

Lessons From Paul's Travel Plans
Romans 15:22-29
ABC 8/27/17

In his book *Don't Waste Your Life* (which if you haven't read it, you should. & if you have read it, you should probably read it again), John Piper contrasts 2 stories. The 1st is about 2 women, one over 80, the other in her late 70s, who'd given their lives to make Jesus known among the unreached people of Cameroon. In April, 2000, their brakes failed, their car went over a cliff, & they were both killed instantly. Piper asks, *Was that a tragedy?* He answers, *No, that is not a tragedy. That is a glory. These lives were not wasted. & these lives were not lost. Whoever loses his life for My sake & the gospel's will save it* (Mk 8:35). The 2nd story shows how to waste your life. The February, 1998, *Reader's Digest*, told of a couple who took early retirement, he was 59 & she was 51. They moved to Florida where they cruise on their boat, play softball, & collect shells. At 1st Piper thought the story was a spoof on the American Dream, but then he realized this is the dream. Piper then says,

*Come to the end of your life—your one & only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball & collecting shells. That is a tragedy.*¹

It's especially tragic when Christians waste their lives in light of eternity. Far too many have been sucked into the American dream & retire as young as possible & devote their final years to living for themselves. The justification often is, *I've worked hard, now it's my turn to indulge myself.* I agree that we need to provide adequate financial resources for the time when we're no longer able to work. I also understand the need for more leisure time as we get older. After all, things take longer. But it seems to me as those commanded by our Lord Jesus to seek 1st God's kingdom & righteousness (Mt 6:33), we ought to think & even dream about how God might use our remaining years on earth for His purposes. If you no longer have to work to earn a living, shouldn't you give some thought to how you could spend at least some of that time to help fulfill the Great Commission? If anyone *deserved* a retirement cabin in the mountains with a porch & rocking chair, it was the apostle Paul. He'd endured threats on his life, beatings, imprisonment,

¹ pp 45-46

being stoned, shipwrecked, & numerous other dangers & hardships for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor 11:23-28). It would be easy to say, *Slow down, Paul! At least take a little vacation time! You're not getting any younger!* But here he's telling the Roman Christians that he wants to visit them, but he won't be staying long. He wants to go to Spain to preach the gospel there. His driving ambition was to keep preaching the gospel where Christ was not yet known (20). As he looked toward the final years of his life, he was still dreaming big for God. For us as Christians, retirement never comes because we're to live as Christians, serve others, & tell people about Jesus until we die or Jesus returns. Paul had an impressive list of accomplishments, sufficient for many lifetimes, but he had no intention of settling down into a comfortable retirement. Our text tells us instead of stopping with what he had done, Paul wanted to go west from Greece to bring the gospel to far-distant Spain. We learn from this that we're to dream big & plan for how God might use us, but submit to God's will & seek His blessing in the outworking of our plans. If God has left you on this planet (& if you're here this morning, He has), He has a purpose for you to fulfill. Perhaps due to age or weakness, you feel you can't do anything. You're wrong. You can still do the most important thing of all, you can pray! If you can give financially to the cause of missions, then give! You can always write encouraging notes to those serving on the front lines. But you may be able to do much more. **22-29** PRAY

In one sense, this passage may seem insignificant because it simply records Paul's personal itinerary from 2000 years ago. But these vss actually provide a useful glimpse into the thinking of the Apostle Paul, & as such, they help us understand why he did what he did & the underlying priorities that guided his life. With that being said, here's a question: If Paul was called to the Gentiles, & Rome was the capital of the Gentile world, why had he never been to Rome? Why hadn't he started a church in Rome? & now that a church was established in Rome, why visit? If he wanted to preach where Christ hadn't been named, why go to Rome where Jesus was known & proclaimed by this church he wrote to? We don't know all the answers, but Paul was humbly forging a relationship with the Romans while communicating to them as a Spirit-inspired Apostle. & what we find in our text today are some carefully worded travel plans that communicate far

more than simply that. We read that Paul hadn't been to Rome, but planned to go there on his way to Spain after he went to Jerusalem. But since God's Spirit was inspiring Paul as he wrote this, we want to learn much more than merely his travel plans. We want to learn from his perspective about his past travels & his current status & his future plans. There are at least 3 lessons we can draw out of Paul's plans & dreams:

1. Make plans for God to use you. 22-24

The phrase **for this reason** (22) points back to Paul's previous ministry commitments he was fulfilling. As vs 19 says, he'd fully preached the gospel all through the regions from Jerusalem to Illyricum. He'd gone to those places where Christ was not named & had established churches in those areas. The word translated **prevented** or *hindered* means to cut in. It was used of armies cutting deep gullies across roads so the enemy would have to stop & fill it in before they could continue. We talk about hitting a bump in the road or an obstacle in our path, which convey the same idea. Paul is picturing himself on a wagon, driving full speed toward Rome, but he has to stop again & again because the road isn't passable. Other things come up. Other ministries demand his attention. Other believers need help. Not to mention the beatings & hardships & shipwrecks he experiences along the way. Because of his diligent commitment to all the opportunities elsewhere, Paul had been hindered from coming to the Rome. The idea is this was a repeated hindrance. & the implied hinderer was God Himself. It's that divine perspective that shaped Paul's travels plans though he still desired to go to Rome. God was sovereign over where he was able to go & what he was able to do & how much he was able to accomplish. Like Paul, we all must trust in God's providence, which is simply His control over everything, He's in charge & is working in every big & little thing in our lives & the life of everyone else. God's providence is His sovereign rule over all things. When we're hindered from something we want to do because God gives us an opportunity to do something else instead, we can joyfully embrace it & strive to be faithful in it. When we say we believe God is sovereign, we're saying we believe God doesn't owe us an explanation for the steps or the stops. So if we're constantly questioning & asking for explanations, we don't truly trust our sovereign God.

Look at vs 23. If it looks incomplete it's because it is. This is one of those places where Paul seems to break off what he's saying without finishing his sentence. Fortunately, vs 23 is a repetition of what Paul said in 1:13, which may be why he breaks off as he does here. **1:13**

Here in chpt 15 he seems to be saying, *Since I have completed my work in these regions & since I've always wanted to visit you in Rome... But you know that, because I've already told you.* Paul obviously wanted to see the Christians in Rome (Acts 19:21) & spend time with them, but he didn't want to stay for very long. He wanted to use Rome as a base to reach further west into Spain, the western edge of the Roman Empire. Did Paul ever get there? We don't know. Possibly. About 96 A.D., Clement of Rome wrote to the church of Corinth & mentioned that Paul had reached *the limits of the west* before he died.² For someone who lived in Rome, *the limit of the west* was Spain. Another work dating from the late 2nd century, the Muratorian fragment, takes Paul's Spanish journey for granted.³ So it's possible but not certain that after his 1st Roman imprisonment, Paul was released & went to Spain before returning to Rome, where he was arrested again & finally executed. Regardless if Paul made it to Spain or not, we can learn from his plans to go there. We can draw at least 4 applications from these vss:

A. Dream big! God's providence isn't an excuse not to plan. Just because He's in charge doesn't mean we shouldn't plan for what we think should happen next. As we plan how we'll serve God at work or at home or in ministry, God's providence gives us comfort that He'll work our plans for good. But we still should try to plan like Paul obviously was doing. In other words, have a holy ambition to see God use you in ways beyond what you can ask or think. We spend time thinking about how we can enjoy our retirement years. We plan & talk & dream about where we can go & what we can do. But why not spend time thinking about how God could use our remaining years to advance His kingdom? William Carey was a self-educated shoe cobbler in England who had a vision of taking the gospel to India. When he shared that idea with some pastors, one called him a *miserable enthusiast* & told him that God would reach the heathen in His own way without

² *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, p 1872

³ FF Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, pp 447-449

human aid.⁴ (You've met Christians like that, right? Just overflowing with bitterness & squashing everything. Don't be that Christian!) Thankfully, Carey persisted. He made it to India, learned & translated the Bible into almost 40 languages, founded a university, & saw God make a huge impact in India. Carey's motto was, *Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.*⁵ Maybe you're thinking, *I don't have those kinds of talents. I can barely speak English, let alone learn another language! I don't have much to offer in terms of advancing God's kingdom.* Remember in Jesus' parable of the talents, the slave who received 5 talents & the one who received 2 invested them on behalf of their master. The slave who only received 1 talent buried it & felt the wrath of his master (Mt 25:14-30). One lesson to take away from that story is if you think you don't have much you can do for the Master, you're the one most in danger of doing nothing. & remember the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 from a boy's meager lunch of 5 loaves & 2 fishes? Little becomes much when you yield it to Jesus. So where should you begin? Consider ABC, your church. Talk to one of our elders or myself or someone in a ministry you're interested in. Become a mentor to youth who desperately need it. Think about what you could do to reach others in your neighborhood for Christ. Volunteer to help tutor kids who need help in school or with reading & show them the love of Jesus. Call up CEF & help out at a Good News Club. Use your creativity & your interests & ask God to use you to make an impact for His kingdom. Dream. Think. Plan for God to use you. But keep in mind...

B. God's best is always better. Paul wanted to get to Rome & that was a good desire. But something better had kept him from getting there. What was it? Preaching the gospel where it hadn't been proclaimed. & while Paul wanted to visit Rome, there was something better that meant he couldn't stay long. He wanted to proclaim the gospel in Spain. He wants to enjoy their company for a while, but he isn't going to stay or take charge of their church. His sights were focused elsewhere. It's difficult to understand Paul's comment in vs 23, **with no further place for me in these regions.** Surely Paul could find plenty to do in those regions! But we understand his comment in light of his restless pioneer spirit that always wanted to move on to the gospel-less

⁴ Mary Drewery, *William Carey*, p 31

⁵ [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Carey_\(missionary\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Carey_(missionary))

frontier. There were plenty of good things Paul could have done in those regions. But in light of his gifts & calling, the best thing he could do was press on to areas where Christ had not yet been named, such as Spain. So ask yourself, *What contribution can I make to the cause of Christ in light of my gifts & resources? Where can I best be used of God?* Don't let good things crowd out the best way that God can use you.

C. Pursue God-given desires. Paul had a desire & plan to go to Jerusalem with the Gentile gift for the poor Jewish believers, then to visit the saints in Rome, & then to move on to Spain. Which raises the question, wasn't it wrong for Paul to have made plans to reach Spain since, if he didn't get there, God obviously didn't intend for him to do so. It would mean that Paul's plans were not God's plans, that Paul was in error. Well, if Paul didn't get to Spain, it obviously wasn't God's plan for him to reach Spain. But I don't think it follows that he was wrong to have made plans for it. If that were the case, it would be wrong for us to plan anything. As we know, things didn't work out exactly as Paul had envisioned. What happened? He got arrested in Jerusalem, spent several years in custody, & finally went to Rome in chains. But he wasn't wrong to plan ahead in line with the desires God had put upon his heart. Sometimes we have the wrong idea, that if you hate the thought of going to the jungle to a primitive tribe as a missionary, that's what God will have you do. We think the only way we can be sure of doing God's will is if we're doing something we hate or would rather not be doing. While it's true God wants you to be yielded to whatever His will for your life may be, He's not a sadist who delights to make you miserable! He's a loving Father who wants to see His children happy & fulfilled. He gives us the desires & personalities we have. If He calls you to go to a primitive jungle tribe, He'll also give you the grace to live there. I'm not saying it'll be a cake-walk, but at least you'll be able to shrug off the inconveniences & hardship & love what you're doing. God works through our desires & gives us the grace to endure hardship cheerfully. Work out a plan for how He might use you in line with your desires & abilities. Of course, this doesn't mean your desire will necessarily prove to have been God's will for you. We don't know if Paul ever got to Spain. But it does mean the desire itself isn't a bad thing. It's unlikely you'll achieve anything for God if you don't plan for it.

D. Serve God with others. Paul always worked as a team with others. We'll see this in chpt 16 where he sends greetings to Rome from 8 men who were with him, along with greetings from the whole church (23-25). Part of Paul's strategy in stopping at Rome was to get them on board as his western base to reach out to Spain. He may have hoped to recruit some from Rome to accompany him as well. Paul says he wants **to be helped on my way there by you**. Some say this phrase doesn't *mean more than to be sent forward on a journey with prayers & good wishes*.⁶ But this phrase could be used in a variety of ways, referring to food, money, companions, arranging travel, & other things.⁷ At the very least, Paul is asking the Roman church to partner with him in prayer. But he's probably asking for more, including finances. God could have provided miraculously for Paul, but He didn't. Instead, when Paul started bringing the gospel to Asia Minor he was supported by the church at Antioch. Later when he went from Macedonia into Greece he was supported by the church at Philippi (Phil 4:10–19). Here he looks for support from the church at Rome. It's no different today. God calls some to be the missionaries overseas, but He also places a duty to support them on those who remain at home. That's your duty if you aren't serving as a missionary. The spreading of the gospel requires us who remain at home to give to gospel ministries & churches to support, pray for, & send missionaries. That's what Paul is doing here. He's asking for help. This is, in a very real sense, a missionary support letter. So make plans, but do so ...

2. Plan Strategically 25-28

When you read Paul's letters, you realize this gift from the mostly Gentile churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem was a really big deal to Paul. He spends 2 chapters in 2 Cor (8 & 9) urging them to be generous in this effort. He could have delegated this to a trusted associate, but he felt it was important enough to go personally. So we have to ask why this was so important to Him? My answer is he thought taking the gift to Jerusalem would have maximum impact for Christ's kingdom. In vs 25 he says he was **serving the saints**. & when he refers to the **contribution** (26) he uses the Greek word *koinonia*, which is often translated **fellowship**. This is a great choice

⁶ William Sanday & Arthur Headlam, *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p 411

⁷ Leon Morris, *Romans*, p 515

of words because this offering was more than nickels & dimes. It was a relationship; it was fellowship; it was the sharing of life. One of the reasons Paul was so passionate about taking this offering to the Jews was because it had been given by Gentiles. In that era, when the race issue of Jew & Gentile was yet to be overcome, this offering was incredibly significant. The Gentile believers were clearly saying, *We're related to you. This is an expression of our communion & fellowship with you & our love for you.* Paul saw it as putting his seal on this fruit of the Gentile churches (28). In other words, this gift confirmed the bond of unity between the Gentile & Jewish factions of the church. But why doesn't he send it on to Jerusalem with other trusted representatives so he can get on about the business of going to Rome & Spain? I believe he wants the poor saints in Jerusalem to know that as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:6-10), he cares deeply about his Jewish brothers & sisters. He wants to make sure there's no question about how the money is handled since it no doubt amounted to a considerable sum. The gift also authenticated the reality of the Gentiles' conversion to the Jewish believers in Israel. It showed the power of the gospel to bring these former pagans to obedience to Christ. It fulfilled the commitment that Paul had made to James, Peter, & John to remember the poor as he went to the Gentiles (Gal 2:10). & perhaps Paul saw it, at least in part, as fulfilling the OT prophecies that the Gentiles would bring their wealth to Jerusalem (Is 2:2-3; 45:14; 60:5-17; 61:6).

There are several helpful principles of giving in these vss that we don't have time to develop. One reason we must be generous is because generosity is evidence that we are Christians. If we don't care for other people or the work of God, why should we assume we are Christians? Note briefly that giving is both a duty & a delight. It's a duty to share in material things with those who have shared with you in spiritual things (27). & yet Paul mentions twice that the Gentiles were *pleased* to do it, it was a delight (26-27). The idea that the Gentiles are indebted spiritually to the Jews is the major theme of Rom 11. Gentiles of Greece owed support to the Christians of Jerusalem because they had received their spiritual blessings through them. Also giving to missionaries or to needy saints builds a bond of fellowship between you. Sacrificial giving is a debt & a delight. How can both these be true? If you're a parent, you're under the obligation to

care for your children. Yet you likely also find pleasure in parenting (at least some of the time). If you're a parent this responsibility is both an obligation & a delight.

But the overall principle is, as you dream & plan for how God might use you, consider what will have maximum impact for Christ's church. Finally...

3. Submit to the God's will & seek His blessing 29

What does that mean? *Blessing* has an interesting history. In the early days of the English language, there were more than 30 forms of the words *bless*, *blessed*, & *blessing*. What's common to these words is they were all based on the Germanic word *blod*, meaning blood, & therefore referred to something that had been set apart to God by a blood ritual. Our words that come closest to this are *sanctified* & *consecrated*. A 2nd meaning of *blessed* comes to us through the French & Latin languages. The Normans, who invaded England, brought the French with them, including the word *benir*, meaning bless, which was based on a common Latin term which meant to speak well of somebody. It was used in the Latin Bible for blessing or praising God. This sense of the word occurs in Luke's gospel when Jesus tells His disciples, **Bless those who curse you** (6:28). He means that although our enemies speak badly of us, we're to speak good about them. In time this meaning of blessing attached itself to the older Anglo-Saxon expressions so that blessing began to mean not only to be set apart to God but to be well spoken of or well regarded. A 3rd meaning of *blessing* & *blessed* comes from their being close in sound to another old English word, *bliss*, meaning an exceptional state of happiness or well-being. Because the words were alike, *blessed* soon took on this meaning too. Here in Rom 15:29, it probably includes all 3 meanings: to be set apart to God, to be spoken well of, & to be happy. The meanings belong together. Paul is confident that when he comes to Rome he'll do so as an appointed & consecrated messenger of God, who is therefore blessed by God in the sense that God's good words will accompany him & prosper what he does for God. Therefore, because he is God's servant & will be blessed by God in his service, he is profoundly happy & will continue to be so.⁸

⁸ Boice, J. M. *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, pp 1886-1887

As we know, it didn't happen in quite the pleasant way Paul envisioned. His trip to Rome was as a prisoner via a shipwreck. & after he got there, some mean-spirited believers in Rome preached Christ out of envy & strife, thinking to cause Paul distress in his imprisonment (Phil 1:15, 17). The point is that while Paul sought for & expected God's blessing, he had to submit to God's sovereign will in the outworking of what those blessings actually entailed. As Prov 16:9 says, **The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.** We should seek God's blessing in all we dream & plan for & how He might use us. But we have to submit to how all of that actually works out. It may not go according to our plans, but if we walk with God & submit to Him, He will use us for His glory.

What does this mean for us? If you're serving God & your work isn't done, keep at it where you are. Don't get restless. But if one opportunity has closed, look around for something else. The needs are great & the opportunities are endless.

What else do we see here? This massive theological treatise we've been studying for over 4 years was a letter from a missionary asking for support. If they wanted to support the mission of Paul to Spain, here's 16 chapters of deep, rich, glorious truth of what they'd be supporting. & the most vital truth of all that weaves through everything Paul wrote in Romans & through all the Bible is the gospel of Jesus. We are sinners & violate God's law & deserve punishment but there is one Man who never sinned & whose life deserved heaven forever. That man is Jesus Christ who was both God & man & lived a perfect life that He graciously offers to be counted as ours if we turn from trust in ourselves to faith in Him. & that same Jesus also died on the cross to pay the punishment that our sin deserved & He also offers that death as accomplishing forgiveness for all of our sins if we trust Him. He rose from the grave to prove His offer is good. Jesus is the only way into a right relationship with God. But with Jesus, we can begin to practice these life lessons & enjoy the blessings of them. If we can help you begin on that path of faith or help you make progress on that path, please come talk with us after the service.

To take action on these vss, ask God to show you how to spend your life (both now & in the future) in light of eternity. *Don't waste your life!* With Moses, pray, **teach us to number our days,**

that we may present to You a heart of wisdom (Ps 90:12). He concludes that psalm with the repeated plea, **& confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands** (17). Give some thought to what abilities & desires He's given you to use for His purpose. Think ahead to when you'll be 75 or 80 or 95 or 103 & dream about how you would like for God to have used you by that time. Life is short, don't waste it! The truth is, our missionary task isn't ended until every person in the world has heard of Jesus Christ. It's easy to get tired in Christian work not only as individuals, but as churches. When we're tired it's easy to think of retirement & dropping out of Christian work. But if God has left us in this life, it's for us to do something good for Him. Otherwise He'd simply take us home to glory. & if Jesus hasn't yet returned (& He hasn't), it's because there are people who need to be reached with the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. As long as the church is in the world, we have people to reach & neither your task nor mine is completed. Therefore, educate yourself about the needs of the world in light of the gospel. How can you strategically use your gifts & desires to have maximum impact for Christ's kingdom? Work out some plans that will take you in that direction. Perhaps it will be to pray for & support missionaries or national believers to reach the unreached. But for some of you, it may be to go to the unreached with the good news of the Savior who has come. Whatever you do, dream big for God & use what He's entrusted to you for His kingdom & His glory!