

Paul's Plans and Prayer Requests

📖 Romans 15:23-33

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Last time we looked at Romans 15:20-25 and I gave you an organic exposition meaning I wove the pieces together into the larger picture of Paul's ministry. This man had a strategy in ministry that fit into the great commission strategy of the Lord Jesus Christ and I challenged you to think about your life and ministry in terms of the great commission strategy. The great commission is the overarching strategy and we can plug into that our gifts, our talents and our opportunities in all kinds of ways. It's important to purposely think this way and to come up with short and long term plans. You see in 15:20 Paul says, "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation." Note the word "aspired." It is a word that relates to service, being in the service of another and having the special honor of serving a particular function. Paul's particular service was "to preach the gospel" but not just to preach it, to preach it to unreached peoples and those would be mainly Gentiles, that was his emphasis in ministry. He had a unique background that allowed him to do this effectively. He grew up in Tarsus and so he was a Diaspora Jew. And being of the Diaspora he had much more contact with Gentile culture than a native Hebrew. At Tarsus they had the third largest library in the Roman Empire and it was a center of Gentile philosophy and learning. We can imagine that Paul got quite a bit of it just from growing up so close to it. So even long before he came to Christ and was commissioned to go to Gentiles he was being formed and fashioned for his particular ministry. It may be the same with you. God can use your previous background to form and fashion you for ministry after you become a believer. In any case, this was Paul's particular ministry, preach the gospel to unreached Gentiles. The gospel, we said, is the death and resurrection of the Christ, preached contextually as the promised son of David. Paul preached that gospel in ever expanding circles moving out from Jerusalem and those who believed had the foundation of Christ laid in their lives. In 15:21 he saw his ministry as fulfilling Isa 52:15, "Those who had no news of Him shall see, And they who have not heard shall understand." In 15:22 he says, "For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you." The original says, "these many things hindered me from coming to you." In other words, Paul was busy reaching unreached people with the gospel so that he did not have time to come to Rome. Rome was important to Paul but it wasn't of first importance. You might think of that when you get your plan in mind. Keep your primary task in mind and don't divert from it. Don't let things that are less important get in the way. There will be lots of things get in the way. You have to learn to say, "No" so you can

stay on task and keep moving toward completing your plan. But, 16:23, contrast, now, with no further place for me in these regions, meaning, I've fully preached the gospel in these regions so there are no more foundations here for me to lay, "and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you." Paul had wanted to come to them. There's nothing wrong with wanting to go do something. Paul had said earlier in Rom 1:9 how he unceasingly prayed for them and how he hoped that it would be in the will of God for him to come to them because he wanted to go and share some spiritual gift and encouragement with them and to preach the gospel among them so that he might bear some fruit among them. And so we see his plans in 16:24, "whenever I go to Spain—" Spain was the Western frontier, known then as the Iberian Peninsula. For him this was going to the end of the world. And as he is on his way he says, "I hope to see you in passing." He wasn't planning to stay but he was planning on passing through. "and to be helped on my way there by you." This would be his new missionary base for his work farther to the West. Paul had been based in Antioch but Rome would be his new base. Paul would receive financial help and support from mature believers. And he says, "When I have first enjoyed your company for a while—" Paul wanted to enjoy some down time and enjoy the believers at Rome for a while before going on to Spain. That's the long-term plan.

In 15:25 Paul gives his short-term plan and so we want to look at this today and then wrap up by looking at what happened to these two plans; the long-term and the short term. In 15:25, "but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints." That's the short-term plan. The word "saints" is a positional term for believers. All believers are saints. It means "set apart ones" and all believers are set apart by God and for God when they believe the gospel. Paul was going to serve the Jewish saints at Jerusalem. What was their problem? What needs did they have? There had been a famine in the land. This was predicted by Agabus in Acts 11:27 and it took place during the reign of Emperor Claudius. It was a famine throughout the Roman Empire but the region that was hit hard was Judea and so they were especially suffering. As a result, Paul had collected a financial gift from many of the churches. He says in 15:26, "For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." These were the provinces in what is now Greece and you see many churches there, predominately composed of Gentile believers; Philippi, Neapolis, Berea, Athens and Corinth among others. He had encouraged these local churches to have a contribution ready for these poor Jewish saints when he came to them so that he didn't have to collect when he arrived. The collection had been successful, these churches had generously given and now Paul was planning on personally taking these gifts to Jerusalem to hand over to Peter and the other leaders at the Church of Jerusalem. In 15:27, "Yes, they were pleased to do so," that is, these predominately Gentile churches gave to the Jews at Jerusalem with a cheerful heart. The way to give is without thought of return and without the left hand knowing what the right hand is doing; that is, as one has purposed in their own heart and not under compulsion. Giving is to be viewed as a privilege and not as a burden and if you can't part with your money without it being a burden don't part with the money. So understand that giving is a responsibility but there is a right motive in giving and it should be viewed as a privilege and not to be seen by others and without thought of return. Those are some basics of giving. Now note

that in this giving the Gentile saints had an obligation to give to these Jewish saints. "And they are indebted to them." Gentile believers are indebted to Jewish believers. We owe them. Why do we owe them? Because Paul says, "...if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things." How have we shared in their spiritual things? Well, one may say, salvation is of the Jews. That is the short answer. Another answer is to remember the olive tree analogy in Romans 11. There was a tree with a root and the tree gets its nourishment from the root. That root is the Abrahamic Covenant, it is a Jewish covenant and it is the source of spiritual nourishment. It belongs to the Jews. It's a Jewish covenant. But Paul was saying that we Gentiles have come to share in the spiritual nourishment of the Abrahamic Covenant. The spiritual blessings don't belong to us and we are certainly have not taken them over but we are partakers with believing Jews of these blessings. And because we are partaking of these spiritual blessings Paul says we are indebted to Jews. But note this is not to Jews in general, this is to Jewish saints. It doesn't mean that the general principle of blessing Israel in general is not still intact under the Abrahamic Covenant. It is. But specifically the indebtedness here is to Jewish believers because we're getting our spiritual blessings from their covenant, a covenant that belongs 100% to them, they are partakers too. The rest of the Jews who lived under Judaism had other relief programs. So he says we "are indebted to them in material things" and he's specifying the believing remnant of Jews. They would not be able to get funds through the relief programs of Judaism and so they were in particular need. I watch giving to Israel. There are many Christians that give to Israel. But they do this in general and when the funds get over there the rabbis have complete control over the distribution of these funds and they will not allow one penny to go to Messianic Jews. Because of that the Messianic Jews in the land today are in the same pinch that they were in Paul's day. To get money to them you have to find ministries that ensure the money you are giving goes only to believing Jews. So I'm just telling you the landscape now and how the Messianic Jews are singled out as not even Jewish, as having denied their Jewishness and they get a lot of flak from the orthodox Jews and not one penny of money from evangelical Christians unless it is funneled directly and purposely to them. In any case, we are indebted to them in material things since we are sharers in their spiritual things. Therefore, in 15:28, **when I have finished this**, that is, transferring the funds to Peter and the other leaders at the Church of Jerusalem, **and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs**, giving with a cheerful heart is fruit. Then, **I will go on by way of you to Spain**. So we have the short and the long-term plans stated.

How did these plans go for Paul? We're going to trace what happened. But how did Paul plan? What's the Christian doctrine of planning? In 15:29 Paul says **I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ**. Now, you say, how could Paul know that? Well, it's all contingent on the timing word **when**. **I know that when I come to you**. Paul did not say "I know that I will come to you." His knowledge of coming **in the fullness of the blessing of Christ** was contingent on **when** he gets to come and Paul knew that he was in the hands of God. So **when**, and on the condition that he was able to come to them, then he would come **in the fullness of the blessing of Christ**. What does he mean **come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ**? It means to come with His full approval. In other words, if Paul made it to Rome it would obviously be

because Christ fully approved of His being there. Paul viewed his life under the sovereign plan of God. Constable suggests, "The apostle probably also had in mind the blessing that would come to the Romans through his ministry among them."¹ That is probably true and the reverse is probably also true, they would bless him. But the focus is on the fact that if Paul made it it would ultimately be because Christ approved of his being there.

In verse 30, Paul says **Now I urge you**. The Greek word is *παρακαλεω*. This is the same word used in Rom 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice..." It's not a command, it's less than a command but it's a firm encouragement. *Παρακαλεω* means "encouragement." It's like a good friend coming alongside of you and saying, "Hey, it would be in your best interest to go this way..." What's he encouraging them to do? **By our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company?** The main thing he encouraged them to do is **to strive with him in prayers to God** for him. So in our doctrine of planning should we incorporate prayer? Absolutely. You should never plan without prayer? Paul planned with prayer. He requested those at Rome to be involved in intercessory prayer for him. What is prayer? Prayer is sometimes said to be talking to God and that may be a place to start but that's not really prayer. This is the Greek word *προσευχη*. It is one of the more common words for prayer. There are five other Greek words for prayer in the NT but all six have at the core of their meaning to make a "request." This one means "to petition a deity." So prayer is requesting something of God. And what position are we assuming when we request something of God? A humble position. We're saying that we depend upon Him. We can't provide for ourselves. We need Him. Alright, so isn't Paul admitting by this request that he can't make this plan work? Absolutely he is. We may have plans but we want to include intercessory prayer warriors in that plan. Why do we do that? If history is closed and whatever will be will be, then why pray? Because some of God's plans for history are conditioned on human prayer to the point that if the prayers weren't asked then whatever it is wouldn't happen. One of the adjuncts to the doctrine of prayer is that God's plan isn't so tight that it is to be viewed as writing on a stone tablet. His plan involves the actions of responsible agents. Jer 18, Jonah 3, et al. I'll use the example of Moses on Mt Sinai in Exod 32 getting the Ten Commandments and the people down below breaking the commandments. What did God say to Moses when that happened? "Leave me alone that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation." If you were Moses you might say, this is my exit. I'm getting off the stage. But is that what Moses did? No, it says "Then Moses entreated the Lord his God." Moses went to bat for the Israelites. Why did Moses do that? Because Moses knew that if God revealed this to me He is trying to get me to engage Him in intercessory prayer. Moses knew that God conditions certain things in His plan on prayer. And when he did what did God do? He answered the prayer. The God of the universe actually engaged a human request. Now what would have happened if Moses had not prayed? Destruction of the Jewish people. My point is this was not just theatre. There is a

personal relationship between God and us. He responds to us when we respond to Him correctly. Do you think Paul believed that? Absolutely. That is why Paul requested that they pray for him.

But does it say Paul just requested that they pray for him? No, he said in v 30, **strive with me in your prayers.** **Strive with** is the Greek word *συναγωνίζομαι*. Do you hear the word "agonize" in that word? Sure you do. He's saying agonize with me in prayer. The word means to fight, to contend along with me in your prayers to God. Prayer in one sense is fighting with God. Isn't that what Moses was doing at the foot of Mt Sinai? Contending with God. Do you contend with God in prayer or are you just sitting there praying the "Oh God, whatever you want types of prayer?" Some of the prayers in the Bible are downright scary. People get right up in the face of God and start reading His promises back to Him, like He forgot or something. That's what God wants. He wants you to get up in His face and start claiming promises. He wants a personal interaction with you coming to Him on the basis of His word. That's when things start happening.

And that's what Paul is encouraging them to do, agonize with me in prayer, fight, contend with God. Now look at the requests. What did Paul request they pray for? There are two requests and one result of those requests being answered. You'll observe that the two requests are specific. The first one in verse 31 is **that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea** and the second one is **that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable among to the saints.** Note how specific these requests are. This is one thing I'm emphasizing more and more whenever I talk about prayer with someone. Get specific. Don't just generalize. Look how specific this is. There are certain people, **disobedient** ones, in a particular geographical region, **Judea**. I need rescuing from those people in that location. Paul's going into a zone where he is going to get resistance. Who are these people? They are referred to as **disobedient**. Are they unbelievers or are they disobedient believers? It comes from the Greek word *απειθεω*. Here it's a participle with the definite article and so it is functioning as a noun. We might translate it as "the disobedient ones" or possibly "the disbelieving ones" but it may be better to bring in the idea of "the unconvinced ones." This word is the negation of another word, as you can see from the *a-* prefix. *A-* usually negates. The word its negating is *πειθω* and means "to persuade, to convince" and so we come to the idea of "not convinced, not persuaded." When you study this word in the Book of Acts you see it most commonly when Paul would go to a new city and certain ones would not be convinced. Where did he usually go when he first visited a city? The synagogue, if they had one. And in the synagogue there were always some Jews and Greeks who would believe but then there were the unbelieving Jews. If you turn to Acts (we'll be there for a while). These are the ones Paul used this word to describe. Acts 14:2, at Iconium, "But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren." Acts 19:8, at Ephesus, the first three months, "he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God." i.e. that it was being postponed and during the postponement God was calling out Gentiles to be sons of the future kingdom. Verse 9, "But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus." So I'm viewing these pockets of Jews as being

unconvinced by Paul's arguments and so unbelieving. But more than that they started forming groups and plotting to kill Paul and so were disobedient. That's our word. We see this group in Acts 20:3 when he was in Greece, "...he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail..." So this group was after Paul. They didn't just reject the gospel, they plotted to destroy Paul. Paul's life was in danger. In Acts 20:19 at Miletus he says to the elders, "serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews." These were the plots of the unconvinced, unbelieving, disobedient Jews. And in verse 22 he says, "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me." We don't have to wonder who Paul thought was going to put him in bonds and afflict him; it was the disobedient Jews. So he sails toward Jerusalem knowing danger awaits him. In 21:4 they port at Tyre and the believers there "...kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem." Then they sail down the coast to Caesarea by the Sea and this is where Philip lived with his four virgin daughters and in 21:10 a prophet named Agabus came down. And just like the OT prophets he did something strange. He said, "Paul, give me your belt," and he took the belt and "bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles." Then everybody started begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. And Paul says, "What is wrong with you people, you are breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound but to die in Jerusalem for the Lord Jesus Christ." But you say, Paul had a plan, I thought Paul was planning to go to Spain. Now he's ready to die in Jerusalem? Yeah, here's another element Paul built into his plans, the will of God. Or we might say, subject to the will of God. So planning is biblical, these plans should incorporate prayer from others and the will of God, subject to the will of God. Then all the people said, "The will of the Lord be done." So Paul goes up to Jerusalem. When he gets there he presumably delivers the financial gift to relieve the stress of the famine on the believing Jews. We're not actually told how they receive it. Then he's told that there are thousands of believing Jews all zealous for the law and they've heard tell about Paul that he's teaching Gentiles not to keep the Law of Moses and not to circumcise their children. And so to save face Paul better take a vow and prove that he keeps the Law and so he does this and goes to the temple and follows all the legal procedures. But what do you know, the Jews from Asia, that's way over here, were in Jerusalem and this was probably around Passover, so Jews from all over were there, and they saw Paul enter the temple and they said, this is our opportunity to kill Paul and so they stirred up a mob riot of Jews, made all kinds of false accusations and they all attacked Paul, dragged him out of the temple compound and were about to kill him when the word came to the Roman barracks and the Roman soldiers went out and rescued Paul. So ultimately Paul was rescued. He would have died at Jerusalem but what did Paul ask the believers at Rome to pray for? Look at it again. Romans 15:31 **that I be rescued from those unconvinced, unbelieving, disobedient Jews in Judea.** Was that prayer answered? To a 'T'. More than you know. The word **rescued** (*ρυσθαι*) in the Greek means, "to be rescued from death." Well, what just happened in Jerusalem? Paul was attacked, almost killed and "rescued." That is a specific answer to a specific prayer. Now, just as a fascinating aside, there is another word

with one letter difference, (*ερυεσθαι*), and this word means "to ward off death." That's not what Paul requested prayer for. He requested prayer "to be rescued from death." Do you see how important every word in the Bible is? Do you see that it's more than that actually because if the word had one letter difference it would have meant something different? This is one reason we hold to verbal, plenary inspiration. Every word and every letter of every word is inspired by God. It's not just the concepts or the ideas that are inspired. It's the words and letters that are inspired. So now we see clearly that Paul already knew when he requested that the Romans pray for him that he was going to be attacked and almost killed at Jerusalem. How did he know that? We read it. In every city Paul went to the Spirit revealed that trouble was awaiting him in Jerusalem. So that's why he asked them to pray for this specific thing. And that prayer was answered to the 'T'.

Now I don't know if you see the marvelous truth here. I've tried to paint it for you but history is not impersonal. History is deeply personal. History is not just a computer program that God hit the execute key in order to set in motion. That's not a biblical idea of God's sovereignty. You can slide off in one of two directions when you look at history and both are errors; one is chance and this is the idea that history is open and anything can happen. That is not biblical theology. The other is fatalism and this is the idea that history is closed and impersonal and nothing can happen except that which is determined. The biblical view is that God is sovereign and man is responsible. And in this view God has a plan and man is a responsible agent in that plan and he is responsible to plan, he is responsible to pray to God with respect to elements in the plan, he is responsible to incorporate the will of God in these prayers. Isn't that what Paul did? Absolutely. So this is a tremendous view of history that few people can hang on to; they tend to slide into chance or fatalism at every turn because they can't get their mind around the idea of a living, personal God who has a dynamic relationship with His children. But this is the biblical view.

So the first request was answered to a 'T'. The second request is **that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints**. And on that one we get no notice of how it was answered. All we know in Acts 21:17 is that they were received by the brethren gladly, they went to the elders the next day and he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry and they all began to glorify God. We assume he handed the financial gift over and it was accepted by the elders but we don't know how it was received by all the saints of Jerusalem.

Alright, now the result is verse 32, that is, upon the condition of the two prayer requests being answered, Paul says, **so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company**. Did Paul find that? Did Paul **come to them in joy**? It ended up being a long time coming to them. He was in prison in Caesarea by the Sea for over two years before he appealed to Caesar and was shipped to Rome. We go to Acts 27-28, Paul was given consideration on that trip and able to visit friends at various ports. Near the end of the journey they experienced a terrible storm and shipwreck on Malta. Eventually, in Acts 28:14 they "came to Rome." Not quite as Paul had perhaps expected, as in Romans 15:32, **in joy** and in **rest in their company**. But He

did come to them **by the will of God**. And he did get their company. Verse 15, "And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. 16When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him." So Paul, we see was on house arrest. In verse 17 "After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews," so Paul continued to minister as always. He had wanted to preach the gospel in Rome, he got to preach the gospel in Rome. These Jews reject, in vv 26-27 he pronounces the judgment of Isaiah which is exile. In verse 28, "Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." 29When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves. 30And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, 31preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered." So Paul ended up fellowshiping with the saints of Rome in his own rented quarters. We don't know how, perhaps the Prisci family, a very wealthy family of the woman Priscilla who was married to Aquila, provided these quarters. But you see he had quite a bit of freedom in Rome even while under arrest awaiting trial. So Paul did have his short-term plans fulfilled and he did make it to Rome, sort of the first stage of his long-term plans. Presumably he never made it to Spain. I say presumably because we really don't know. There is one view that Paul was released after the two years in verse 30 and went on to further ministry, perhaps in Spain, there is a second view that he was sent into exile and there is a third view that he died in Rome. Scripture doesn't tell us the end of Paul's life. 2 Tim 4:6 indicates that Paul felt he was near the end of his life, about to be poured out as a drink offering, which implies he thought he was going to be martyred under the wicked Nero at Rome. But we don't know that for sure so I don't know if Paul ever made it to Spain.

Alright, so how do we plan? What's the Christian doctrine of planning? Let's close with the classical text on planning, James 4:13. This expresses the proper balance; "Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." 14Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15Instead, *you ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." That about says it all. You can plan for the future, you should plan, but you don't control the future, the Lord does, so you have to add in elements like prayer and subject to the will of God. "If the Lord wills, maybe he wills, maybe he doesn't will, but if the Lord wills we will do this and that." That is a healthy balance to the doctrine of planning. Ok, that's the end of Romans 15. Next week we will pick up the final chapter, Romans 16.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 15:29.