27)? What does it mean for Jewish Christians to be a family with Gentiles and for Gentile believers to be family with the Jewish believers?
5. Why is it so crucial for Paul to enlist the prayers of the Roman church for the journey ahead of him?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. What do you see in Paul's ministry that you would like to imitate in your own work for God?
2. What is Paul's purpose for instructing the believers? Who is instructing you in the faith so that you can instruct others?
3. What principles for praying can you gather from the brief instructions Paul gives in Romans 15:30-33?
4. There is no evidence to suggest that Paul ever got to Spain, but his desire to go there and establish a new ministry was one of the reasons he wrote the letter to the Romans. What lesson is there for us in the fact that Paul wrote Romans in preparation for a vision that he may never have realized?
5. In what ways is Paul's attitude toward Jewish and Gentile believers (Romans 15) a model for our behavior toward other groups that may be in opposition at times?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. ***Class Brainstorm Session:*** In preparation for class time, go to our Missions page <https://ibclr.org/for-the-world>. As a class, how can you help support and encourage missionaries sent by Immanuel and the International Mission Board (through the Southern Baptist Convention) in a similar fashion to what Paul wanted the Roman believers to do for him? Why is this kind of help vital to the mission? You could read a story of a missionary from the IMB website (they have missionary profiles) or invite an Immanuel Strategy Leader to class (like Paraguay, NYC, Brazil, San Diego, or Las Vegas).

2. Can you think of someone who is fulfilling his or her God-given purpose? What about him/her makes you feel that way?
3. Frederick Buechner once wrote that your purpose in life is where your greatest passion meets the world's greatest need. Can you think of how your passion could be used to meet a need for the kingdom of God?

Commentary: Romans 15:14-33 by John Stott

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.

Conclusion: The providence of God in the ministry of Paul

Romans 15:14–16:27

The great exposition (chapters 1–11) and the great exhortation (12:1–15:13) are over. Paul's readers may well be thinking that his two benedictions (15:5, 13) are the conclusion of his letter. But he has not finished yet. He intends to return to the question of his relations with the Roman church, which he began to open up earlier (1:8–13). He wants to take them into his confidence about the salient characteristics of his ministry, which will throw light for them on why he has not yet visited them and on his plan to do so soon.

But first he wonders whether they may have been offended by the fact, contents or tone of his letter. Has he been presumptuous to address a church

he did not found and has never visited? Has he given the impression that he regards their Christianity as defective and immature? Has he been too outspoken? The apostle seems to be experiencing a twinge of apprehension about how his letter will be received. If so, the rest of it will disarm and reassure them. He writes very personally (maintaining an 'I—you' directness throughout), affectionately ('my brothers', 15:14) and candidly. He opens his heart to them about the past, present and future of his ministry, he asks humbly for their prayers, and he sends them many greetings. In these ways he gives us insight into the outworking of God's providence in his life and work.

25. His apostolic service

15:14–22

Paul begins by expressing his confidence in his Roman readers. *I myself am convinced, my brothers, he writes, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another* (14). He is of course engaging in a little harmless, diplomatic hyperbole. But it would be unfair to accuse him of insincerity. Nor does it seem right to describe his words as 'a courteous apology'.¹ He is simply assuring them that he knows and appreciates their qualities—their kindness (as *agathōsynē* can be rendered), their extensive Christian knowledge and their proven ability to teach and admonish one another.

If then they are such fine and gifted Christians, why has Paul thought it necessary to write to them as he has done? He supplies two reasons. First, *I have written to you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again* (15a). The apostles attached great importance to their reminding ministry. To them had been entrusted the task of formulating the gospel and thus of laying the foundations of the faith. Consequently, they kept reminding the churches of the original message and calling them back to it.² Paul's second reason for having written had to do with his unique ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles, to which he has already referred three times (1:5; 11:13; 12:3).³ *I have written, he goes on, because of the grace God gave me* (15b) *to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles ...* (16a). Although he did not found the church in Rome, he nevertheless has authority to teach its members on account of his special vocation, by God's grace alone, to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

¹ Sanday and Headlam, p. 403.

² *E.g.* Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 15:1ff.; Phil. 3:1; 2 Thes. 2:15; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13f.; 3:14; Heb. 2:1; 2 Pet. 1:12ff.; 3:1; 1 Jn. 2:21ff.; Jude 3.

³ *Cf.* Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:2ff.

For the next seven verses Paul elaborates the nature of his ministry, drawing his readers' attention to three salient features of it.

1. Paul's ministry was a priestly ministry (16–17)

He calls himself a *minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit* (16). Many readers are taken by surprise that Paul should thus describe his service in priestly terms, but the vocabulary he uses is unambiguous. Although *leitourgos* (*minister*) usually meant a public servant, as in 13:6, yet in the biblical literature both the noun and its cognate verb *leitourgeō* are used 'exclusively of religious and ritual services' (BAGD). Thus in the New Testament they are applied both to the Jewish priesthood⁴ and to Jesus our great high priest.⁵ Next, the verb *hierourgeō* (*priestly duty*) means to serve as a priest (*hiereus*), especially in relation to the temple sacrifices. And Paul continues the imagery with his reference to *an offering (prosphora), acceptable to God (euprosdektos, used of sacrifices)*⁶ and *sanctified* (used of consecrating sacrifices)⁷ *by the Holy Spirit*. These five terms, directly or indirectly, all have priestly and sacrificial associations.

So what is Paul's priestly ministry, and what sacrifice does he have to offer? The answer clearly has to do with the gospel and the Gentiles. Paul regards his missionary work as a priestly ministry because he is able to offer his Gentile converts as a living sacrifice to God. It is not that he enables them to offer themselves to God (*cf.* 12:1), as some commentators suggest. For it is he himself who presents the sacrifice. Although Gentiles were rigorously excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, and were on no account permitted to share in the offering of its sacrifices, now through the gospel they themselves become a holy and acceptable offering to God. This significant development was in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that diaspora Jews (of whom Paul was one) would proclaim God's glory in distant lands and bring people to Jerusalem from all the nations 'as an offering to the LORD'.⁸ I wonder if Paul recalled his

BAGD Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer's fifth edition, 1958 (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁴ Heb. 10:11.

⁵ Heb. 8:2.

⁶ *E.g.* 1 Pet. 2:5.

⁷ *E.g.* Ex. 29:33ff.

⁸ Is. 66:20.

priestly ministry to Gentiles when less than a year later he was falsely accused of bringing one into the temple area?⁹

Although Paul's priestly ministry as apostle to the Gentiles was unique, the principle he enunciates has a vital contemporary application. All evangelists are priests, because they offer their converts to God. Indeed, it is this truth more than any other which effectively unites the church's two major roles of worship and witness. It is when we worship God, glorying in his holy name, that we are driven out to proclaim his name to the world. And when through our witness people are brought to Christ, we then offer them to God. Further, they themselves join in his worship, until they too go out to witness. Thus worship leads to witness, and witness to worship. It is a perpetual cycle. No wonder Paul is grateful for his share in this privileged ministry and breaks out: *Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God* (17).

2. Paul's ministry was a powerful ministry (18–19a)

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done (18)—*by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit* (19a). This is a very valuable statement of Paul's own understanding of his ministry. The repetition of the word *dynamis* (*power*) in verse 19 justifies our calling it a 'powerful ministry'. He alludes to at least five features of it.

First, Paul describes the objective of his ministry as being to lead *the Gentiles to obey God* (*eis hypakoē*, 'with a view to obedience'). The same two Greek words occur in 1:5 and 16:26. There, however, Paul's phrase is 'unto obedience of faith among all the Gentiles'; here it is 'unto obedience of the Gentiles'. It is surprising that he now omits any reference to faith, for of course his objective is to bring people to Christ, indeed to faith in Christ (e.g. 1:16). Nevertheless his emphasis is on obedience, presumably because it is the indispensable consequence of saving faith, and is a vital ingredient of Christian discipleship.

Secondly, Paul refuses to recount his own exploits. All he will dare to talk about, he says, is *what Christ has accomplished through me*. To be sure, the relationship between Christ and his evangelists is variously portrayed in the New Testament, and sometimes it is seen as a collaboration (e.g. 'We are God's fellow-workers').¹⁰ But Paul is not altogether comfortable to think of himself as Christ's partner; he prefers to be Christ's agent or even instrument, so that Christ works not 'with' him but 'through' him. 'We are ... Christ's ambassadors,' he writes, 'as though God were making his appeal *through us*.'¹¹ It is safer to

⁹ Acts 21:27ff.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 3:9; cf. 2 Cor. 6:1.

¹¹ 2 Cor. 5:20; cf. Acts 15:12; 21:19.

think in this way because if the work is Christ's, the glory will be Christ's as well (cf. 17).

Thirdly, Paul writes, what Christ has accomplished has been *by what I have said and done*, literally 'by word and deed'. This combination of words and works, the verbal and the visual, is a recognition that human beings often learn more through their eyes than through their ears. Words explain works, but works dramatize words. The public ministry of Jesus is the best example of this, and after his ascension into heaven he continued 'to do and to teach' through his apostles.¹² It would be wrong to conclude, however, that 'works' means only miracles. One of Jesus' most powerful visual aids was to take a child into his arms, and one of the early church's was their common life and care for the needy.

Fourthly, Christ's ministry through Paul was *by the power of signs and miracles*. This expression brings together the three commonest biblical terms for the supernatural. 'Signs' indicates their significance (especially in demonstrating the arrival of God's kingdom), 'powers' their character (exhibiting God's power over nature) and 'wonders' their effect (evoking people's amazement). Paul's only other use of these three words in relation to his ministry is in 2 Corinthians 12:12, where he calls them 'the things that mark an apostle' or 'the signs of a true apostle' (RSV). This is not to deny that God can perform miracles today, for it would be ludicrous to impose limitations on the creator of the universe. It is rather to acknowledge that their chief purpose was to authenticate the unique ministry of the apostles.¹³ As Chrysostom put it, the signs of Paul's apostolic priesthood were 'not the long garment and the bells as they of old, nor the mitre and the turban, but signs and wonders, far more aweful than these'.¹⁴

Fifthly, Paul's ministry was also *through the power of the Spirit*. Since this clause is separate from the reference to the power of signs and wonders, its meaning is likely to be different too. Physical miracles are not the only way in which the power of the Holy Spirit is displayed. Indeed his usual way is through the Word of God, which is his 'sword'.¹⁵ It is he who takes our feeble human words and confirms them with his divine power in the minds, hearts, consciences and wills of the hearers.¹⁶ Every conversion is a power encounter, in which the Spirit through the gospel rescues and regenerates sinners.

3. Paul's ministry was a pioneer ministry (19b–22)

¹² Acts 1:1.

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

¹³ See the Acts record and e.g. Heb. 2:4.

¹⁴ Chrysostom, p. 543.

¹⁵ Eph. 6:17.

¹⁶ E.g. 1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thes. 1:5.

So, Paul continues, what Christ has accomplished through him is this: *from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ* (19b). This is Paul's succinct and modest summary of ten years of strenuous apostolic labour, including his three heroic missionary journeys. The expression *all the way around* (*kyklō*) should probably be translated 'in a circle' or 'in a circuit'. Then one can visualize, or trace on a map, the arc of Pauline evangelism encircling the Eastern Mediterranean. From Jerusalem it goes north to Syrian Antioch, then further north and west through the provinces of Asia Minor, and across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. From there it leads south to Achaia, then east across the Aegean Sea again, and via Ephesus back to Antioch and Jerusalem.

But two questions arise. First, did not Paul begin from Antioch, rather than from Jerusalem? Yes and no. Although the first missionary journey was indeed launched from Antioch,¹⁷ the Christian mission itself began in Jerusalem,¹⁸ and after his conversion and commissioning Paul certainly preached in Jerusalem, albeit to Jews.¹⁹ Secondly, did Paul ever evangelize Illyricum? It is situated on the western, Adriatic seaboard of Macedonia, and corresponds approximately to Albania and the southern part of former Yugoslavia today. Certainly Luke gives us in the Acts no account of a Pauline visit to Illyricum. But he leaves room for it, since there is a gap in his narrative of the best part of two years between his leaving Ephesus and his embarking for Jerusalem.²⁰ While in Macedonia at that time he may well have walked west along the Egnatian Way from Thessalonica, at least to the borders of Illyricum.

This reconstruction would justify Paul's claim to have *fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ*, or better, to have 'completed the preaching of the gospel of Christ' (REB) within this arc. This does not of course mean that Paul had 'saturated' the whole area with the gospel, as we might say today. His strategy was to evangelize the populous and influential cities, and plant churches there, and then leave to others the radiation of the gospel into the surrounding villages. So 'we understand his claim to have completed the gospel of Christ to be a claim to have completed that trail-blazing, pioneer preaching of it, which he believed it was his own special apostolic mission to accomplish'.²¹

Having plotted on the map the sweeping arc which represented his ten years of missionary outreach, Paul goes on to explain the consistent pioneer policy which lay behind it. *It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known* (literally 'not named', i.e. 'not honoured'), *so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation* (20). Paul was

¹⁷ Acts 13:1ff.

¹⁸ Lk. 24:47; Acts 1:8; cf. Is. 2:13.

¹⁹ Acts 9:26ff.

²⁰ Acts 20:1ff.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

²¹ Cranfield, vol. II, p. 762.

quite clear, as is evident from his teaching about *charismata* (e.g. 12:3ff.), that Christ calls different disciples to different tasks, and endows them with different gifts to equip them. His own calling and gift as apostle to the Gentiles were to pioneer the evangelization of the Gentile world, and then leave to others, especially to local, residential presbyters, the pastoral care of the churches. He used two metaphors, agricultural and architectural, to illustrate this division of labour, especially as it related to himself and Apollos in Corinth. 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it.' Again, 'I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it.'²² It was in keeping with this policy that, positively, he would evangelize only *where Christ was not known*, and negatively, he would avoid *building on someone else's foundation*.

Rather, that is, instead of departing from his policy, he found that Scripture itself validates it, *as it is written*:

*²¹Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.'*²³

The prophet was writing about the mission of the Servant of the Lord to 'sprinkle many nations', so that they would see and understand what had not so far been told them. Paul sees the prophecy fulfilled in Christ, the true Servant, whom he is proclaiming to the unevangelized.

Paul concludes: *This is why I have often* ('all this time', REB) *been hindered from coming to you* (22). In the first chapter Paul wrote that he had 'many times' planned to visit them, but had so far 'been prevented' (1:13), although he did not divulge what had stopped him. Now he does. It had to do with his mission policy. On the one hand, because he was concentrating on pioneer evangelism elsewhere, he was not free to come to them. On the other hand, because the Roman church had not been founded by him, he did not feel at liberty to come and stay. Soon, however, as he is about to explain, he will visit them, since he will only be 'passing through' (24) on his way to the unevangelized field of Spain.

26. His travel plans

15:23–33

Having shared with the Roman church his understanding of his special apostolic ministry, Paul now looks into the future and confides to the Romans his travel plans. He specifies three destinations. First, he is about to sail from

²² 1 Cor. 3:6, 10.

²³ Isaiah 52:15.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

Corinth to Jerusalem, taking with him the collection which he has long been organizing. Secondly, he is intending to go from Jerusalem to Rome, even though he will only be 'passing through' (24) rather than settling down among them for an appreciable period. Thirdly, from Rome he will travel on to Spain, determined to resume his pioneer evangelistic commitment. If he were to make all these journeys by ship, the first would be at least 800 miles, the second 1,500, and the third 700, making a minimum total of 3,000 miles, and many more if he were to travel some of the way by land rather than sea. When one reflects on the uncertainties and hazards of ancient travel, the almost nonchalant way in which Paul announces his intention to undertake these three voyages is quite extraordinary.

1. He plans to visit Rome (23–24)

Although Paul has so far been hindered from coming to Rome, now at last the time seems to be ripe for his long-awaited, long-postponed visit. A combination of three factors has facilitated it. First, his missionary service in the East Mediterranean zone is complete. *But now*, he writes, ... *there is no more place for me to work in these regions* (23a). At first hearing this is a most surprising statement, for undoubtedly there were still many areas into which the gospel had not penetrated, and still multitudes of people who were not converted. But we must read Paul's words in verse 23 in the light of his policy explained in verse 20. He means that there is no more room in Greece and its environs for his pioneer church-planting ministry, for that initial work has been done.

Secondly, Paul writes, *I have been longing for many years to see you* (23b). He has written the same thing near the beginning of his letter: 'I long to see you' (1:11). He is not exaggerating. Nor is this a mere flash in the pan. It is a sustained, ardent desire over *many years*, which all the hindrances and frustrations have not been able to quench. It must surely come from God.

The third deciding factor in Paul's mind is that he has come to see his visit to Rome as a stepping-stone to Spain. *I plan to do so* (*sc.* visit you) *when I go to Spain* (24a). This perspective helps him to keep his resolve not to build on somebody else's foundation, for he will only be *passing through*. At the same time, he entertains a second hope: *I hope to visit you ... and to have you assist me on my journey there* (*sc.* to Spain), *after I have enjoyed your company for a while* (24b). The verb translated *assist* (*propempō*) seems already to have become almost a technical Christian term for helping missionaries on their way. It undoubtedly meant more than good wishes and a valedictory prayer. In most cases it also involved supplying them with provisions and money,¹ and

sc Seneca

sc Seneca

¹ Cf. Tit. 3:13; 3 Jn. 6f.

sometimes providing them as well with an escort to accompany them at least part of the way.² So the dictionary definition of *propempō* is to ‘help on one’s journey with food, money, by arranging for companions, means of travel etc.’ (BAGD). Perhaps Paul hopes to establish an ongoing relationship with the Christians in Rome, so that they will continue to support him, as other churches have done previously.³

This conjunction of three factors must have presented itself to Paul as evidence of the providential guidance of God. It has led him to make plans to go to Rome. But first, he explains, he has another journey to make.

2. He plans to visit Jerusalem (25–27)

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there (25). The expression ‘I am on my way’ is an attempt to catch the present tense of the verb (*poreuomai*), meaning that his departure is imminent; it has even virtually begun. His purpose in going is to ‘serve the saints’ there, the people of God, in this case the Jewish Christian community. To explain this to the church in Rome, he first gives the facts about the collection (26) and then draws out its significance (27).

The facts may be simply stated. *For Macedonia and Achaia* (that is, the churches of northern and southern Greece respectively) *were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem* (26). In order to understand this, we need to think first about the poor in Jerusalem, and then about the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia. First, no explanation is given of the cause of poverty in Jerusalem. It may have been caused partly by the ‘severe famine’ which Agabus predicted.⁴ But the plausible suggestion has also often been made that it was related to the economic sharing of the first church there.⁵ While applauding their generosity, some have questioned their wisdom, since they sold and gave ‘in the economically disastrous way of realizing capital and distributing it as income’.⁶ Secondly, Paul writes that the Macedonian and Achaian Christians *were pleased to make a contribution* for the Jerusalem poor. ‘Contribution’ renders *koinōnia*, which means a ‘common share’ in anything, here in contributing to Paul’s collection. His statement that the Greek Christians *were pleased* to give (an expression he repeats in verse

² E.g. Acts 20:38; 21:5.

BAGD Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer’s fifth edition, 1958 (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

³ E.g. Phil. 4:14ff.

⁴ Acts 11:27ff.

⁵ Acts 2:44f.; 4:32ff.

⁶ Dodd, p. 230.

27) is a forgivable euphemism. They did give freely and willingly, but only because Paul had urged them to do so!

Why then did Paul conceive and initiate this freewill offering project, this *koinōnia*? Clearly he saw great significance in it, as may be seen partly from the disproportionate amount of space which he devoted to it in his letters,⁷ partly from the passionate zeal with which he promoted it, and partly from his astonishing decision to add nearly 2,000 miles to his journey, in order to present the offering himself. Instead of sailing directly west from Corinth to Rome to Spain, he has made up his mind to travel first in entirely the wrong direction, that is, to go to Rome via Jerusalem!

The significance of the offering (the solidarity of God's people in Christ) was primarily neither geographical (from Greece to Judea), nor social (from the rich to the poor), nor even ethnic (from Gentiles to Jews), but both religious (from liberated radicals to traditional conservatives, that is, from the strong to the weak), and especially theological (from beneficiaries to benefactors). In other words, the so-called 'gift' was in reality a 'debt': *They were pleased to do it (sc. to make their contribution), and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings (27).*

The nature of this debt Paul has already elaborated in chapter 11. Although indeed it is through Israel's transgression that 'salvation has come to the Gentiles' (11:11), he has argued, yet the Gentiles must be careful not to get boastful or arrogant (11:18–20). They must rather remember that they have inherited from the Jews enormous blessings to which they have no title. In themselves they are nothing but a wild olive shoot. But having been grafted into God's ancient olive tree, they 'now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root' (11:17). It is right therefore for Gentiles to acknowledge what they owe to the Jews. When we Gentiles are thinking of the great blessings of salvation, we are hugely in debt to the Jews, and always will be. Paul sees the offering from the Gentile churches as a humble, material, symbolic demonstration of this indebtedness.

3. He plans to visit Spain (28–29)

Having explained the facts and the significance of the offering, Paul now looks beyond its presentation in Jerusalem, and hopefully its acceptance, to the long westward journey which he plans then to undertake to Spain via Rome. So *after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit* (literally 'have sealed to them this fruit', this expression of solidarity,

⁷ Rom. 15:25ff.; 1 Cor. 16:1f.; and specially 2 Cor. 8–9.
sc Seneca

meaning perhaps 'have ... officially handed over' the offering, JB), *I will go to Spain and visit you on the way* (28).

Some two years previously Paul told the Corinthians that, in keeping with his pioneer mission policy, he was hoping to 'preach the gospel in the regions beyond you'.⁸ Perhaps he already had his eyes on Spain. We know from the Old Testament that for centuries before Christ the seafaring Phoenicians from Tyre and Sidon had engaged in commerce with Spain, their 'ships of Tarshish' being perhaps so called because they plied trade with Tartessus.⁹ The Phoenicians also established colonies there. By the time of the Emperor Augustus 'the whole Iberian peninsula had been subjugated by the Romans and organized in ... three provinces ...',¹⁰ with many flourishing Roman colonies. Did Paul possibly look beyond Spain to the edges of the Empire, to Gaul and Germany, and even to Britain?

Whether he reached and evangelized Spain we shall probably never know. The nearest thing we have to evidence is the statement by Clement of Rome in his first letter to the Corinthians (usually dated AD 96–97) about Paul's 'noble renown' as a herald of the gospel: 'To the whole world he taught righteousness, and reaching the limits of the West he bore his witness before rulers.'¹¹ It may be, then, as has often been surmised, that Paul was released from his confinement in Rome, in which the Acts leaves him, and that he then resumed his missionary travels, including a visit to Spain, before being re-arrested, imprisoned and finally beheaded during the Neronian persecution.

As Paul mentally prepares for his visit to Rome, however, he is full of assurance. *I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ* (29). There is no need to detect a trace of arrogance in this statement. Paul's confidence is not in himself but in Christ. That he is not trusting in himself is evident from his request for their prayers which immediately follows. He knows his weakness, his vulnerability. But he also knows the blessing of Christ.

4. He requests prayer for his visits (30–32)

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me (30). Towards the beginning of his letter Paul assured the Roman Christians that he was constantly praying for them (1:9f.). So it is entirely appropriate that he should now ask them to pray for him. Besides, he and they are *brothers* in the family of God. He is also able

JB The Jerusalem Bible (1966).

⁸ 2 Cor. 10:16.

⁹ Cf. 1 Ki. 10:22.

¹⁰ Cranfield, vol. II, p. 769.

¹¹ 1 Clement 5:7.

to appeal to them *by our Lord Jesus Christ* (our common Lord) and *by the love of the Spirit* (our common love being the Holy Spirit's fruit).¹²

He goes on to refer to prayer as a *struggle*. It is natural that readers who are familiar with the Old Testament should recall the occasion when Jacob 'wrestled' with God.¹³ But there is no suggestion here of such a struggle with God. It is more likely that Paul is thinking of our need to wrestle with the principalities and powers of darkness.¹⁴ In point of fact, however, the apostle does not specify any adversary with whom we are to strive. It may be, therefore, that he is simply representing prayer as an activity demanding great exertion, a struggle in fact with ourselves, in which we seek to align ourselves with God's will.¹⁵

For what, then, does Paul ask their prayers? It concerns his visits to Jerusalem and to Rome. With regard to Jerusalem, he mentions two topics for their prayers, which relate to believers and unbelievers respectively. The first concerns the opposition of unbelievers. *Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea* (31a). He is aware that he has many enemies among the unbelieving Jews, who will doubtless plot and scheme for his downfall, even his death. He knows he is in danger, even for his life. He will shortly say, when *en route* for Jerusalem, 'I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'¹⁶ But he asks the Romans to join him in prayer for his protection and deliverance from his opponents.

Paul's second concern for his Jerusalem visit relates to the believers, the Jewish Christian community: *Pray ... that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there* (31b). He realizes that it may be difficult for them to accept the offering, not in the general sense that we all find it hard to receive gifts which place us in other people's debt, but in a much more specific sense. In accepting the gift from Paul, Jewish Christian leaders would be seen to endorse Paul's gospel and his seeming disregard of Jewish law and traditions. Yet if his offering were to be rejected, this could cause the rift between Jewish and Gentile Christians to widen irrevocably. So Paul longs that Jewish—Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ may be strengthened by the Jewish Christians' acceptance of its tangible symbol. That is why he asks the Romans to pray both that the believers will accept the gift and that unbelievers will not be able to prevent either the giving or the receiving of it.

Paul now requests prayer also for his visit to Rome. Indeed he sees the two visits to be inseparably connected. Only if his mission in Jerusalem succeeds will his voyage to Rome be possible. So he asks the Romans to pray that he may be protected and his gift accepted in Jerusalem, not only because these

¹² Gal. 5:22.

¹³ Gn. 32:24ff.

¹⁴ Eph. 6:12.

¹⁵ Cf. Col. 2:1f.; 4:12.

¹⁶ Acts 21:13.

things are important in themselves, but also *so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed* (32). Whatever reception he is given in Jerusalem, he anticipates that afterwards he will be in need of the joy and refreshment which fellowship with the Roman Christians will bring. This time he does not mention his further plan to go on to Spain.

Paul's reference to the will of God in relation to prayer is very significant. He has prayed earlier that 'now at last by God's will the way may be opened' for him to come to Rome (1:10). Here he again prays that *by God's will* he may come to them. His use of this qualifying clause throws light on both the purpose and the character of prayer, on why and how Christians should pray.

The purpose of prayer is emphatically not to bend God's will to ours, but rather to align our will to his. The promise that our prayers will be answered is conditional on our asking 'according to his will'.¹⁷ Consequently every prayer we pray should be a variation on the theme, 'Your will be done.'¹⁸

What about the character of prayer? Some people tell us, in spite of Paul's earlier statement that 'we do not know what we ought to pray for' (8:26), that we should always be precise, specific and confident in what we pray for, and that to add 'if it be your will' is a cop-out and incompatible with faith. In response, we need to distinguish between the general and the particular will of God. Since God has revealed his general will for all his people in Scripture (e.g. that we should control ourselves and become like Christ), we should indeed pray with definiteness and assurance about these things. But God's particular will for each of us (e.g. regarding a life work and a life partner) has not been revealed in Scripture, so that, in praying for guidance, it is right to add 'by God's will'. If Jesus himself did this in the garden of Gethsemane ('Not my will, but yours be done'),¹⁹ and if Paul did it twice in his letter to the Romans, we should do it too. It is not unbelief, but a proper humility.²⁰

So what happened to Paul's three prayers, in which he asked the Romans to join him, namely that he might be rescued from unbelievers in Jerusalem, that his gift might be accepted, and that he might succeed in reaching Rome? Were they answered or unanswered? Regarding the middle of the three prayers we do not know, since surprisingly Luke does not refer to the offering in his Acts narrative, although he knows about it, because he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and records Paul's statement (when on trial before Felix) that he had come to Jerusalem 'to bring my people gifts for the poor'.²¹ The probability is that the gifts were accepted.

What, then, about the other two petitions? Both received a qualified 'Yes': the first 'Yes and no', the second 'Yes but'. Was Paul delivered from unbelievers

¹⁷ 1 Jn. 5:14.

¹⁸ Mt. 6:10.

¹⁹ Lk. 22:42.

²⁰ Cf. Jas. 4:15.

²¹ Acts 24:17.

in Jerusalem? ‘No’, in the sense that he was arrested, tried and imprisoned, but also ‘yes’ because he was three times rescued from lynching,²² once from flogging²³ and once from a plot to kill him.²⁴ Then did he reach Rome? Yes indeed, as Jesus had promised him he would,²⁵ but neither when nor how he had expected, for he arrived about three years later, as a prisoner, and after an almost fatal shipwreck.

So prayer is an essential Christian activity, and it is good to ask people to pray for us and with us, as Paul did. But there is nothing automatic about prayer. Praying is not like using a coin-operated machine or a cash dispenser. The struggle involved in prayer lies in the process of coming to discern God’s will and to desire it above everything else. Then God will work things out providentially according to his will, for which we have prayed. That is why I have called this concluding section ‘The Providence of God in the Ministry of Paul’.

Paul ends this part of his letter with a third benediction, in which, having asked for their prayers, he prays for them again. *The God of peace be with you all. Amen* (33). That he chooses this time to call God *the God of peace* or reconciliation, that peace (shalom) is a central Jewish concern, and that he deliberately writes not ‘with you’ but *with you all* are three suggestive pointers. They seem to indicate that Paul’s mind is preoccupied to the end with Jewish—Gentile unity. As Professor Dunn has aptly put it, ‘Paul the Jew, who is also apostle to the Gentiles, says the Jewish benediction over his Gentile readers.’²⁶

Additional Resources:

Podcast: Where Christ Has Not Been Named (Romans 15:20-21), David Platt. <https://radical.net/podcasts/pray-the-word/where-christ-has-not-been-named-romans-1520-21/>

Commentary: Romans, NIV Application Commentary, Douglas Moo.

²² Acts 21:30ff.; 22:22ff.; 23:10.

²³ Acts 22:25ff.

²⁴ Acts 23:12ff.

²⁵ Acts 23:11.

²⁶ Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 884.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 376–391.

Commentary: Romans, Collin Kruse.

Commentary: Romans Commentary, John Stott.

Book: Romans, by N.T. Wright and Patty Pell.

Book: Romans: Encountering the Gospel's Power, John Stott.

Website: The Bible Project, Romans 5-16,
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/romans-5-16/>

Course: Romans 15:14-33 by Michael Kruger
<https://cdn.rts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Sermon-Notes-Romans-L39.pdf>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/study-romans-kruger/#romans-15>