

“PLANS, PRAYERS, AND THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 15:22-33

Introduction.

Romans 15:22 This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you.

And just what is that reason, Paul?

Romans 15:20 I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation,

Paul was a frontiersman, always moving further west. He was like our Dutch forefathers who came to Whatcom County at the turn of the last century. When they got here this was all old growth cedar forest like Berthusen Park. The farmers had to cut down the trees, pull up the stumps, clear the land, cultivate the soil. All by hand or with horses. The labor was intense, backbreaking.

Paul's mission was to plant churches where there were no churches, to lay a foundation in Jesus Christ and then move on. To plant and then let others water. The labor was intense, and more than backbreaking. Here is how he described it in II Corinthians.

II Corinthians 11:23-27 [with great] labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger

from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

At what point in that list would you have cried uncle and surrendered? How did Paul do it?

Romans 15:15-16 because of the grace given me by God 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

That was Paul's passion and calling for what he did. That was why he got up in the morning. He lived and breathed and prayed bringing the Gospel of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. His love for Jesus and what Jesus did for Him, gave him a passion to share the Gospel to those who never heard.

Have you ever stopped to consider what Paul did for you and at what cost, and consider the debt of gratitude you owe him? Consider the contrast to today. Who are the spiritual leaders we look up to and why? Famous pastors, TV pastors, celebrity pastors who fly around speaking at church conferences, who tickle our ears? Where are the ones who suffer, who go there no one goes, who lay down their lives? You know, we probably wouldn't have liked Paul. He would rebuke our sin, confront us in our complacency, and our coziness with the world.

But what instrument did God raise up to bring the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to us Gentiles? What a gift from God to give us a man like this. We are indebted to him, he sacrificed for us, he laid down his life for us, he died a thousand deaths for us.

That was Paul's ambition. How many of us have ambitions, dreams, desires, goals, that will survive the great fire? How many of them in the end will seem pointless?

What are we living for that is worth dying for? Who are we serving beyond ourselves?

How are we using the grace of God given to us to advance His kingdom on earth?

Jerusalem.

So Paul says he hopes to see them on his way to Spain, but then he says, however, first I have to go to Jerusalem. That doesn't make sense, that's a 2000 mile detour. I thought he didn't go where someone else had already built. Peter and James already planted the church in Jerusalem.

This is a surprise given Paul's desire to go where no one has gone. There must be a really important reason to take him that far out of the way, delay his desire to go to Rome and Spain. Indeed there is.

Paul has been traveling around Macedonia in northern Greece around Philippi, and around Achaia in southern Greece around Corinth, collecting an offering from those new start up church plants for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Do you know who those people are? They are Gentiles giving out of their poverty to the Jews in poverty. Have we not been talking about the racial and ethnic tension in the church? This is like a black church in Mississippi sending money to a white church in Grand Rapids.

Furthermore, the Gentiles were pleased to do so, delighted for the privilege, and they were indebted to do so. But what debt did the Gentiles owe the Jews? What had the Jews given the Gentiles that needed to be paid back? It is a spiritual debt, for the great inheritance they had received from the Jews.

John 4:22 Salvation is from the Jews.

The Gentiles had received the Messiah, the Christ from the Jews. They had received the very words of God from the Jews, all the promise given to the patriarchs of the Jews.

The Jews are the tree into which the Gentiles had been grafted into; all the benefits that belonged to the Jews were now theirs.

All the spiritual blessings we enjoy—forgiveness of sins, and justification by faith, and reconciliation with God, and deliverance from hell, and all things working together for our eternal good, and the hope of enjoying eternal life in the presence of the glory of God—all of these are because we have been grafted into the people of God and made seed of our spiritual father Abraham. Our savior is the Jewish Messiah.

The Gospel makes people generous. It frees hearts from the love of money. This reminds us of the value of the Gospel, and how indebted we. We all owe a debt to those from whom we receive the Gospel.

When God's people receive a spiritual blessing, it is right for them to return the blessing in support of the material and spiritual needs of His church. This is why God instituted the tithe. God gives us the money from Him for us to give back to Him in the service of His church.

Do you know you can have pleasure and find joy in fulfilling your obligation? Joyful duty is not an oxymoron, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Spain.

There is a sense in which this letter to the church in Rome is a fundraising letter from a missionary who is coming to visit them. Paul is asking for financial help for his mission trip to take the Gospel to Gentiles in Spain.

The Gospel never stands still. It is always moving, always reaching out. The Holy Spirit is always on the move, a wind blowing across our planet raising up a testimony for Jesus from every tribe, tongue, language and people.

Prayer.

And all of this is powered by the Holy Spirit through the prayers of the saints.

Romans 15:30-32 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.

The Apostle Paul asks for prayers for himself. This is personal, he's not proud, he acknowledges his need, his dependence, his reliance on God's help and provision and protection.

It is always good when Christians are able to ask for prayer, to humbly acknowledge their need. I have no hesitation in asking for prayer because I know how much I need it.

Paul's request is not casual, he is asking for earnest, urgent, persistent prayer. The word here means to strive together with me in prayer. Paul must have had some sense of what he was getting into, knowing the tension in Jerusalem.

15:31 [Pray] that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

First, Paul knows he is the object of fierce hostility from the unbelieving, disobedient Jews. We saw repeated hostility all through Acts whenever Paul was in Jerusalem.

We know this prayer was dramatically answered in Acts 21-26.

While he was in jail "the Jews [more than 40] made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). But "somehow" (!) Paul's nephew heard of the plot and informed the Roman tribune who immediately dispatched 200 soldiers with 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to escort Paul to Caesarea. That was God's doing in response to the faithful, fervent prayers of the Christians in Rome!

Second, even among the believing Jews there was some suspicion of Paul. Would they accept a gift from the Gentile churches?

Would they be able to see that the Gentiles are part of the people of God, would they be willing to accept the gift as an expressing of love and unity, or is the money tainted by being from the uncircumcised? Do they believe the Gospel to be for all peoples?

Or would the unbelieving Jews intimidate the believing Jews into silence, would they shrink back from association with Paul out of fear?

You know how strongly this works even in our own day. Godless people bully and badger and coerce the faithful into silence on ethical and Biblical issues of the day.

Have you ever been silent because of vocal unbelievers who mock and shame and ridicule Christians? Have you experienced godless critics of the church of Jesus Christ threaten to silence the Gospel or the plans of Christians? Will we be salt and light? Will we be bold and fearless in the face of opposition out of love for Jesus and the Gospel and the truth?

Notice something in these prayer requests. Paul is uncertain how his labor will be received. But that doesn't hinder him working for those who might not welcome his efforts. This is love. He strives for them and on their behalf, regardless of whether or not they love or honor or respect him, or give thanks back. He doesn't work for them for a reward, he works for their blessing.

The prayers are answered, but not in ways expected or desired. Paul's life is spared but he is imprisoned for two years before being taken to Rome in chains for trial. That wasn't how he had planned to get to Rome.

We all have hopes and dreams and desires and aspirations. Sometimes they are realized and sometimes they are not. This is just as true for apostles as it is for us. What Paul hoped to do didn't happen.

God is sovereign over every square inch of this world, over every human heart and decision, over every aspect of each of our lives. His ways are not our ways. In this life you will have trouble and afflictions and trials. God is God. He is sovereign and He is good.

Implications and application.

First, the Gospel is always moving, always reaching out. Spain is not just way over there, Spain is all around us in every unbelieving heart. In every person we have opportunity to be salt and light to. Spain is sitting in this room, and in our families, and school and work and community. Pray for eyes to see, pray for hearts to care, pray for words to speak. Pray for Paul's boldness.

A person who does not know the Gospel is in great spiritual danger and has an immeasurable need. And you have an immeasurable truth and hope.

Second, we have a debt to the Jews, for the Scriptures and for Christ. Let us not forget them, to pray for them. There must be no racism, no antisemitism in the Christian church. Beware of ethnic pride and prejudice.

Racism abounds in our world and in every church. There are always those we look down on or judge or think they are inferior to us, that we are better than. Pray for the unity and ethnic diversity of the church.

We also have a debt to those from whom we received the Gospel, parents, grandparents, church leaders and volunteers, teachers, preachers. We owe them our honor and love for their faithfulness. For being means of God's grace coming to us. Let us seek ways to repay our debt.

Third, pray. Paul believed in the power of prayer, his life depended on it. So does ours. Pray.

Pray for the Serve week, the leaders, the students, the volunteers. The next three Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the Ed building there will be a time of prayer for Serve.

Pray for your church, your leaders, for God's provision of leadership for our children's ministry. Pray for your pastors, they face so many challenges, temptations, so many pressures.

Pray for those in need among us. Pray for those we support and have sent out in Gospel ministry.

All that we are and have comes from God. Apart from Him we have no good thing. All our strength is dependent on God. So the best way we can strengthen one another is to earnestly strive together in pray for each other.

15:33 May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for the leaders here, the servants, those who give and give, who spend themselves and their money and time and life for your glory and an eternal reward.