

**December 12, 2021**

**Romans 15:22-33**

**SCRIPTURE**

**22**That is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you. **23**But now I no longer have any work to do in these regions, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you **24**whenever I travel to Spain. For I hope to see you when I pass through and to be assisted by you for my journey there, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while. **25**Right now I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints, **26**because Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. **27**Yes, they were pleased, and indeed are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to them in material needs. **28**So when I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will visit you on the way to Spain. **29**I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

**30**Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in prayers to God on my behalf. **31**Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, **32**and that, by God’s will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed together with you.

**33**May the God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

**COMMENTARY**

Paul was in the vicinity of Corinth as he wrote Romans—how easy it would have been for him to deliver his letter to Rome himself and continue on to Spain. Had Paul been concerned only about himself and his personal desires, he would likely have done that. Instead, his servant's heart reveals a parallel set of priorities that would delay his arrival in Rome: the need to visit the predominantly Jewish church in Jerusalem—to deliver funds for the poor and to strengthen ties with the leaders.

**15:23-24**. If anything may be said of the apostle Paul, it was that he took the long view. Here we find Paul making plans to complete a plan he had been working on for years—to visit the church in Rome. And in the restatement of his plan we find a snapshot of his long-term goal and desire for the church in Rome—that they might assist him on his journey to Spain. Paul was not "using" the believers in Rome to help him accomplish a self-serving goal. Rather, he was involving them in the priority of the church— teaching all nations with the gospel.

**15:25-29**. Paul was about to turn his back on Rome and head in the opposite direction—to Jerusalem, in the service of the saints there. He had a financial gift from the saints in Macedonia and Achaia to be distributed for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. In addition to delivering the gift, he hoped by his presence in Jerusalem to strengthen his ties, as the apostle to the Gentiles, with the Jewish branch of the church still headquartered in Jerusalem.

But this was no mean decision on his part. Assuming he traveled by sea, the first leg of his journey from Corinth to Jerusalem would be around eight hundred miles. The second, from Jerusalem to Rome, would be fifteen hundred miles. And the third, from Rome to Spain, would be seven hundred miles, making a total of three thousand miles by ship. However, had he gone straight from Corinth to Spain, the trip would have been approximately fifteen hundred miles.

So, for the good of the saints in Jerusalem and the unity of the church, he doubled the length of his journey. In our modern age of jet travel, this does not seem like such a sacrifice. But all one need do is read the accounts of Paul's ultimate journey to Rome when he is shipwrecked on the island of Malta (Acts 27:13-28:11), not to mention three previous shipwrecks, once spending a day and a night in the open sea (2 Cor. 11:25), to realize the cost of his decision. Such is the nature of a servant.

Paul does not tell us here, or in parallel passages concerning the offering for the church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:11-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15), what occasioned their need. It could have been a famine like the one predicted by the prophet Agabus which occurred during the reign of Claudius (around A.D. 44-46). Or it might have been due to the ongoing persecution of the church in which Paul had participated shortly after the ascension of Christ (cf. the martyrdom of Stephen, Acts 8:1-3).

Some have even speculated that the communal lifestyle of the church, consuming its capital base to meet daily needs in the burgeoning early days of its existence (Acts 2:42-47), had finally taken a toll on the long-term economic viability of its members. For Paul, what is more important than the cause of the need in Jerusalem is the reason why the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (as well as Galatia; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1) were obligated to respond sacrificially. The churches in the Gentile portion of the world owed a debt to the Jewish portion of the church— still located in Jerusalem.

Think of it with Paul's "big picture" perspective. If one looks at a map of the Mediterranean world in the first century, Jerusalem represents the Jewish portion of the church, and Asia Minor and Macedonia the Gentile portion of the church. Obviously, there were Jews living in Asia Minor and Macedonia, and undoubtedly some Gentiles were mixed in with the church in Jerusalem. But the two "halves" of the church can be located in these regions. To grasp how Paul feels about the debt owed by the Gentile churches to their brethren in Jerusalem, take a ruler and draw straight lines on your map radiating out from Jerusalem to all the cities that Paul, Silas, Barnabas, Timothy, and others had visited in proclaiming the gospel.

The gospel came from Jerusalem (Rom. 15:19), from the nation of Israel, and was received by the non-Jewish parts of the world. Paul has made this clear already in Romans. Israel's was the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the temple worship, the promises, the patriarchs, and from within Israel "is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all" (Rom. 9:4-5). Israel is the cultivated olive tree into which have been grafted the branches of the Gentiles' wild olive trees (Rom. 11:17-21). Paul could not have said it more clearly than when he told the Gentile believers in Rome, "You do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Rom. 11:18).

Therefore, Paul's bold wording should come as no surprise: For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. And while he does not mention it here, we know that the words of Jesus on giving (which we know only from Paul) are informing Paul's desire for the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to receive a blessing by giving one: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). While it is good that the Gentile churches were pleased to give, the fact is that they owed it to the Jews. Paul made it clear to the church in Corinth that he was not "commanding" them to give, but giving them an opportunity to respond to the grace of God in Christ who became poor so that, through his poverty, we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:8-9).

The blessing (eulogia) of Christ which Paul would bring with him to Rome is the same blessing that is twice translated "gift" in 2 Corinthians 9:5. Paul would bring with him the overflow from Christ of the gift-blessings that the churches in Macedonia and Achaia were giving to Jerusalem. Paul speaks of the gifts to the Jerusalem church as fruit— the natural result of life lived for God. As Paul transfers the fruit to the church in Jerusalem, he will be nourished by it and will become a blessing to the church in Rome when he sees them.

**15:30-33**. Paul had apparently made no effort to ask the Roman believers to participate in the collection he made for the saints in Jerusalem. Logistically, the distance separating Corinth, where Paul was writing his letter, and Rome, would have made it impractical to wait upon a return gift before leaving for Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Paul invites the participation of the Roman church in his mission of mercy to Jerusalem. In fact, he appeals to them on the basis of two imperatives: the will of God (the meaning of by our Lord Jesus Christ, or by the authority Paul has as an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ), and the love of the Spirit requires it. That is, if they are servants of Christ and are manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, which includes love, they will join with him in his struggle.

Paul requests prayer for two specifics; first, that he may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and second, that his service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there. The unbelievers are obviously the Jewish leadership who will have viewed Paul as a traitor for the last twenty years. If he shows his face in Jerusalem, the chances are good that he will be accused by the Jewish leaders of being a troublemaker— blaspheming their religion and stirring up divisions among the populace. And that is exactly what they do, trying to use whatever trumped-up charges they can to prove to the Roman authorities that Paul deserves to be incarcerated.

The second request for prayer is that Paul's service—meaning the gift he is bringing to the Jerusalem church from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia— would be acceptable to the saints there. This request for prayer is an admission by Paul of the tension that probably remains concerning his ministry to the Gentiles. Ever since the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the question of how to integrate Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church, had been a delicate one. Nearly fifteen hundred years of Jewish culture were being held up to scrutiny by the doctrine of justification by faith alone that Paul preached—and it had not been a trouble-free transition, as evidenced by Paul's own words on the subject to the Roman church (Rom. 14:1-15:13).

The prayers of the Roman church were answered. The gift from the Gentile churches, and Paul's submissive posture toward the Jerusalem church leadership, were both apparently received gladly by the church. Likewise, he was protected from harm by the unbelievers in Judea, though just barely— he came within a moment of being flogged by the Roman authorities (Acts 22:25-29), which would have been his sixth such punishment, the first five coming from the Jews themselves (2 Cor. 11:24).

Did Paul ultimately arrive in Rome with joy? Knowing Paul, though it was in chains and on the heels of almost losing his life at sea, we would have to say an unqualified "Yes." Paul asked the Roman believers to pray that he might arrive in Rome by God's will. . . with joy.

**MAIN POINT**

A passion for the gospel is revealed in our commitment to pray, give, and go.

**INTRODUCTION**

*As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.*

**When has someone helped you do something you couldn’t do on your own?**

**Why is it often difficult for us to admit our need and ask for help?**

**Do you think it would help or hinder efforts to spread the gospel if we put our heads down and got busy doing gospel work as individuals without relying on one another in that work? Explain.**

The gospel message often spreads because of the support given by believers to one another. In fact, the book of Romans was written for this very purpose. Paul wanted to go to Spain and needed some help. Paul was perhaps the most well-known missionary in the world, and like all missionaries, he needed support. The closing verses of Romans 15 give helpful insight into why he contacted this church full of people whom he had never met to request support. Paul gave his entire life to Christ and wanted to encourage the church to join him.

**UNDERSTANDING**

*Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.*

* *ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ROMANS 15:22-29.*

**Looking back on your schedule and priorities for this year, what would you say is your ambition in life?**

**How do your ambitions compare with Paul’s in terms of clarity? Value? Concern for God’s kingdom?**

**Why did Paul say the Gentiles were indebted to the Jews?**

**Why should Christians be motivated to give sacrificially and generously to fund local outreach and ministry efforts?**

Paul’s missionary journeys took many years of his life, but he had not yet traveled to Rome. Paul had missions in mind when he wrote about his desire to visit the Christians in Rome. He wanted to know them better, but not for his own sake. He wanted them to become partners with him in his journey to Spain. Their sending Paul implied financial assistance and fervent prayers for his successful labors on Christ’s behalf.

**Are you surprised to learn that Paul had never been to the church in Rome when he wrote this letter? How could his love for them have been so great if they had never met?**

**How would the offering Paul was taking to the church in Jerusalem bring unity and harmony in the churches?**

Paul loved the church in Rome because the people of the church loved Jesus Christ. Paul knew their mutual affection for Jesus made them brothers and sisters in spirit, and so he was joyful for them and excited to meet them. They were family.

Paul’s love for the “strangers” in Rome demonstrates how we ought to feel as well. Even though the churches in Macedonia and Achaia did not know many, if any, people in the church in Jerusalem, their love for the gospel compelled them to sacrifice to meet the needs of the church there. This sacrificial love for one another demonstrates the love and unity that the gospel brings to the lives of people who are otherwise strangers.

* *ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ROMANS 15:30-33.*

**In your own words, what was Paul’s appeal to these Romans he had not yet met?**

**How should we pray for missionary efforts? Why should we?**

Paul knew his efforts would mean nothing apart from the power of Christ. For that reason, he appealed to the Christians in Rome to pray for him. Specifically, he wanted them to pray that he would be rescued from opposing forces, that Jewish Christians would accept his ministry to the Gentiles, and that he might make it to Rome.

**To make the eventual trip Paul described in these verses would require him to travel around three thousand miles on a ship. What would drive a person to go to such lengths for the sake of others?**

**Does this seem extreme to you? What are you willing (or unwilling) to give up for the gospel to advance?**

**How did Paul eventually make it to Rome? What can we learn about God’s plans from Paul’s example?**

Paul cared so much about gospel advance that no cost was too great. Earlier in Romans 9, he expressed that he would rather be cut off from salvation than for his brothers in the flesh, the Jews, to be lost. This is seen in Paul’s willingness to suffer shame, derision, imprisonment, and arduous travel to spread Christ’s name where He was not known. Paul indeed made it to Rome, but in chains to await trial. He never got to Spain as he intended, but Paul gave effort to spreading the gospel until he could not give anymore.

**APPLICATION**

*Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.*

**When we talk about giving our lives in service to the gospel, does that make you excited, scared, or somewhere in between? How do we cultivate a desire to give our all for the sake of Jesus?**

**How can we band together as a group to pray, give, and go for the advancement of God’s kingdom?**

**How do you sense God moving you to give and pray differently?**

**PRAYER**

Thank God for the privilege of partnering with other believers around the world for the advancement of His kingdom. Ask Him to help you pray, give, and go as a way of showing concern for the lost and love for others who are committed to sharing the gospel around the world.