

Lesson 37: Paul's Concluding Thoughts About His Mission

Romans 15:14-33

Paul's Mission as the Apostle to the Gentiles

¹⁴ And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. ¹⁵ But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul's Past Mission: Jerusalem to Illyricum

¹⁷ Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ¹⁹ in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ 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; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul's Present and Future Mission: Jerusalem to Spain via Rome

²² For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ²³ but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴ whenever I go to Spain—for 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—²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ²⁸ Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Paul's Prayer Request

³⁰ Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³² so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company. ³³ Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

NASB

Introduction

Hearing Romans for the First Time

The Roman word *domus* means home. The Slavic word *dom* comes from the Roman word as does the English word *domicile*. You call it *domus* because you are a free Roman living in the capital city. Believers have been assembling every night this week in different homes. This is your third night in a row. Arriving at one of the wealthier homes in the Christian community, you pass through the vestibule, greeted with a kiss, and squeeze your way into the atrium.

You notice again there is no statue of a household god standing in this atrium, and you smile to yourself. We Christians are a strange lot. Though this atrium measures some 50 square meters, about 540 square feet, the seating is shoulder to shoulder. You do not mind. You enjoy the closeness of your brothers and sisters in Christ. The ceiling is high with an opening to the sky. The air is good. As more arrive, the group spills from the atrium into the warm m night air of the courtyard, scented by lemon trees. There must be sixty or seventy brothers and sisters assembled together tonight.

The sister Phoebe arrived three days ago. She brought with her a letter from the Apostle Paul. You were there the first night the letter was read. We first read, as we always do, from the Bible. From the Law or the Prophets or the Writings. Your Bible consists only of the Old Testament Scripture. You have no gospels or letters, not yet. There is very little Christian writing. Priscilla and Aquila brought

back with them copies of a couple letters written by Paul. And now you have another. One written directly for you in Rome. Epaphroditus stands up to read. You will never forget the first time you heard the letter to the Romans. What an incredible presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Paul's introduction drew you in. Even though he was a persecutor of Christians, a pharisee of Pharisees, he talked about his special calling to the Gentiles. You had heard the story from his friends. He wrote in his introduction that he had heard the report of your faith in Rome, and he expected to be blessed by your church when he comes. He longs to visit your great city, but the work of the Lord has prevented him from coming. You love his confidence in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Epaphroditus read that line, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," you got goose bumps. As you did also the second night. And will again tonight.

After declaring that the righteous man will live by faith, Paul went on to defend the gospel with such care and depth and insight. He brought together so much you had been hearing from the preachers and teachers among you. He answered so many questions, raising so many more.

He proclaimed freedom from the Old Covenant law. Christ is the end of the law he says. Still he rooted everything in the Law and the Prophets. He taught about Abraham and quoted David and Moses, from the Psalms, Genesis and Deuteronomy, from Habakkuk and other prophets, especially Isaiah, a lot of Isaiah. He preached the freshness of gospel while keeping it rooted in the deep, rich soil of God's Word. Some of your teachers lean towards formulating the gospel as though it is a new Christian law parallel in form to the old. Others lean in an opposite direction, almost degrading the old in order to promote the new. Listening to Paul that first time, your emotions went both ways. He is stuck to the old. No, he is preaching something entirely new. But as you hear again and again, you realize how beautifully he proclaims the newness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, still rooted firmly in the Word of the Law and the Prophets.

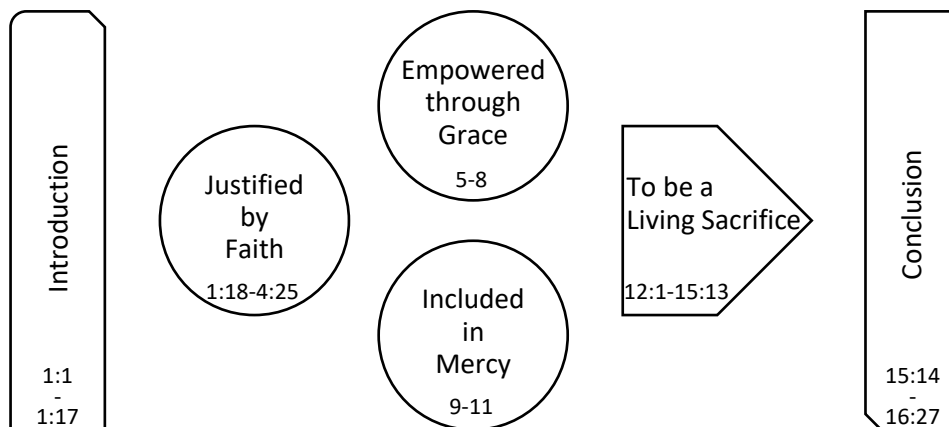
You hear Paul declare how you are justified by faith, then also empowered in grace, and finally included through mercy. You, a Roman Gentile, justified, empowered and included through the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, humanity's Messiah. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

You remember how Paul then shifted from proclamation to exhortation. And he described it as worship, offering ourselves as living sacrifices. Living for God is an act of worship. We are to be a new community. And you realize how much good already exists among you, and how much more growth you long to see. And then there is the rebuke. A gracious rebuke, though still a rebuke, that you all take care not to ruin your work to build the kingdom of God over the non-essential issues of food laws and holy days.

You come again to the conclusion as Paul turns from exhortation to speak about his mission to the Gentiles and his travel plans and to greet everybody he knows in Rome. You decide to come again the next night. You admit that your mind wandered during the reading, taking a thought and running with it for several minutes before you came back again to listen. You are just beginning to catch elements of Paul's structure. To see how he brings together different parts. You especially enjoyed the chiasmic parts of the letter. That was artfully done. But you know there is so much more to the teaching of Paul. In a lifetime of serving God and learning about Jesus, you sense that you can come back to this well again and again.

Introduction to the Conclusion

We have arrived at the conclusion to Paul's letter to the Romans, this amazing letter. What would it have been like to hear it read in context, to receive a letter crafted so well, addressing essential questions of gospel belief and gospel practice, a letter excelling from the perspective of human achievement and even more importantly inspired by the Holy Spirit?



The letter divides into four basic parts: the introduction, the argument, the application, and the conclusion. The argument was a three-part presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul first took us to court to show how the gospel saves humanity from the curse of sin. We are justified by faith. That was chapters 1-4. Then Paul addressed two challenges to the good news of justification by faith. First, what about sin? Does a gospel of grace promote sin? By no means! The gospel of grace motivates and empowers the believer for righteousness. That was chapters 5-8, empowered in grace. Second, what about Israel? Does the end of the law mean the end of God's faithfulness to Israel? By no means! The gospel of Jesus Christ includes through mercy, both Jew and Gentile. That was chapters 9-11. Concluding his argument section, where he establishes us in the truth of the gospel, Paul then moved on to chapters 12-15 to exhort us to live out the gospel as a new kind of community.

We just finished this practical application section with a personal charge to the Romans to accept one another in spite of disagreement over issues of conscience. And at the very end of that exhortation to acceptance, Paul came back again to the prophetic vision of Gentiles being incorporated into the people of God. The Messiah will rule over the Gentiles who will give God glory through their heartfelt obedience. Verse 15:12, "Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse [that's the Messiah], he who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in him shall the Gentiles hope.'"

The newness of the new covenant establishes Jesus as King over all peoples, issuing an invitation for all peoples. Ending the application section with a focus on Gentiles living to the glory of God does two things. First, it ends the application section with an emphasis on life as worship. Gentiles believing in God bring him glory as they live lives of worship. Ending on Gentiles living to the glory of God also provides a transitional bridge to Paul's conclusion, where he returns to his special calling as apostle to the Gentiles.

We are going to cover the conclusion in three lessons. In chapter 16 we will consider Paul's long list of greetings and his final words to the Romans. In this lesson we will cover Paul's report about his mission in chapter 15:14-33. In this section, Paul shifts to the more personal communication that we saw in the introduction of the letter, verses 1:1-17. He used there the three classical Greek categories of persuasion, logos, ethos and pathos. Logos is the message that Jesus is the Christ and salvation comes through him. Logos was presented in the first few verses of the letter, the entire argument section, and will be covered again in the last verses of the letter. Logos is the content of the message.

People can be persuaded by the facts of the message. But persuasion drops dramatically if the audience does not accept the credibility of the messenger or if their heart is not engaged. Ethos establishes credibility, and pathos draws in the heart. As in the introduction, Paul employs all three elements of persuasion in the conclusion of the letter. We especially see ethos and pathos in chapter 15. As we read through the text for this lesson, in addition to hearing Paul express details about his past and future mission plans, listen also for ethos and pathos, that is, listen for ideas that establish Paul's credibility and for the phrases that communicate to the heart of the Romans. How does Paul draw the Romans towards accepting his message? Let's read the whole passage, Romans 15:14-33.

[Read Romans 15:14-33]

Ethos and Pathos in Paul's Conclusion

Paul communicates ethos or credibility by asserting a special calling from God as a minister to the Gentiles. His mention of signs and miracles performed in the power of the Holy Spirit also attest to his credibility, especially since his coworkers in Rome can support the claim. Paul creates pathos by affirming the Romans in their faith and by talking about how he longs to see them and how he expects to be blessed by them.

Paul uses here in the conclusion, the same means for creating ethos and pathos as he did in the introduction. Consider these five parallels. (1) Concerning his affirmation of the Romans, he said in the introduction, “your faith is being proclaimed through the whole world.” And he says in 15:14, “you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge.” (2) Concerning his calling to the Gentiles, he says in the introduction that he wants to obtain some fruit among them, “even as among the rest of the Gentiles.” And he says in 15:16 that he was given grace, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.” (3) Concerning confidence in the gospel, he proclaims in the introduction, “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation.” And he says in 15:17, “in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting.” (4) Concerning his desire to visit the Romans, he says in the introduction, “I long to see you.” And in 15:23 he says, “I have had for many years a longing to come to you.” (5) And concerning his expectation of benefit from the Romans, he gave this expectation in the introduction, “that I may be encouraged together with you while among you each of us by the other’s faith.” And he states this expectation in 15:24, “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.”

Introduction 1:8-17

- 1 ^aFirst, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because **your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.** ^bFor God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the gospel* of His Son, is my witness *as to how* unceasingly I make mention of you, ^calways in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. ^dFor
- 4 **I long to see you** so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; ^ethat is, that I may be encouraged together with you
- 5 **while among you, each of us by the other's faith,** both yours and mine. ^fI do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that
- 2 **I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.** ^gI am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ^hSo, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in
- 3 **Rome. ⁱFor I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation** to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ^jFor in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous shall live by faith.”

Conclusion 15:14-29

- 1 ^kAnd concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that **you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge** and able also to admonish one another. ^lBut I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ^mto be
- 2 **a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles,** ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ⁿTherefore **in Christ Jesus I have found reason for**
- 3 **boasting** in things pertaining to God. ^oFor I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ^pin the power of signs and wonders, **in the power of the Spirit:** so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. ^qAnd thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; ^rbut as it is written, “They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.” ^sFor this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ^tbut now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since
- 4 **I have had for many years a longing to come to you**
- 5 **whenever I go to Spain—for 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—** ^ubut now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ^vFor Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ^wYes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. ^xTherefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. ^yI know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Why does Paul make this effort to relate to the Romans and to establish his credibility? I believe that he does it because he believes in his message, and he wants the Romans to benefit from the message and even join him in the mission of spreading that message. We considered in the introduction the multiple purposes of the letter to the Romans. There is a pastoral purpose to the letter. Paul wants to strengthen the Romans in the truth of the gospel so that they will be saved and transformed to the glory of God. The fruitfulness of the message in the lives of the Roman believers requires accepting Paul as a true messenger of Jesus Christ. Along with the pastoral purpose, the letter has an apologetic purpose. Paul is establishing truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ by addressing criticism or challenges to his message. He is not presenting his message as a useful option. He is presenting his message as a definitive statement. For the Romans to stand strong in the defense of the gospel, they need to accept Paul as a credible defender of the gospel. Along with the pastoral and apologetic purposes of the letter, Paul has a missional purpose. This message should be proclaimed. “How beautiful are the feet

of those who bring good news (10:15).” Paul invites the Romans to join him in the proclamation of the gospel, not only through their own witness in Rome, but by assisting him on to Spain. For the sake of the people in Spain who have not yet heard the name of Jesus, Paul wants the believers in Rome to accept him as a credible missionary with whom to partner in the work of the gospel. So, this is why Paul establishes his credibility when writing the Romans; to motivate the Romans to receive his message of the gospel for the sake of his pastoral, apologetic and missional purpose.

For this same reason Paul seeks to create pathos in the heart of the Romans. Feeling a connection with Paul as a partner in the gospel will also help them accept his message of the gospel. He can count on a relational connection with churches he has planted and visited. But apart from believers he has met during his work in the Eastern part of the Empire who now reside in Rome, Paul does not have personal relationship with the members of this community. So, he makes this effort to connect relationally through his writing to help open hearts to his gospel message.

This work of Paul to create credibility and heart connection occurs as he describes for the Romans the past work and future plans of his mission to the Gentiles. Paul gives us a lot of insight into his understanding of his calling. So, let’s look at that, the past and future plans of Paul as the minister to the Gentiles.

Paul’s Mission, Past Present and Future (15:14-29)

He starts his mission summary with a general statement of his special calling to Gentiles in 15:14-16.

Paul’s Mission as the Apostle to the Gentiles (15:14-16)

Just as the last verses of the application section 15:9-12 create one half of a transitional bridge over to the conclusion, the first verses of the conclusion create the second half of the transitional bridge from the application. Paul’s initial comments in the conclusion point back to his final exhortation. He typically allows himself freedom to rebuke members of churches that he has founded. Here he tempers his rebuke to the strong and weak in Rome by telling them that he knows they are mature enough to admonish one another. He also says that he is reminding them of truths that they already know, which is much of what we need from sermons when we hear. We need reminders of how to live out the gospel. I need to hear a good sermon on communication in marriage at least once a year to remind me of the truth I know I need to be applying. Imagine the transformation if we would apply just half of what we know. So, Paul tells them, “This is part of my ministry. I am reminding you of truth you have already heard, so that you will continue in your effort to live it out.

These first few verses of the conclusion are also where Paul reminds the Romans of his calling to the Gentiles. It is as though he imagines someone asking, “Who does he think he is writing to us about accepting each other? Who’s Paul?” Paul pre-empts the question. I am writing to you, not as one of your own, not as a founder of your community or even as a member of your community, but as one given a special ministry to all Gentiles. I would be remiss to leave you out. God called me to Gentiles. You are Gentiles. So, I need to write to you, though I know you can admonish each other, and I am just reminding you of what you know. Let’s read how this comes together in those verses, verse 14-16.

¹⁴ And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. ¹⁵ But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul envisions his own service to God by expanding on the imagery of 12:1. There he associated the offering up of one’s own life as an acceptable sacrifice to God. Here he sees himself offering up others as acceptable sacrifices to God. So, gospel ministry is a dual offering. We offer up ourselves as we live for God, and we offer up all those that God may have given us the opportunity to bless with the gospel. And our desire for them is that they be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, that is, set apart for use and cleansed and made holy in that purpose.

After recommunicating his special calling to the Gentiles, Paul gives us a brief summary of his past work, that's in verses 17-21.

Past Mission – Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:17-21)

Paul starts this summary giving credit to Jesus. He does recognize his own participation in serving God. God invited Paul to a special ministry, and Paul said, "Yes!" to that offer. At the same time, Paul does not see his ministry as something he can boast about as coming from himself. He does boast, but he boasts in Christ Jesus. Let's that read in verses 17-19.

¹⁷ Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ¹⁹ in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.

For Paul, boasting reveals something essential about who we believe we are as human beings. Right after the critical passage declaring justification by faith in 3:21-26, Paul immediately asks, "Where then is boasting?" All non-graced based religion, religion that is not based on grace, provides the believer with grounds for boasting. Whether the goal of that religion is to live according to an external law or the goal of that religion is to be true to your own internal spiritual self, either way, if you are not made acceptable 100% by grace, then your acceptance depends in some part on your efforts to live out the law or to be true to you, whichever one, you have to do it. And therefore, you have something to boast about. That is not true if you see yourself depending 100% on the gift of God for your acceptability. You depend on him 100% not only as your creator but 100% as your savior. You do not save yourself. Where then is boasting?

In 5:1-11, Paul repeated a similar Greek word three times. We translated the word there as "exult" which carries the meaning of boasting and rejoicing together. Our joyful boasting in that context came from our hope we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here, the boast has to do with fruitfulness of Paul's ministry. But he does not boast on his own account, on what he has done, rather in what Jesus has done through him. He is able to affirm the fruitfulness of his service, without taking prideful credit. He is thinking soberly, not belittling his own contribution, but being sure to recognize his complete dependence on Christ for supernatural results. I imagine Paul keeping a running conversation with God in his head, praying before everything, "Let this not be by my power but by Christ who lives in me for it is no longer I who live, but I live by faith in the Son of God;" and praying after everything, "To Christ be the glory for including me in the work he has done! Praise be to Christ!" So, Paul is able to rejoice in his own effort in the ministry as one who has run the race faithfully while giving all the credit to Jesus Christ.

Paul's boast in Jesus includes the scope of his ministry from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum. Paul could have said that he had preached the gospel from Damascus all the way around to Illyricum, where he first came to Christ or from Antioch all the way around to Illyricum where he was sent out on his first missionary journey. But he could also start with Jerusalem where he had a short, but significant, ministry after his conversion. He also continued to report back to Jerusalem as the mission to the Gentiles continued to expand. Starting with Jerusalem Paul accurately understands himself as involved with the expansion of the gospel from the center of Israel out to the Gentiles. He really could not have chosen a more theologically important starting point than Jerusalem, from Jerusalem out.

The end point of Illyricum is curious. Illyricum was the region north of Macedonia bordered on the East by the Adriatic Sea, starting in modern day Albania and reaching up through Croatia. This is the only mention of Illyricum in the Bible. The choice makes sense geographically since from Jerusalem to Illyricum covers the entire Eastern, Greek speaking portion of the Roman Empire. The curious question is, "When did Paul ever go to Illyricum?"

There is a period of time during Paul's third missionary journey, recorded in Acts 20:1-4, when Paul travelled through the districts of Macedonia to Greece and back again. And it took several months.

The Roman road called Via Egnatia stretched from the Adriatic coast city of modern-day Durres in Albania. So, that's if you come to the back of the boat of Italy and then just take a boat across to the Adriatic Sea. Now you are in Albania. You are in Durres. And that road stretched all the way through Albania across modern-day Macedonia into Turkey, all the way to Istanbul. And it passed through Thessalonica and Philippi. So, Paul must have used this road on his second and third missionary journeys. And following that road from Philippi up to the coast would have taken Paul through Macedonian districts as described in Acts 20:2, bringing him to the border between Macedonia and Illyricum. His statement that he preached the gospel around to Illyricum could mean that he preached up to the border of that region. You know, if he covered all of Macedonia, he would have preached up to Illyricum. Or it could mean that he actually entered into the region. Like he went up the road to Durres and just went a little further north, and he would have done some ministry in Illyricum. We do not know. We do know that Paul covered the major regions in the Greek speaking portion of the Roman empire.

His comment that he fully preached the gospel in this area does not need to mean that everybody in Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia heard the name of Jesus. Rather it means that Paul completed his pioneering ministry of planting churches in major cities and towns through the area that served as lighthouses or rescue stations for the further spread of the gospel. Paul's mission plan seems to have been strategic culturally by planting gospel communities among different Gentile peoples, strategic geographically by planting gospel communities in the various regions of the Eastern Roman Empire, and strategic socially by targeting urban centers where there was a lot of movement, and the rest of the region might be reached.

Additionally, Paul understood himself as called to pioneering ministry. He cared about the ongoing growth of the church communities he started. He made it a practice to visit churches he had planted on each of his succeeding missionary journeys. He wrote letters to these churches. He sent fellow workers like Timothy and Silas to these churches to help establish solid leadership of elders. At the same time, he also continued to press into new regions, having as a basic principle the goal of taking the gospel to people who had not heard about Jesus. He did not stop and establish himself in one place. That's not Paul. This is verses 20-21.

²⁰ 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; ²¹ but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND."

Paul's ministry shows the tension between using time and resources to build up the community of Christ and using time and resources to spread the community out. He has longed to get to Rome and beyond. But he is not only an evangelist. He can't just preach the gospel and keep going. His goal is not simply conversion of individuals. He consistently invested time in the establishment of gospel movements, of communities of believers committed to growing in Christ and proclaiming the good news of Christ. Sometimes Paul stayed in a location for days. On a few occasions he stayed more than a year. So, on the one hand, he did not just set up evangelistic meetings and then move on. On the other hand, he stayed only for short periods of time in a given location, counted by days, maybe months, rarely years. He prepared faithful men and women to take over the ministry of the church, and then he moved on. If he could, he might even move on before raising up leaders, but he would then leave fellow workers or send fellow workers to help with that task.

From his past ministry we have a valuable window into Paul's mission strategy. In the second half of our passage, 15:22-29, Paul gives the Romans insight into his present plans and his future plans.

Present and Future Mission – Jerusalem to Spain via Rome (15:22-29)

Looking to the future, Paul connects his desire to visit the believers in Rome with his long-term plan to go to Spain. Spain had been dominated by Rome for over 200 years. It was a rich producer of olive oil and wine. The Roman Road via Augusta stretched across the Iberian Peninsula, from the east in France all the way over to the coast of what is modern-day Portugal for 1500 kilometers or 930 miles,

connecting significant Roman towns in much the same way that the via Egnatia stretched across the territory of Macedonia. Spain was a settled territory ripe for the harvest of the gospel. The mission to Spain would be Paul's first missionary journey in a primarily Latin speaking region of the Western Empire. Most importantly Spain contained millions of souls who had not heard the name of Jesus.

By communicating his mission strategy of proclaiming Christ where Christ had not been heard and by communicating his plan to only visit Rome on the way to Spain, Paul let's the Romans know that he has no plans to set up shop in Rome. Rome is not a promotion for Paul. It's not advancement for Paul. Rome is strategic as a mission center, both for the mission the Romans will do, and for the mission Paul aims to do. Paul wants the Roman believers established firmly in the gospel, not only for their own benefit, but also to equip them for the role they can play in spreading the kingdom of Christ. And he let's them know that he looks forward to their partnership.

Before Paul can go to Spain, however, he must go in the exact opposite direction to Jerusalem. That is sometimes the way it is with God. Paul had a calling of giftedness. He was passionate about that calling. It was the call of pioneering mission, to establish communities of believers where Christ had not been known. Paul also had a calling of need. This may not have been his passion. It may not have utilized his primary gifts. But it needed to be done. Sometimes the need comes before the passion. We cannot always do what we most want to do with those we would most want to do it. Sometimes that happens. Sometimes God has other plans. We follow God's call.

Paul had special influence, and he had special responsibility as the apostle to the Gentiles. He was concerned for unity between Jew and Gentile believers. He was also concerned with maintaining the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The tension between Jew and Gentile provided a context for defining the gospel as something new rooted in the that which was old. One of the ways that Paul sought unity and fought to maintain faithful gospel proclamation, was by raising financial support from Gentiles to give to poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He describes this plan in 15:25-27.

²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, he took on himself the responsibility of delivering the financial gift and giving a report of the continue spread of the gospel among Gentiles. We can see into the future how this works out because Luke writes about Paul's arrival in Jerusalem in Acts 21:18-20a:

¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God;

Luke goes on to describe one of the worries of the Jerusalem leaders in Acts 21:20b-21. And this worry gives us insight into the tension that we have seen Paul addressing in this letter to the Romans between Jew and Gentile believers. This is Acts 21:20b-21.

And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; ²¹ and they have been told about you, [Paul] that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."

And we see that Paul is preaching that we are free from those things. But we have also seen how carefully he has talked about it. And even here to the Romans, he does not tell them to forsake the customs. So, the need for Paul to go to Jerusalem was not primarily to deliver the financial support. He could have sent someone else to do that. The need was for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of unity between Jew and Gentile. Paul understood God calling him to stand up for the gospel in Jerusalem, as one who understands both what it means to be a Jewish believer and as one who also understood the freedom that was to be given to Gentile believers. And Paul had to go meet this need

before he could follow his passion to proclaim the gospel in Spain. In this case Paul put the call of need first. This was a special moment in the history of the church. The apostle to the Gentiles was needed in Jerusalem.

Paul's Prayer Request (15:30-33)

Paul concludes this description of his mission, past, present and future with a request for prayer. Let's read the prayer request, it's interesting, in 15:30-33.

³⁰ Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹ that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³² so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company. ³³ Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

I wonder whether Paul would consider this one of the prayers that God answered. I think he probably would have, but certainly not in the way he was hoping for. He asked that his "service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints." That prayer came true. He was received by James and the elders who praised God for the work done among the Gentiles.

He also asked to be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea. This prayer was answered as well. When a mob seized him and took him out of the temple, preparing to kill him, a Roman centurion intervened and arrested him. He was imprisoned, but alive. So, we have to admit the prayer was answered. He was "rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea" even if the answer meant he was going to be put in jail.

Paul adds on to the prayer the request "that I may come to you in joy by the will of God." Again, this did not happen the way Paul planned. After two years of imprisonment in Caesarea, Paul finally appealed to Caesar. He was sent as a prisoner to Rome, survived a shipwreck, and on arrival was put under house arrest where he was able to receive guests. Not the way, I would have wanted God to get me to Rome. But he got Paul there. And we must admit looking back that Paul had some pretty incredible adventures on the way.

And that's how prayer works, isn't it? If your mind is focused on the work of God, and your heart is motivated by love for your king, then you can really trust him to answer your prayers however seems best to him, and you know in the end it will also be revealed that however is best for God is also best for you.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 15:14-33?
2. Where do you notice Paul persuading through ethos, or the establishment of his credibility?
3. Where do you notice Paul persuading through pathos, or connection to the feelings of the Romans?
4. Would this passage motivate you to support Paul as a missionary to Spain? Why or why not?
5. What principles of mission work does Paul's strategy suggest to you? Or what questions does it raise for you or your church?
6. Does it make sense to you to think of Paul's desire to go to Spain as a calling that matches his passion and the plan to go to Jerusalem as a calling that lines up with need? Is that a helpful distinction? Have you experienced in your own life that tension between a call of gifting and a call of need? (This could be in any area of service, not just mission service.)
7. Can you think of a personal prayer example where you asked God for something, and he answered you, though in a very different way than what you had originally envisioned?