

XXXIV. Apostolic Plans

April 25/26/27, 2017

Romans 15:14-33

Aim: To gain insight into the motivation and plans of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's travels are the leitmotif of this section and identify it as a discrete literary unit. It falls into three basic parts, marked by the address 'brothers' in vv. 14 and 30 and the transitional 'therefore' in v. 22. In vv. 14-21, Paul alludes to his past travels – 'from Jerusalem around to Illyricum' (v. 19b) – to explain why he has written to the Roman Christians. His focus shifts to his future travel plans in vv. 22-29. Here Paul tells how he intends to 'pass through' Rome on his way to Spain after delivering the collection to Jerusalem. Verses 30-33 are closely tied to this last matter, as Paul asks the Roman Christians to pray for that visit to Jerusalem. This section therefore reveals the degree to which Paul's past ministry and especially his anticipated itinerary shape the content and emphases of the letter. A certain degree of reflection on the stage of ministry Paul has completed; concern about his reception by Jews and Jewish Christians in Jerusalem; preparation for his visit to Rome – all these contribute to the way in which Paul explains and applies his gospel in this letter.

Having finished the argument of the book of Romans, Paul now tells us why he wrote it and how he views his mission. Verses 14-33 of chapter 15 are an exposition of the anatomy of the greatest missionary heart ever.

A. Looking Backward (Romans 15:14-21)

As he did in the letter opening (cp. 1:11-12), Paul again displays sensitivity about presuming to write to a church that he had neither founded nor pastored. Hence, the commendation and almost apologetic tone of vv. 14-15a. But, as he also did in the opening (cp. 1:5, 14), Paul quickly tempers this hesitancy with an assertion of his write to address the Roman church: as a mainly Gentile congregation, it lies within the sphere of apostolic responsibility that God has allotted him (vv. 15b-21).

1. Paul's Letter to the Romans (15:14-15)

a) Commendation (15:14)

¹⁴*I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.*

Paul's address, 'brothers and sisters' (*αδελφοι, adelphoi*), signals the transition to a new topic. After exhorting the Roman Christians at length (12:1-15:13), Paul now commends them for their spiritual maturity. Undoubtedly Paul walks on eggshells in his desire not to offend the Christians in Rome by assuming an authority over them that they would not recognize. But there is no reason to think that Paul is insincere in what he says of them here. Through trusted co-workers (e.g., Prisca and Aquila; cp. 16:3), Paul had access to good information about the Roman Christian community – information about both its problems and its strengths. Thus he can say, emphatically, 'I myself (*αυτος εγω, autos egō*) am convinced (*πεπεισμαι, pepeiosmai*)' that 'you yourselves (*αυτοι, autoi*) are full of goodness, being filled with (*πεπληρωμενοι, peplērōmenoi*) all knowledge.' 'Goodness' (*αγαθωσυνη, agathōsunē*) translates a rather rare word that can denote general 'uprightness' in conduct or, more specifically, 'kindness' and 'generosity' toward others.

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The Roman Christians' 'goodness' flows from their comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith ('all knowledge'). Indeed, so complete is their understanding that they are 'able to admonish one another.'

The first commendation was for their 'goodness,' their high moral character and living. As Paul makes clear in Galatians 5:22-23, all virtue is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The believers in Rome were not perfect, but neither were they spiritual deficient. By their moral 'goodness,' they gave abundant evidence of their spiritual transformation and of the good works in which God ordains all believers to walk (Eph. 2:10). Second, Paul commended the church at Rome for being 'filled with knowledge.' He is not, of course, speaking of broad human knowledge but of the deep knowledge of God's truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers in this church were doctrinally sound. The third virtue for which Paul commends believers in Rome is a product of the first two. Christians who are 'full of goodness' and 'filled with all knowledge' are 'able also to admonish one another.' *Noutheteō* ('to admonish') carries the ideas of encouraging, warning, and advising. It is a comprehensive term for counseling. IN this context, it refers to coming alongside other Christians for spiritual and moral counseling. Paul is not referring to a special gift of counseling, but of the duty and responsibility that every believer has for encouraging and strengthening other believers.

'Goodness' is listed elsewhere as a virtue (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9) meaning 'uprightness.' 'Knowledge' is one's grasp of the Gospel issuing in a living 'knowing' of God. 'Able' (literally, 'powerful') to admonish' (*nouthetein*) is that strength to teach, encourage, and challenge others so as to change patterns of behavior.

b) Boldness (15:15)

¹⁵*But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder because of the grace given me by God...*

But if their knowledge of the faith is so extensive, why has Paul bothered to write them so long a letter? Paul admits that he wrote 'rather boldly' (*τολμηροτερον, toluēprotepron*) in certain parts (*απο μερους, apo merous*) of the letter, but he did so by way of reminder (*επαναμνησκων, epanamimnēkōn*). We may again spot a bit of diplomatic exaggeration in this assertion, but Paul must intend his language seriously; and what he is saying is that the things he has taught them and exhorted them to do all derive from the faith that they hold in common with Paul. In his letter Paul has done nothing but to explicate, for them in their circumstances, the implications of the gospel.

After that brief but touching commendation, Paul begins the defense of his boldness in writing the letter, which some readers might have considered to be presumptuous. However much Paul might want to tiptoe carefully around the Romans' sensibilities, he will not surrender his right to address them, and to address them with authority. For his 'bringing to their remembrance' gospel truths is based on 'the grace that was given to [him] by God.' By this, of course, Paul does not mean that general divine grace that underlies and empowers all Christian existence. As in 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:2, 7-9, Paul refers to that special gift of God's grace which established him as an apostle; cp. 1:5, 'the grace of being an apostle.'

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2. Paul's Ministry to the Gentiles (15:16-21)

a) Paul the Priest (15:16)

(1) His Priestly Office (15:16a)

¹⁶...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles...

In the New Testament those appointed to preach and teach are usually called elders or servants or pastors or shepherds; on rare occasions they are called ministers. *Minister* is the common term we use today, but it was not used frequently to describe the role of a pastor in the early Christian community. Strikingly absent here is another word often used to describe those who minister to the people of God—*priest*. The office of *pastor* is not called the office of *priest*, because the function of the priest in the Old Testament had reached in fulfillment in the offering of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The priesthood of Christ was fulfilled on the cross, so we are not priests. Paul does not consider himself a priest; he calls himself ‘a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God.’

Paul did not inherit a priestly *office* by birth. He was a priest in the same way that all Christians are priests, except in a larger way. *Leitourgos* (‘minister’) was a general Greek term used of public officials. Earlier in this letter, Paul used it of government officials in general, who are, whether they realize it or not, ‘servants [*leitourgos*] of God’ (13:6). But in the New Testament, the word is used most often of those who serve God in some form of public worship. It is used of the Levitical priest Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and is translated ‘priestly service’ in Luke 1:23.

Of special relevance for the matter of Paul’s authority over the Roman Christians is the purpose for which God called Paul to be an apostle: that he might be ‘a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.’ As God indicated in His initial call of him (Acts 9:5; cp. Rom. 1:5; Gal. 1:16), Paul was given a special responsibility for the Gentiles: a call that the Jerusalem apostles duly recognized (Gal. 2:1-10). The Roman church, a mainly Gentile church (cp. 1:6-7, 14-15), therefore lies within the scope of Paul’s apostolic authority. However, it is interesting that Paul does not in v. 1 name himself an ‘apostle’ but a ‘*leitourgos* (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus.’ With this word, Paul may simply be describing himself as a ‘servant’ or ‘minister’ of Christ. But the sacrificial language in the last part of the verse make it more likely that he intends the term to connote *priestly* ministry specifically.

Paul’s heart is first a heart that sees its mission as entirely sacred. Here Paul appropriates the vivid imagery of a Hebrew priest ministering at the altar in the temple. The imagery here is remarkably forceful because the word translated ‘minister’ is the same root word from which we derive the word *liturgy*. The word even sounds like it—*leitourgon*. This is most significant, because Paul could have used other words to describe himself. For example, he could have used the common term *doulos* to indicate a servant of Jesus Christ, or he could have used *diakonos*, which means ‘servant’ or ‘minister.’ But he chose *leitourgon* because he saw his missionary work like that of a priest offering sacred worship to God.

(2) His Priestly Service (15:16b)

...in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

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Although Paul does not call himself a priest, he borrows the language of the priesthood and uses it in a metaphorical way. We do not offer bulls and goats anymore, but we are called to make a sacrifice to Christ, an offering of our very lives, as our response to the gospel. In that sense, every Christian is a priest, but the offering is a sacrifice of praise, not of atonement. It is a sacrifice of worship, which is what we are called to do when we gather together as the Lord's people. Here Paul uses the concept of the offering in a somewhat unusual way. Paul is talking about his offering of the Gentiles to Christ. As Paul proclaimed the gospel of God to the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit had attached himself to the proclamation of that word and worked to bring those Gentiles to conversion. That, Paul is saying, is his sacrifice, the fruit of his ministry. His sacrifice is the Gentile converts. Nor for a minute was he claiming that he had the power to convert them. Paul knew that such power comes only through the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, as a minister, he offers the fruit of his ministry to the Lord. In that sense Paul exercises the office of priest.

What immediately strikes us is the language of Temple and sacrifice in verse 16. Paul speaks of himself as a 'priest' (*leitourgos*) engaged in a 'priestly duty' (*hiergein*) offering a 'sacrifice' (*prosphora*) that is 'acceptable' to God (*euprosdektos*) and 'sanctified' (*hēgiasmenē*) by the Holy Spirit.' By this metaphor Paul portrays himself as a 'priest' who is 'serving' in the Temple of God and is 'offering' up to God an 'acceptable' sacrifice. In Paul's ministry around the eastern Mediterranean he has, in a sense, been 'offering' up his Gentile converts to God.

Paul goes on to describe his 'ministry' here as consisting in 'serving the gospel of God as a priest.' The purpose of this ministry, further, is that 'the offering (*προσφορα, prosphora*) of the Gentiles might be acceptable.' The 'offering' might be the praise, or obedience of the Gentiles, but it is more likely to be the Gentiles themselves. Paul therefore pictures himself as a priest, using the gospel as the means by which he offers his Gentile converts as a sacrifice acceptable to God. The language of 'priest' and 'sacrifice' here is, of course, metaphorical. Paul makes no claim to be a 'priest' or to be offering sacrifice in any literal sense. This is made altogether clear by his reference to the Gentiles themselves as the sacrifice.

Consonant with this view, he saw his priestly offering not as a lamb or a grain offering, but as Gentile converts. Though he is involved in the dusty, mundane business of traveling the ancient world on foot, suffering from exposure, threats, beatings, and rejection, in his heart of hearts he sees himself in priestly garb in the temple, lifting up the souls of men that then ascend as a sweet-smelling fragrance to Christ. Fully apprehended and appreciated, this is a dazzling picture.

It seems that once again, Paul sees what he is doing in a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Earlier he quoted four separate Old Testament texts that were now being fulfilled (15:9-12). Here, however, he is echoing but not quoting from one passage, Isaiah 66:18-20. In its context God has promised to gather the Gentiles to the New Jerusalem to see His glory. But not all have yet come there. God will send 'messengers' to the nations (Gentiles), to those who have not heard the name of the Lord, to bring them back. Paul saw himself as an apostle, 'sent' to 'the nations,' where he has been declaring God's 'glory' in preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. His 'brother' Gentiles from the nations are Paul's 'gift for the Lord,' his 'sacrifice' brought to Jerusalem. Those Gentiles (and their money) which were ordinarily seen as 'unclean' by Jews have been in fact, 'sanctified by the Holy Spirit.' It is likely that Paul saw the collection of money from the Gentile churches brought by Gentile converts to Jerusalem (see vv. 25-28) as evidence that the Old was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.

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In keeping with the rest of the NT, Paul assumes an eschatological transformation of the OT cultic ministry, in which animal sacrifices are replaced by obedient Christians (cp. 12:1) and the praise they offer God (Heb. 13:15), the temple by the community of believers (e.g., Jn. 2:21; 1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Pe. 2:5), and the priest by Christians (1 Pe. 2:5, 9) or Christian ministers. But one thing has not changed: to be ‘pleasing to God’ sacrifices must still be ‘sanctified.’ And so, Paul acknowledges, it is ultimately God Himself, by His Holy Spirit, who ‘sanctifies’ (*ηγιασμενη, ēgiasmenē*) Gentiles, turning them from unclean and sinful creatures to ‘holy offerings fit for the service and praise of a holy God.

Imaging what this priestly self-perception did for Paul. His missionary life was to him intensely sacred. The most mundane daily occurrences were holy. However ignominious his treatment, he was garbed in imperturbable dignity as a servant of God. Everything was done to please God. All of life was a liturgy. If only we could see our service as such, our lives would be transformed. A pie baked for a neighbor becomes an offering to God. A child held and loved is a liturgy, and employee treated with dignity a beatitude. The gospel shared is a song in Heaven’s courts, a Sunday school class well taught a fragrance to God. These are beautiful thoughts! Even better, they are true! This sacred view of life was a primary characteristic of the missionary heart of the Apostle Paul.

b) Paul the Preacher (15:17-19)

In verses 17-19 Paul does some sublime boasting, sublime because he is boasting about God. Paul mentions here at least three marvelous happenings in his life: 1) Gentiles came to belief; 2) signs and wonders accompanied his ministry; and 3) he himself preached the entire 1,400 miles from Jerusalem to Illyricum, which is in present-day Yugoslavia. Not bad—especially in sandals! But Paul takes no credit. Christ did it through him. Paul made this very clear to the Galatians as well: ‘Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 6:14). God was everything to Paul.

(1) Pride (15:17)

¹⁷*In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.*

Although Paul was a priest only in a figurative sense, he was a preacher in the most literal sense. It was in regard to his preaching that he could declare with both boldness and humility: ‘Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God.’ In the next two verses Paul explains the nature of that boasting.

This verse is closely related to vv. 15b-16; this boasting I do – in claiming so central a role in God’s purposes for the Gentiles – is perfectly legitimate, for it is a boasting ‘in Christ Jesus’ and ‘with respect to the things of God.’ Paul condemns boasting in one’s own achievements (cp. 3:27; 4:2-3), but Paul’s priestly ministry to the Gentiles is not of his own doing – it is the work of God’s grace in his life.

Why ‘therefore’ does Paul ‘boast in Christ in the things pertaining to God’? Most likely ‘the things pertaining to God’ summed up the totality of his ministry to the Gentiles as it fulfilled the promises of God to the nations, as spoken through the prophets (v. 16). This is not ‘boasting’ based on pride of achievement. Boasting was commonplace in that era and culturally acceptable. Rather, Paul exulted before God in the privilege he enjoyed in bearing God’s glad tidings to the nations. Paul’s was a quiet boasting arising from a profound and humble gratitude to God. In

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any case, such ‘boasting’ was ‘in Christ,’ because, as Paul now proceeds to say (vv. 18-19), it was *Christ* who worked in and energized Paul for the work he was doing.

(2) Purpose (15:18)

¹⁸*For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed...*

Paul now further justifies his ‘boasting,’ explaining specifically how it is a boasting that is ‘in Christ Jesus.’ What Paul earlier alluded to – ‘grace given to me by God,’ ‘sanctified by the Holy Spirit’ – he now makes clear: the success of his ministry is due entirely to divine enablement. Christ is the active ‘worker’ in the things of which Paul is speaking: Paul is simply the instrument.

The only thing Paul has to talk about is what Christ has done. Paul is not just being humble; he is being truthful, accurate, and theologically sound. Paul is looking at the results of his ministry, and he understands that those results have been wrought by God. Paul offers to God a return of the gift that God Himself has given. That is all we can ever do. What can we give to God that we have not first received from His hand?

First, Paul took no credit for himself. Lest he be misunderstood, he immediately explained, ‘I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.’ In other words, he was not boasting in what he had accomplished as an apostle but only in what Christ had accomplished through him. The second feature of a faithful preacher is emphasizing obedience to the Lord. Paul’s preaching resulted ‘in the obedience of the Gentiles.’ The gospel not only calls men to faith in Christ as Savior but to obedience to Him as Lord. The third feature of a faithful preacher is personal integrity. Paul preached to the Gentiles ‘by word and deed.’ His life was totally consistent with his message, without hypocrisy or self-righteousness.

At the end of the verse, Paul specifies the goal of what Christ has accomplished through him – ‘obedience of the Gentiles’ – and its means – ‘by word and by deed.’ In making the Gentiles’ obedience the object of his ministry, Paul sounds again a key note in this paragraph and in Paul’s introduction of himself to the Romans (cp. 1:5). And ‘obedience will therefore have the same meaning here as in that earlier verse, denoting comprehensively the believers’ response to the Lord Jesus Christ, including, but not limited to, faith. ‘Word and deed’ is a natural combination, occurring frequently in extrabiblical Greek and in the NT (e.g., Lk. 24:19; Acts 7:22; Col. 3:17; 2 Th. 2:17). It subsumes all Paul’s apostolic activity under the heading of speaking and doing.

(3) Power (15:19a)

¹⁹*...by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—*

The first part of this verse continues Paul’s description of the means by which Christ has ‘accomplished’ things through him. ‘By word and by deed’ (v. 18b) is the general summary of these means; the two ‘by’ phrases at the beginning of verse 19 go into more detail. ‘Signs (*σημεία*, *sēmeia*) and wonders (*τεράτια*, *terata*)’ is standard biblical phraseology for miracles, the former term connoting the purpose of the miracle and the latter its marvelous and unusual character. The phrase occurs especially often in descriptions of the miracles at the time of the Exodus and in the history of the early church. Paul may then choose to illustrate his apostolic work with this phrase in order to suggest the salvation-historical significance of his own

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ministry. For Paul is not just another apostle; he is *the* apostle to the Gentiles, the one chosen to have a unique role in opening up the Gentile world to the gospel.

The fourth mark of a faithful preacher is a divine affirmation of his ministry. For Paul, that affirmation often was made evident ‘in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit.’ Divine affirmation does not require miracles. Much, perhaps most, of Paul’s own ministry was not affirmed in such dramatic ways. But ‘the power of the Spirit’ is always evidence in some way when the gospel is rightly proclaimed, even by the simplest and most uneducated preacher who proclaims and glorifies Christ.

(4) Progress (15:19b)

...so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;

Paul has identified the initiator and agent of his apostolic work – Christ, its purpose – ‘the obedience of the Gentiles’; and its means – ‘in word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit.’ Now he identifies its results: ‘so that from Jerusalem and around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ.’ This result statement contains three matters that require comment.

(a) Jerusalem to Illyricum

1) Why does Paul choose Jerusalem and Illyricum as the geographical limits of his previous ministry? We would have expected Paul to identify Antioch as the jumping off point of his distinctive outreach to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-2). However, brief, Paul can legitimately point to Jerusalem as the geographical beginning point of his ministry (Acts 9:26-30; cp. 26:20; Gal. 1:18-19, 22). And Illyricum is appropriately chosen as the other limit. The Illyrians inhabited a region north and west of Macedonia; and the Romans carved out a province in the area, occupied today by northern Albania, much of Yugoslavia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Paul is probably referring to this province. Noting that neither Paul nor Acts mentions missionary activity of Paul in Illyricum, many scholars think that Paul may be claiming only to have preached ‘as far as’ or ‘up to the boundaries of’ Illyricum. But it is quite possible that Paul ventured into Illyricum during his apparently circuitous trip from Ephesus to Corinth on his third journey (Acts 20:1-2). The ancient geographer Strabo mentions that the Egnatian Way passes through Illyricum on its way from the Adriatic coast to Macedonia. Knowing Paul’s preference to stick to well-traveled Roman roads, then, Paul may easily have preached into the southern regions of Illyricum during the movements mentioned by Luke in Acts 20:1-2.

The fifth feature of the faithful preacher is that his work is thorough. He completes what God has called him to do. ‘From Jerusalem’ in the far southeast, Paul travelled through Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and even to ‘Illyricum,’ the region roughly corresponding to the former eastern European country of Yugoslavia—a span of some 1400 miles. The book of Acts does not record his going to ‘Illyricum,’ but he probably visited that remote place during one of his stays in Macedonia.

For Jews, Jerusalem was the ‘navel’ of the world, the center of the universe, towards which the nations would return one day. The Roman province Illyricum (modern ‘former’ Yugoslavia) was the dividing line between the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire. So Paul had ‘fulfilled the gospel’ to the Gentiles in Nabataea and Damascus (the region of Jerusalem) in Syria-Cilicia, in Galatia, in Macedonia, in Achaia, in Asia, and ‘into’ (*mechri*) Illyricum. To be

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sure, he had not evangelized every individual nor every settlement. As a Roman citizen he has strategically targeted Roman provinces through ministry in leading Roman cities where he could expect a measure of protection from provincial authorities. But from the churches in those nodal points the gospel has spread throughout localities and whole provinces.

2) Why does Paul add the word *kuklō* to his description of his travels from Jerusalem to Illyricum? The word means ‘circle’ or ‘ring.’ Probably Paul intends simply to indicate that the journey he describes was not a direct one, but that he moved ‘around,’ ‘in a circuitous route’ as he made his way from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

(a) ‘Fulfilled the Gospel’

3) How can Paul claim that he had ‘fulfilled’ the preaching of “the gospel (*ευαγγελιον, euaggelion*) of Christ’ in these regions? Does not this language suggest a finality to preaching in the eastern Mediterranean that hardly accords with the relatively small number of churches that had been planted? The most reasonable explanation is that Paul claims that he has brought to completion in the regions designated his own special apostolic task of planting strategic churches. As Knox puts it, ‘He could say that he had completed the preaching of the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum only because this statement would have meant for him that the message had been proclaimed and the church planted in each of the nations north and west across Asia Minor and the Greek peninsula – ‘proclaimed’ widely enough and ‘planted’ firmly enough to assure that the name of Christ would soon be heard throughout its borders.

The phrase ‘fully preached’ can mean two things. It can refer to preaching the full gospel message (cp. Acts 20:27) or to preaching throughout the full geographical area in which he was called to minister. Both meanings appropriately describe Paul’s ministry, but the context seems to indicate that the apostle here had the second meaning in mind. He was affirming that he faithfully and fully ministered in every place to which the Lord sent him.

Remarkably Paul does not say, ‘I have fully *proclaimed* the gospel of Christ’ as the NIV translates it. The verb is ‘fulfill’ (literally, ‘fill up’) not ‘proclaim’ or ‘preach.’ What does he mean by ‘*fulfilled* the gospel’ (a phrase similar to Col. 1:25: ‘to *fulfill* the word of God’)? The probable answer is to be found in verses 20-21 where the initial ‘Thus’ connects those verses back to verse 19a. ‘I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ, *thus* making it my aim to evangelize where Christ is not named.’ For that would be to ‘build upon another’s foundation,’ which he will not do. ‘Fulfilling the gospel,’ then, implies two connected ministries. The first is ‘laying the foundation’ by preaching Christ in virgin territory (‘where Christ is not named’) and so winning converts. The second is ‘building’ upon that ‘foundation’ a superstructure of mature believers through *further* gospel ministry. ‘Fulfilling the gospel of Christ’ is nothing less than 1) founding a church *on* Christ, and 2) raising it up to spiritual adulthood *in* Christ.

c) *Paul the Pioneer (15:20-21)*

The third aspect of Paul’s missionary heart is that it dreams. We must note that Paul had dreams and visions of incredibly large proportions. Basic to Paul’s dream was the obsession to preach where the gospel had not been preached, wherever that might be (cp. 2 Cor. 10:16).

(1) Theological Calling (15:20)

²⁰ *...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation...*

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‘In this manner’ at the beginning of the verse looks both backward and forward, linking Paul’s fulfilling of the gospel in v. 19b with the procedure that he describes in v. 20b-c: ‘But in this way I am fulfilling the gospel (v. 19b): by striving to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named, lest I build on another person’s foundation.’ By ‘where Christ has not been named,’ Paul means places where there is no worship of Christ at all. Paul here indicates that he believed God had given him the ministry of establishing strategic churches in virgin gospel territory; like the early American pioneers who pulled up stakes anything they could see the smoke from another person’s cabin, Paul felt ‘crowded’ by too many Christians. His purpose was therefore ‘not to build on another’s foundations’ (see also 2 Cor. 10:13-18). As 1 Cor. 3:9b-15 makes clear, Paul does not intend to say anything disparaging in general about the work of ‘building on the foundation,’ for example, further evangelism and pastoral care. It was simply that he knew that his commission from the risen Christ did not include these activities. To adopt Paul’s other metaphor from the same passage, he had been given the task of ‘planting’; others, like Apollos, were there to ‘water’ the fragile new growth (1 Cor. 3:5b-8).

Even a superficial reading of the book of Acts reveals that Paul was a pioneer missionary, evangelist, and church planter. He preached ‘the gospel’ where no one else had ministered, ‘where Christ was’ not ‘already named.’ Judging from the New Testament record, Paul ministered in more previously unevangelized areas than any other apostle or preacher. More than any other, he reached the unreached, because his calling and his desire were to ‘not build upon another man’s foundation.’ Such was surely the primary function of a New Testament evangelist. It was not that it is wrong to build on another minister’s foundation, because that process is part of God’s plan for establishing and maintaining His church. Paul explained to the factious church at Corinth that he ‘planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth’ (1 Cor. 3:6). In that instance, Apollos had built on Paul’s foundation, which was perfectly in accord with the calling of both men. It is still God’s plan that some believers lay the foundation by bringing unbelievers to saving faith in Christ (evangelists) and that others build up those converts by ministering God’s Word to them (pastors).

There is nothing wrong with preaching on somebody else’s foundation. Ministers build on the ministry of those who have gone before. Very rarely does a church begin and end with a single pastor, and it is customary in the ministry to build on another’s foundation. Paul, however, was not a pastor; he was an apostle and a missionary, and he was sent to places where the gospel had not been preached and where no one else had laid a foundation. That was his aim—to preach the gospel not where Christ was already named, lest he should build on another man’s foundation.

How does Paul’s expressed reluctance to build on another’s foundations fit with his assumption of some degree of authority over the Roman Christians through this letter and with his anticipated visit to them? We should recognize that the desire Paul expresses here is just that, and not an absolute rule. For in pursuing his pioneer church-planting ministry, Paul would often have to engage in other ministry activities or to work with churches that he did not himself found (e.g., Antioch). And, as Paul will explain in the next paragraph, his letter and planned visit to the Roman church are means by which he hopes to advance his pioneering mission work into a new field – Spain.

Since Christ is already ‘named’ in Rome Paul will now bypass this city and region. ‘Another’ has laid a ‘foundation’ and Paul will not come to reside in Rome to erect a ‘building’ upon it. But who is this ‘other’ person who has ‘laid a foundation’ in the Eternal City? It is unlikely to have been those converted Jews on their return from pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of

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Pentecost (cp. Acts 2:10). ‘Another foundation’ sounds rather too formal for the rather *ad hoc* beginnings associated with those Jews who probably remained members of the various synagogues in Rome during those early years. The best guess is that the unnamed ‘foundation’ layer is the Apostle Peter. According to early church evidence Peter made his way to Rome (1 Clement v-vi), arriving perhaps by the mid-fifties (that is, after the death of Claudius in AD 54 when Jews were allowed to reside in Rome). In this case it is most likely that Peter concentrated his ministry on Jews and Jewish believers. If so, Peter’s ministry would not have advanced the integration of Jewish with Gentile believers so dear to Paul. By the hypothesis that Peter was the apostolic ‘foundation’ layer Paul would have two reasons not to reside in Rome. First, he was committed to evangelizing where Christ was not named, which was not possible in Rome. Second, to labor alongside Peter in the same city, where his ministry was to Jews and Paul’s was to Gentiles, may have actually deepened the divisions and deferred indefinitely the consolidation of the Jews and Gentiles into one common body (see 15:5-7).

(2) Biblical Support (15:21)

²¹ *...but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’*

As he so often does, Paul clinches his point with an OT quotation, here from Is. 52:15b. Paul has probably chosen to quote this text for at least three reasons. First, it justifies Paul’s decision not ‘to build on another’s foundations’ (v. 20); for the text speaks of bringing a message to those who have not yet heard. Second, it accords with Paul’s sense of calling to Gentiles, since the ones who have not had it announced to them and have not yet heard are ‘kings’ and nations’ (cp. Is. 52:15a). Third, it alludes to the content of Paul’s gospel. For Is. 52:15 is part of the famous fourth ‘servant’ passage, and the ‘him’ concerning whom these Gentiles have not been told is the Servant of the Lord. Paul’s pioneering church-planting ministry among the Gentiles is fulfilling the OT prediction about Gentiles coming to see and understand the message about the Servant of the Lord.

Significantly, these words belong to Isaiah’s prophecy about the Servant of the Lord who will suffer and die in place of His chosen people, for their sins (Is. 52:13-53:12). The Gentile nations and their kings, however, will be astonished when they hear about this Servant. They ‘will see’ and ‘understand,’ however, not through Christ directly but indirectly, through Paul’s pioneer preaching to them. Paul, therefore, ‘extends’ *the* Servant’s ministry to the Gentiles and is himself, in a derived sense, a ‘servant of the Lord.’ This, however, is true of all genuine missionaries.

B. Looking Forward (Romans 15:22-29)

This paragraph begins (vv. 22-24) and ends (vv. 28-29) and thus has as its main theme Paul’s intention to visit Rome. As he did at the beginning of the letter (1:13), Paul semi-apologizes for not having come sooner. Even now, he cannot come immediately, for he must first travel to Jerusalem on an important ministry errand (vv. 25-27). And, while sincere in his desire to visit Rome, Paul makes it clear that Rome is not much more than a stop on his way to his ultimate destination: Spain (vv. 24, 28). Paul here hints at one of his main purposes in writing Romans: the need to get help from the Romans for his projected Spanish mission.

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Paul is writing to the Romans from Corinth near the end of seven-year ministry to the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. So now Paul outlines his plans for the future, especially as they relate to the believers in Rome.

Verses 22-29 link Paul's dreams to real life. The gist is this: if Paul had done as he wanted, he would have immediately set sail for Rome. However, he first had to complete the important business of taking an offering to the poor in Jerusalem that he had collected from the Gentile churches. His main motive in this was to cement the relationship between Jewish believers and new Gentile converts. After this task was completed, he hoped to visit Rome (to have some fellowship with the church he had never seen) and then catch a ship for Iberia and begin his Spanish campaign. This was an immense obsession – to preach the gospel in Spain.

1. Rome to Spain (15:22-24)

a) Past Hindrance (15:22)

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

'Therefore' connects this verse with his description of his missionary work in the eastern Mediterranean (vv. 17-19, esp. 19b) – I have been hindered in coming to you because I was concentrating on 'fulfilling the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum.' It was the needs of ministry in these regions that 'hindered' (*ενεκοπτομην, enekoptomēn*) Paul 'many times' from coming to Rome.

'This reason' refers to Paul's fulfilling his divine calling as 'a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.' Faithfulness to his call 'hindered' him from doing many of the things he would like to have done, including, thus far, visiting the church at Rome. *Enkoptō* ('hindered') literally means to cut into or cut out. It was used of deep trenches that sometimes were dug across a road to impede an enemy army. It came to be used metaphorically of any hindrance or impediment. The imperfect tense of the Greek verb indicates continuation, and its being passive indicates that the cause was from the outside. Because of God's plan and control, Paul was providentially and continually prevented 'from coming' to the church at Rome. God effected His will in Paul's life by providentially controlling all the intricate circumstances around him.

Why has the apostle to the Gentiles not come sooner to Rome, the world capital of the Gentiles? It is because someone else (another apostolic leader, presumably) has already arrived so that Christ is already been 'named' in Rome. That 'foundation' has now been laid and Paul will neither re-lay that foundation nor personally erect his superstructure upon it. Paul is called to be a pioneer apostle preaching Christ to those who have not previously heard of Him. The existence of an already laid 'foundation' is the 'reason' he has been hindered for so long, in fact 'for many years,' in coming to them (cp. Acts 19:21). The Greek word *enkoptomēn* is an imperfect passive (of *enkoptein*, 'to hinder') suggesting that *God* had been blocking Paul's Rome-wards journeying, most likely because of Claudius' decree in AD49 barring Jews from Rome, but presumably including the prior arrival of the unnamed foundation-layer.

b) Current Planning (15:23-24a)

²³*But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you,* ²⁴*I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain...*

'But now' contrasts the situation in the past, when Paul was prevented by gospel ministry in the east from coming to Rome, with the present situation, in which, having 'completed' that ministry

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(cp. v. 19b), he is free to move on. We would therefore expect Paul to announce in the sentence that begins here his plan to come to Rome. And this seems to have been Paul's original intention, which he hints at in v. 24 and spells out in v. 28. But, as he sometimes does, he allows subordinate ideas to crop up to such an extent that he never gets around to finishing his sentence. We have here, then, an unfinished sentence. It begins with two parallel participial clauses: 'having no longer an opportunity (*τοπον, topon*, literally 'place') in these regions (*κλιμασι, klimasi*)' and 'having the desire (*επιποθιαν, epiποthian*) for many years to come to you.' Both are probably causal, the former explaining why Paul can now come to Rome and the latter why he plans to. The previous hindrance of ministry in the east has been removed; and Paul's long-held wish to visit Christians at the very seat of the Roman Empire can now be fulfilled.

Paul believed there was 'no further place for [him] in these regions' where he had been ministering, and he 'had for many years a longing to come to' Rome whenever he went to Spain. He did not claim that God was calling him to minister either in Rome or in Spain, but he strongly hoped for and planned for both ministries. 'Spain' included the city or region referred to in the Old Testament as Tarshish, the place to which Jonah sought to flee (Jonah 1:3) and from which ships brought King Solomon 'gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks' every three years (1 Kings 10:22). Spain was on the far western side of the continent and had become a major center of commerce and culture, made accessible by way of the renowned Roman roads. Ruins of impressive Roman architecture still exist there today. That province had produced such outstanding men as Martial, famous for his epigrams; the poet Lucan; the notable orator Quintilian; and the greatest Spaniard in the Roman Empire, Seneca, the notable statesman and Stoic philosopher who tutored Nero and was prime minister of the empire. It therefore is understandable why Paul's plan was to minister in Spain. And he strongly desired 'to see' the believers at Rome 'in passing.'

The third subordinate clause (v. 24a) is temporal: 'when I go to Spain.' Parts of Spain (which in the ancient world included all the Iberian peninsula) had been occupied by Rome since about 200 BC; but it was only in Paul's lifetime that the Romans had fully organized the entire area. Until recently, scholars seemed confident that there was a significant Jewish presence in Spain by this time; but this is now questioned. Why Paul had chosen Spain as his next mission territory cannot be determined; the most we can say here is that Paul was evidently confident that the Spirit was leading him there.

Scholars have questioned why Paul planned to go to Spain. Was it because a Jewish community there would provide Paul the opportunity to preach 'first' to the Jews (1:16)? But evidence is lacking for a Jewish presence in the Iberian peninsula at that time. Did Paul equate Spain with the 'Tarshish' of Isaiah 66:19 as among places that had not seen God's glory and to which the Lord would 'send' His messengers? In fact, there were many nations of the Gentiles still to be won for Christ by His pioneer apostle, for example, Germany, Gaul, Britain, Egypt, and Parthia. Perhaps Paul was systematically 'fulfilling the gospel of Christ' in the nations surrounding the Mediterranean, beginning with the north-eastern quadrant (Jerusalem to Illyricum) so that the north-western sector was the logical next step. Paul's reason for going to Spain may have been as simple as that. Since Rome would not be home for his ministry, the believers there could at least 'send him on his way' by short-term hospitality and provisions for his onward journey.

c) Future Opportunity (15:24b)

...and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

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Paul elaborates on what he has hinted at in vv. 23-24a: that he hopes to fulfill his desire to visit the Roman Christians on his projected journey to Spain. Paul also mentioned his intention to visit the Roman church at the beginning of the letter, but he claimed there that his purpose was to ‘preach the gospel’ in Rome (1:15). Now, however, Paul speaks generally of ‘enjoying their company’ (*εμπλήσθω, emplēsthō*), hits at a fairly short stay (‘for a while’), and treats Rome as little more than a layover on his trip to Spain (‘while passing through’). The best explanation for the difference in emphasis (there is no contradiction) between these two statements is Paul’s sensitivity about financial matters. For Paul makes it clear in this verse that he hopes his ‘layover’ in Rome will result in his gaining material support from the Roman Christian community for his Spanish mission: the verb *propempō* is a regular technical term for missionary support. Probably, then, Paul is reluctant even to hint at this request for help at the beginning of the letter; only after he has ‘built a relationship’ with the community through his letter does he think it appropriate to bring up the matter (cp. also Phil. 4:10-20).

‘To be helped’ is from the verb *propempō*, which, in the New Testament, is used in a rather specific and technical sense. It was always used of the customer in the early church of furnishing an escort, as well as supplies, for someone being sent out to minister in a distant field. Making sensible and careful plans for serving God does not conflict with reliance on His providence, and reliance on His providence does not excuse failure to plan. But personal plans, no matter how unselfish and spiritually motivated, must be subject to God’s plan. Paul’s desire to visit Rome was strong, but his desire to obey God was stronger still.

Allowing for a certain diplomatic tone, we discern two objectives underlying this brief visit, which we note not only from verse 24 but also from the beginning of the letter (1:11-13, 15). First, Paul expected (briefly) to ‘gospel’ them (1:15-17), thus ‘sharing’ his apostolic ‘gift’ with them for their ‘strengthening’ (1:15, 5, 11; 16:25). Since this letter must serve in place of his extended visit, its contents and teaching give us a good sense of the thrust of the apostolic ministry he hoped to fulfill while in Rome. Perhaps Paul planned to expound and apply his own letter as his ‘gospel’ ministry in Rome. Second, Paul looked forward ‘first’ to enjoying the company of the Roman believers but then to be ‘sent on his way’ by them to Spain. The verb ‘send on’ (*propempō*) is used in the New Testament for temporary hospitality and short-term provisions for the missionary who is ‘passing through’ (Acts 15:3; 20:38; 21:5; 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; 2 Cor. 1:16; Titus 3:13; 3 John 6).

2. Greece to Jerusalem (15:25-27)

For some time Paul had been securing financial contributions from the believers of the provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia for the sake of the ‘poor saints of Jerusalem.’ Several reasons inspired Paul in arranging this major task. First, when James, Peter, and John agreed that Paul should ‘go’ to the Gentiles Paul agreed to ‘remember the poor,’ that is, the poor in Judea (Gal. 2:7-9). A famine began in c. AD 46/47 with effects lasting for many years. Jewish believers who were already suffering from the famine were also persecuted by other Jews, adding to their distress. Paul’s ‘collection’ of money for Jews in Palestine from the Gentile Christians was a practical expression of relief within the world-wide new covenant people of God (cp. 2 Cor. 8:13-15; 9:12-15). Second, as Paul will now say (v. 27), the Gentile believers owe a ‘spiritual’ debt to the Jerusalem Church, from which the gospel had come to the Gentiles. In a sense, Paul’s collection from the Gentiles so far evangelized (from Jerusalem to Illyricum) symbolized and expressed the reality that they really were part of the Messiah’s people, although they were Gentiles and not the historic covenant people, Israel. Third, Paul saw his ministry to

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the Gentile nations as fulfillment of prophecy, in particular Isaiah 66:18-20 (cp. v. 16). God through his prophet, promised to ‘send’ messengers to the nations where His ‘name was not yet heard.’ These messengers, among whom Paul included himself, would bring back ‘brothers from all the nations as a gift to the Lord.’ Paul would point to the Gentiles and their money brought to him to Jerusalem as a ‘gift to the Lord’ that he prayed would be ‘acceptable’ to the believers (see v. 31b.).

a) *Jerusalem Collection (15:25)*

²⁵*At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.*

Before Paul would be free to go to Rome, much less Spain, it was necessary for him to go about a thousand miles in the opposite direction to Jerusalem, in order to serve ‘the saints’ there.

Only one last obligation in the east prevents Paul from fulfilling his desire to visit Rome and then to move on to evangelize in Spain: ‘But now I am going (*πορευομαι, poreuomai*) to Jerusalem to minister (*διακονων, diakonōn*) to the saints (*αγιοι, agioi*).’ As Paul makes clear in the following verses, the ministry he intends to have in Jerusalem is a very specific one: sharing with the Jewish Christian community there the money that Paul had gathered from his own mainly Gentile mission churches. This ‘collection for the saints’ was a major focus of Paul on his so-called ‘third missionary journey’; each letter he wrote on the journey mentions it (cp. also 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9). By speaking of the collection as a ‘ministry,’ Paul points to the fact that it was a means by which Gentile Christians could express in a very practical way their love and concern for their less well-off brothers and sisters. It is the need to bring this collection to Jerusalem that hinders Paul from coming straight to Rome. Paul apparently plans to travel to Rome almost immediately; and this suggests that he is writing from Greece after he had finished gather the money from the Gentile churches (cp. Acts 20:2-3).

b) *Greek Contribution (15:26)*

²⁶*For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.*

His references to the Roman provinces of Macedonia (= modern northern Greece, Macedonia, and southern Albania/Macedonia) and Achaia (= the bulk of modern Greece) are of course intended to denote the churches that were to be found there (e.g., at Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth). As his letters to the Corinthians suggest, Paul has not been shy about exhorting these churches to participate in the collection. But their participation is, nevertheless, of their own free will: they were ‘pleased’; they were ‘freely decided’ to make a contribution. Paul suggests something of the significance of this contribution by calling it a *koinōnia*, literally, a ‘fellowship.’ Here the word clearly means ‘that which is readily shared,’ ‘contribution,’ but there is certainly an allusion to the word’s common use in Paul to denote the loving intimacy of the Christian community. As Paul makes explicit in 2 Cor. 8:4 and 9:13, the Gentile Christians’ contribution to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem is an expression of this unity and intimacy.

‘Contribution’ translates *koinōnia*, which has the basic idea of sharing and is most commonly rendered as ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion.’ But here, as in 2 Corinthians 9:13, the context gives it the connotation of financial sharing, a gift. It seems that Paul’s concern was to strengthen the *koinōnia* of spiritual fellowship between Jew and Gentile by means of the *koinōnia* of material support.

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c) Gentile Obligation (15:27)

²⁷*For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.*

Using the same verb that he used at the beginning of v. 26, Paul reiterates the free choice of ‘Macedonia and Achaia’ to participate in the collection; but he immediately adds, ‘indeed, they are indebted (*οφειλεται, ophieletai*) to them [the saints in Jerusalem].’ We can remove the apparent conflict between these assertions if we view the ‘obligation’ Paul speaks of as moral rather than legal. No one was compelling (or had the power to compel) the Gentile Christians to give money to the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem; they gave ‘cheerfully’ (cp. 2 Cor. 9:7) and without compulsion (2 Cor. 9:5). But Paul did want the Gentile Christians to recognize that they had received much from the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and that this had placed them under a moral obligation to reciprocate. Specifically, the Gentile Christians have ‘received a share in the spiritual things (*πνευματικοις, pneumatikois*)’ of the Jewish Christians – that is, in the gospel and all of its associated blessings. Paul alludes here to a central theological theme of the letter: that the salvation enjoyed by the Gentiles comes only by way of the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of promises made to Israel (1:16; 4:13-16; 11:17-24; 15:7-8). There is a sense in which the spiritual blessings of the new age belong especially to the Jewish Christians; and Gentile Christians should acknowledge and give thanks for their ‘sharing’ of these blessings with them. And it is by ‘serving’ (*leitourγησαι, leitourgēsai*) the Jewish Christians with ‘material things’ that the Gentiles can express their sense of indebtedness and thanksgiving.

Leitorugeō (‘to minister’) is the Greek term from which we get ‘liturgy.’ It was often used of priestly service, to which Paul had referred to in 15:16. Even their giving of ‘material things’ was an act of spiritual service. It was not that the Gentiles’ being spiritually and materially ‘indebted’ to the Jews made their generosity any less meaningful or loving. Duty does not exclude willing and joyful compliance. Even the most demanding duty or indebtedness can be fulfilled out of love.

There is now one people, not two, who are saved by and ruled by Christ their king. Jewish and Gentile ethnicity and culture are secondary to this new reality. Paul’s brief references to the collection, with the reciprocal obligations of both Gentile and Jewish believers, drives home the need for Roman Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, to ‘welcome one another’ and to ‘glorify God with one voice’ (15:7, 6).

3. Spain via Rome (15:28-29)

a) Completing the Mission (15:28)

²⁸*When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.*

Paul now makes the transition back to his ‘main’ point in this paragraph: his projected visit to Spain via Rome. However, Paul gets tangled up in his syntax in vv. 23;24a and so ends up there only implying his plan to make this trip. Now he makes it explicitly in the main clause of this sentence: ‘I will go away through you to Spain.’ But the timing of this trip depends on the ‘ministry’ to the saints in Jerusalem, as Paul indicates in a compound subordinate clause: ‘when I have completed (*επιτελεσας, epitelesas*) this [service] and placed a seal of this fruit for them.’ ‘Fruit’ refers to the collection itself. But what does it mean to ‘seal’ it? Many translations and

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commentators suggest that Paul simply refers to the safe deliver of the money. But affixing a seal to something is often an official affirmation of authenticity; perhaps, then, Paul, as the ‘apostle to the Gentiles,’ intends to accompany those delivering the collection to Jerusalem in order to affirm its integrity and insure that it is understood rightly.

Paul was overjoyed with the generous gift that he and the delegation from those Gentile churches were bringing to Jerusalem. He wanted to put his ‘seal on this fruit of theirs,’ confirming, both as a Jew and as an apostle, the genuine love and gratitude those Gentile representatives must have expressed as they presented their conciliatory contribution to the suffering Jewish saints in Jerusalem.

Paul speaks of ‘completing’ his Jerusalem visit and ‘sealing for them this harvest.’ What does he mean? This ‘harvest’ is part of the metaphorical language of sacrifice used earlier. In verse 16 Paul called ‘the Gentiles’ (embodied in their representatives as bearers of the Gentiles’ money) an ‘offering’ by him as a ‘priestly minister’ which, he prayed, would be ‘acceptable [to God].’ A few verses later he will pray that his ‘ministry to the saints in Jerusalem’ will be ‘acceptable’ to them (v. 31). The problem for Paul was that not all the ‘saints’ appear to have understood his ministry in these prophetic terms. He must ‘seal’ this understanding with the believers in Jerusalem.

b) Coming in Fullness (15:29)

²⁹*I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

Paul here breathes ‘a sigh of relief’ as he contemplates his eventual visit to the Romans. For by then the collection will, he trusts, be safely delivered, the poor Christians in Jerusalem somewhat relieved of their crushing burden, and a stronger fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers secured. When he comes to the Romans, then, he will come ‘in the fullness of Christ’s blessing.’ ‘Fullness’ emphasizes the completeness of the blessing that Paul anticipates in Rome. If we translate literally, this blessing would seem to be one that Paul imparts to the Roman Christians through his ministry. But it might be legitimate to assume that Paul thinks not only of his coming but of the results of his coming; and he may then be alluding to a mutuality of ‘blessing’: Paul ministering to the Roman Christians, and the Christians there encouraging and helping Paul (cp. the mutuality in 1:12).

Paul does not mean by this verse a sure confidence of a trouble free journey and safe arrival in Rome. Paul knew better than most about the dangers of travel and of the danger to him by those who opposed his preaching, especially in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 11:25-26). The next two verses call for prayer against the problems that Paul anticipated in Jerusalem. Rather, Paul knew that his coming to Rome for ministry among the believers would be the occasion of ‘the blessings of Christ’ when he would be ‘refreshed’ with them (v. 32). Earlier Paul had expressed similar confidence about the mutual benefits each would enjoy through his coming (cp. 1:11).

Because he lived continually in obedience to the Lord, his life was always blessed. Obviously, that blessing did not exclude physical hardships and afflictions, as he mentions in verse 31 and in many of his other letters. But nothing physical could rob him of ‘the fullness of’ that spiritual ‘blessing.’

4. Rome to Spain?

The Book of Acts tells us that things did not go as planned, however. He did deliver the offering with great success, but he was almost killed by an unruly mob and escaped by night with

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Caesar's soldiers. Then he underwent shipwreck and deprivation before arriving in chains in Rome. As to his vision to go to Spain, we really cannot say for sure whether he ever got there. Modern scholarship inclines to say that he did not, though church tradition says he did.

Whether Paul ever arrived in Spain is a point that we can never be certain about. The NT never reports such a visit; and the evidence of the Pastoral Epistles suggests that Paul turned back to the east after his trip to Rome. But an early Christian document, *I Clement* (cp. 5:7), can be interpreted to suggest that he did reach Spain.

Whether or not he actually reached Spain does not really matter and here is why: First, God knew Spain was in Paul's heart, just as much as it was in David's heart to build the temple, though that king never saw a stone of it laid. Secondly, the value of a dream is not whether we achieve it or not, but in setting out to achieve it. God is not so much interested in whether we reach our destination as in how we try to get there. To us arrival is everything, but to God the journey is most important, for it is in the journey that we are perfected, and it is in hardships that He is glorified as we trust Him. Third, knowing Paul, we can safely surmise that in making his detour to Jerusalem and Rome, Paul never felt that God had mocked him, or that if he never reached Spain his dream was misspent.

C. Looking Heavenward (Romans 15:30-33)

Paul often includes requests for prayer toward the end of his letters. Often, however, those requests are very general. His request here, however, grows directly out of his reference to the collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem in vv. 25-28a. Paul asks the Romans to join him in praying for two things: 1) personal safety (v. 31a); and 2) the Jerusalem Christians' willingness to accept the collection (v. 31b). But Paul has not forgotten his visit to Rome; he makes clear that it is through a positive answer to these requests that he will be able to come to Rome with joy and to find rest for his soul there (v. 32). The paragraph concludes with another typical Pauline letter-closing feature: a prayer-wish that God might be with his readers (v. 33).

1. A Prayer Request (15:30-32)

The final aspect of Paul's missionary heart is, he believes in prayer. He asked for two things: 1) 'that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea'; and 2) that his service in Jerusalem 'may be acceptable.' Both prayers were answered. Acts 21:17-20 records his offering's joyous reception and the resulting solidarity of the churches. In addition, Paul was granted a spectacular deliverance that could only be attributed to God, as Acts 21-23 makes so clear. The prayers of the Roman church brought great power to bear in Paul's life! Paul had called them 'to strive together with me' in prayer—literally 'to agonize together with me'—and that is what they did.

a) *Strong Appeal for Prayer (15:30)*

³⁰*I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf...*

Paul couches his moving appeal in *Trinitarian* terms, a reminder of the three persons in the divine Godhead. He makes his appeal based 1) on Jesus Christ's Lordship over both them and him, about which so much of this letter has been devoted, and 2) their common possession of the Spirit of God who blesses them with 'love' for God and for each other (cp. 5:5). Their prayer is directed 3) to 'God,' which here as elsewhere in Paul's letters means 'God, the Father' of the Lord Jesus and of believers.

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The fulfillment of Paul's hope to come to the Romans 'with the fullness and blessing of Christ' (v. 29) depends on what will happen when Paul goes to Jerusalem with the collection. And so he 'now' 'urges' the Roman Christians to pray for him. The word is a strong one (*παρακαλεω*, *parakaleō*), and Paul accentuates it by his twofold qualification: 'through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit.' The first 'through' might be paraphrased 'in the name of': it introduces the authority by which Paul makes his request. The second, on the other hand, identifies the grounds of this request; for example, the love that believers have for one another is a love 'that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'

Paul's request is that the Roman Christians 'strive together' (*συναγωνίζομαι*, *sunagōnizomai*) with him in prayers. Paul's use of the metaphor of fighting or wrestling may imply something about the nature of the prayer he is requesting: that it involves a 'wrestling' with God; or that it must be especially diligent.

Sunagōnizomai ('to strive together') is an intensified form of *agōnizomai*, which means to struggle or fight and is the term for which we get the English 'agonize.' The word was originally used of athletic events, especially gymnastics, in which contestants, such as wrestlers or boxers, struggled against each other.

The Romans' prayer is to be a matter of discipline, energy, and perseverance, as indicated by 'strive together in ... your prayers.' Our word 'agony' derives from the verb Paul uses (*sunagōnizomai*), which was used for 'wrestling' in athletic contests, and which Paul elsewhere associates with prayer (Col. 4:12). Perhaps Paul has in mind Jacob's all-night wrestle with the angel (Gen. 32:22-32). Prayer to God is no mere ritual or empty repetition for Paul, but a determined struggle urging God to hear and answer.

b) Specific Requests for Prayer (15:31-32)

That struggle in prayer was directed to Paul's forthcoming visit to Jerusalem, for the two groups about whom Paul was deeply concerned, the 'disobedient' and 'the saints.' Whether an Israelite was 'disobedient' or 'saint' depended entirely on his attitude to Jesus as Messiah.

(1) Safety (15:31a)

³¹ ...that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea...

The first thing that Paul wants the Roman Christians to pray for is his personal safety. The 'disobedient' refer to unbelievers; and that Paul had good ground for this request is clear from what happened when he did reach Jerusalem with the collection: the Romans had to take him into custody in order to keep the Jews from killing him (21:27-36).

'Disobedient' is from *apeitheō*, which carries the basic idea of being obstinate and unpersuadable. In this context it refers to Jews who obstinately refused to believe the gospel and therefore were 'disobedient' to God, whose Son, the Messiah, they rejected. Paul's request 'to be delivered' was not for the purpose of his being spared further persecution or even death. He unselfishly wanted 'to be delivered' only to the extent necessary for him to complete the ministry the Lord had given him.

The 'disobedient (*apeithountes*) in Judea' captures Paul sense of tragedy that Israel was 'a disobedient people' who have rejected their Messiah (10:21; cp. 11:31). Judea was a place of danger for Paul as we know from his own pen (1 Th. 2:14-15) as well as from the book of Acts (9:23, 29). So let the Romans pray that he will be 'delivered' from 'the disobedient' in Judea.

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Paul's prayer request 'to be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea' was answered positively, to the extent that the unbelieving Jews in Judea were not allowed to take his life. He was beaten and imprisoned, but his life was divinely spared.

(2) Service (15:31b)

...and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints...

But Paul is also concerned about his reception by believers in Jerusalem. Therefore, his second request is that the Roman Christians pray that 'my ministry for Jerusalem might be acceptable to the saints.' Paul might think that it would be pressure put on the Jewish Christians by their unbelieving fellow Jews that would lead them to reject the collection. But Paul does not draw this connection; and the distrust about Paul and his law-free gospel among Jewish Christians themselves was great enough to give him ample reason for the concern he expresses here. For, while Paul's relationships with the Jerusalem apostles were apparently cordial enough at this point (see, e.g., Acts 21:18-25; Gal. 2:1-10), his own letters reveal that various conservative Jewish-Christian groups continued to be hostile toward him (see especially 2 Cor. 10-13).

By the grace of God, however, there were also 'saints' (*hagioi*, 'holy ones') among God's historic people in Judea. These originated as the first Galilean followers of Jesus of Nazareth who after His resurrection became the church of Jerusalem led at first by Peter (and John) but later by James the Lord's brother. Over a period of time the influx of priests and Pharisees (Acts 6:7; 15:5) and the rise of Jewish nationalism tended to make the 'saints in Jerusalem' more conservatively Jewish and somewhat resistant to Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

Paul's second prayer request was that, regardless of what dangers might befall him, his 'service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints.' In other words, he wanted his ministry to benefit the Lord's people there, at the birthplace of the church. He was not concerned for what might be called professional success. Because he and his Gentile companions from Macedonia and Achaia were bringing a financial contribution to the church at Jerusalem, which was still largely Jewish, the service which Paul mentions doubtless referred, at least in part, to that offering. He wanted the saints in Rome to pray with him that the gift would not offend Jewish believers in Jerusalem but rather would 'prove acceptable to the saints' there. He wanted it to be received with loving gratitude for what it was, a gesture of brotherly love and conciliation. Paul's prayer for success in Jerusalem was also answered (cp. Acts 21:17, 19-20).

But Paul is now bringing Gentile converts with their gifts to Jerusalem and he hopes to 'seal' this 'harvest' to the 'saints' in Jerusalem (cp. v. 28). So let the Romans pray that these Jewish believers will find Paul's 'ministry' (*diakonia*) 'acceptable' (*euprosdektos* – as in v. 16) to them. In short, Paul is concerned that the Church of Jerusalem will share his conviction that the prophecy of Isaiah 66:18-20 is being fulfilled as the apostle brings Gentiles from the nations (with their gifts) to Jerusalem as a sign that Isaiah's oracle is being fulfilled in Paul's ministry (cp. v. 16).

(3) Satisfaction (15:32)

³² *...so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.*

This is Paul's most personal prayer request of the three. Looking forward to the time when he finally would be able to come to the church in Rome, he hoped that he might do so 'in joy.' He

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already had told them, ‘I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while’ (15:24).

The purpose clause in this verse could be a third prayer request, parallel to the two in v. 31, but it probably expresses the ultimate goal of those requests: that Paul might ‘come in joy’ (*εν χαρα, en chara*) to the Roman Christians and ‘find refreshment’ (*συναναπαυομαι, sunanapauomai*) there with them.

Paul sees the positive answer to these two prayers as ‘through the will of God.’ If that proves to be the case, as he hopes, he will, indeed, ‘come to them’ in Rome ‘in joy.’ But that coming is no sightseeing excursion to a magnificent city. Paul is coming to find ‘mutual refreshment’ with this group of Christian believers, as earlier he had looked forward to ‘mutual encouragement’ with them (cp. 1:11-12). He knows that he has much to give, but also much to receive, even from ordinary and unexceptional folk.

We find a somewhat ironic confirmation of this in the way in which God ‘answered’ Paul’s prayer here. He *was* delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, but only by being locked up by the Romans for two years. The collection *was*, apparently accepted by the Jewish Christians (or at least most of them [cp. Acts 21:17]), but Paul’s subsequent arrest in the temple precincts must have raised Jewish Christians’ suspicions about him again. And Paul *did* get to Rome and experience some measure of joy and refreshment (cp. Phil. 1:12-19; 2:25-30), but he arrived there in Roman chains.

2. A Prayer Wish (15:33)

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

Before extending personal greetings to various friends in Rome and giving a final warning to be on guard against those who caused dissensions for their own selfish purposes, Paul gives this short but touching benediction.

In the prayer-wish that climaxes the first part (15:14-32) of his letter closing, Paul addresses God as ‘the God of peace,’ that is, ‘the God who gives peace.’ Paul refers in Romans both to the peace of a new, harmonious relationship with God (cp. 2:10, 5:1; 8:6) and to the peace that should characterize the relations of believers with one another (cp. 14:19). It is difficult, and probably unwise, to restrict the meaning of the word here to one or the other: ‘peace,’ like the Hebrew *shalom*, embraces the panoply of blessings God makes available to His people in the age of fulfillment (cp. also 1:7).

Such a prayer is common near the conclusion of Paul’s letters (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; 1 Th. 5:23; 2 Th. 3:16). This ‘peace’ comes from ‘the God of peace’ (1 Cor. 14:33). There is the individual’s ‘peace with God’ arising from Christ’s death for sinners (as in 5:1). But Paul is thinking more here of peace between people, that is, between Jewish and Gentile believers who lacked practical unity (cp. 15:5-6). So he prays rather pointedly, ‘peace be with you all.’ Let the Roman Christians – Jews and Gentiles – fulfill the apostle’s prayer by their attitudes and behaviors.

For next time: Read Romans 16:1-16.