

**Romans 15:14-33**

In the first chapter Paul expressed his deep desire to come and see them: 1:10 “*always praying that I may succeed in coming to you*”; 1:11 “*I long to see you*”; 1:13 “*often I have planned to come but was prevented*”; 1:15 “*I’m eager to preach the gospel to you*”. So why hadn’t he come? What prevented him? Was he making excuses? Did he really want to spend time with them?

In our verses this morning 15:14-33 Paul answers those questions and along the way we get a glimpse into the heart and ministry of Paul. I have outlined the text into 3 sections:

15:14-22 Paul’s Ministry and Missionary Heart

15:23-29 Paul’s Travel Plans

15:30-33 Paul’s Prayer Request and Benediction

**I. Paul’s Ministry and Missionary Heart Romans 15:14-22**

Paul began this letter commending the Roman church for their faith 1:8 – spoken well of throughout the churches. Now as he is about to wrap up this letter he again commends them – v. 14.

**A. Why Paul wrote Romans 15:14-16**

Paul commends them for their goodness, their knowledge and their ability to instruct each other. According to Paul, these saints scored well in their spiritual attitudes and aptitudes. First, they were “full of goodness.” This seems to speak of their disposition toward God and toward men. They had “good will” toward God and others. They were rightly motivated. Second, they were “filled with all knowledge.” Doctrinally, they were well taught with no grave deficiencies in their biblical and theological knowledge. Third, they were “able also to admonish one another.” There seems to be a sequence to these three commendations. The Roman Christians’ “goodness” and “knowledge” qualified them to “admonish” one another.

Does it surprise you that Paul is not writing Romans because this church is immature, lacking in doctrine or unable to instruct each other? We view Romans as this deep doctrinal book full of insight and knowledge, one of the premier books of the New Testament, which it is, and think the believers there were immature and in need of instruction. According to v. 14 that is not the case.

Two questions come to mind: (1) How then did this church begin; and (2) Why then did Paul write to them. Paul answers the second question in vv. 15-16. The first, however, requires us to reconstruct the situation as far as possible from literary and archaeological references. According to Acts 2:10 the crowd of pilgrims who were present in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and heard Peter preach the gospel, included ‘visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes’. Some of whom came to faith and returned to Rome where they presumably established a church. According to Acts 18:2 when Paul arrived in Corinth he met Priscilla and Aquila who were forced to flee Rome. Priscilla and Aquila appear to have been Christians before they met Paul. We do not know where or when they first heard the gospel; Paul never suggests that they were his children in the faith. It is most likely from them that Paul learned about the church in Rome and it was Priscilla and Aquila who instructed Apollos, a man “*mighty in the Scriptures*” Acts 18:24 in a more fuller understanding of the truth – 18:26. Here is evidence of “*admonishment*” from believers in Rome. So the church in Rome is well established and grounded in the Scriptures.

If these Roman Christians did not need to be taught or corrected, why did Paul write this epistle—one of the

most extensive, systematic expositions of doctrine in all the Bible? Verses 15-16 gives us the answer.

**First**, Paul has written boldly to remind them again (v. 15a). It is not the first time they have been reminded. Both Paul and Peter (2 Pet. 1:13) attached great importance to reminding ministry. He did not write this epistle to inform as much as to remind.

**Second**, he wrote Romans because of his God-given mission and calling as an apostle to the Gentiles – vv. 15b-16a. (Acts 9:15; 13:46-49; 15:12; 16:9-10)

What grabbed my attention in verses 15-16 was the emphasis on “priest” and “offering”. The noun “minister” is *leitourgos* and the verb “to serve” *leitourgeo* are used exclusively of religious and ritual services (BAGD – Biblical Greek Dictionary). Couple that with *hierourgeo* referring to priestly duty and *prosphora* – offering, they all point to Paul’s ministry as a priestly one. Paul speaks of himself as a “priest” who is “offering” a sacrifice to God— the sacrifice of the Gentiles. His desire and motivation is to present the Gentile believers at Rome to God as a sacrifice which is acceptable to God through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

What deepens this even more is God’s original calling to the nation of Israel in Ex. 19:3-6. Israel was chosen by God to be a blessing to the nations. They were to bless the nations in a variety of ways, but one of those ways was by serving as a kingdom of priests. Then according to Rev. 1:6 and 5:10 what has Christ made us to be? A kingdom of priests or as Peter declares in 1 Peter 2:9 “we are a royal priesthood”.

Paul viewed his ministry as a priestly one, the church is a kingdom of priests and a royal priesthood so when you think of that concept what comes to mind? What do priests do? Primarily they represent God to man and man to God. Another way to state what priests do is “they awaken among us a sense of worship along with a sense of the greatness of God”. Think about this: when we share the gospel, when we encourage or admonish another believer, when we teach Scripture in any context, when we pray for each other we are doing a priestly ministry. The goal of which is to present acceptable sacrifices to God both ourselves (Rom. 12:1 ) and others who we serve in the body of Christ – those who are set apart by the Holy Spirit himself.

Where and how did Paul perform his priestly ministry? 15:17-22

## **B. Where and How Paul Ministered 15:17-22**

### **1. Purpose 15:17-18**

Paul refuses to recount his own exploits. All he will dare to talk about, he says, is what Christ has accomplished through him. He describes the objective of his ministry as being to lead the Gentiles to obey God (*eis (unto) hupakon (obedience)* ‘with a view to obedience’). The same two Greek words occur in 1:5 and 16:26

Whichever way we take the expression, obedience is not an option (cf. 1 John 3:23–24). It is binding on all Christians. When anyone is saved through faith, it is with a view to obedience. That says Paul is the purpose of ministry. How is it accomplished?

### **2. Power 15:19a**

He uses the word “power” (*dunamos*) twice – the power of signs and wonders and the power of the Holy Spirit.

This expression brings together the three commonest biblical terms for the supernatural. ‘Signs’ indicates their significance (especially in demonstrating the arrival of God’s kingdom), ‘powers’ their character (exhibiting God’s power over nature) and ‘wonders’ their effect (evoking people’s amazement). Paul’s only other use of

these three words in relation to his ministry is in **2 Corinthians 12:12**, where he calls them ‘the things that mark an apostle’ or ‘the signs of a true apostle’.

The signs and wonders accompanying his preaching were proof to Gentiles and Jews alike that God was in their midst and that Paul’s message was one to be taken seriously. These “signs and wonders” were God’s accreditation of Paul as an apostle. This is not to deny that God can perform miracles today, for it would be ludicrous to impose limitations on the creator of the universe. It is rather to acknowledge that their chief purpose was to authenticate the unique ministry of the apostles.

What specific signs and wonders were done by Paul? Miraculously released from prison – Acts 16; laying on hands to impart the Holy Spirit – Acts 19:6; healing and casting out demons – Acts 19:8-12; raising Eutychus from the dead – Acts 20:7-12. These signs and wonders are not only impressive but are designed to validate Paul’s ministry – to prove that what he said (the gospel and the doctrine) was true.

Having stated the purpose of his ministry and the power, what then is the plan for ministry?

### **3. Plan 15:19b-22**

Paul’s arena of ministry when he wrote this epistle stretched about 1,400 miles, from Jerusalem to the Roman province of Illyricum. Illyricum lay on the east side of the Adriatic Sea opposite Italy. This is modern northern Albania, much of former Yugoslavia. There is no record in Acts of Paul having gone there, though he may have done so on his 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9; Acts 21:1-2). It was the extent of that ministry that kept Paul from Rome – v. 22.

His success was the result of God’s working through him. And so, as he went about proclaiming the gospel, the Holy Spirit bore witness to God’s presence and power by signs and miracles.

Assured that he had fulfilled his mission as an apostle from Jerusalem to Illyricum, Paul’s eyes now look to the horizon of his world. His desire was to preach the gospel where it had not been heard before. Where will he go to fulfill that calling? Paul details his travel plans beginning in v. 23.

## **II. Paul’s Travel Plans Romans 15:23-29**

He specifies three destinations. First, he is about to sail from Corinth to Jerusalem, taking with him the collection which he has long been organizing. Secondly, he is intending to go from Jerusalem to Rome, even though he will only be ‘passing through’ (v. 24) rather than settling down among them for an appreciable period. Thirdly, from Rome he will travel on to Spain, determined to resume his pioneer evangelistic commitment. If he were to make all these journeys by ship, the first would be at least 800 miles, the second 1,500, and the third 700, making a minimum total of 3,000 miles, and many more if he were to travel some of the way by land rather than sea.

### **A. Rome 15:23-24**

Although Paul has so far been hindered from coming to Rome, now at last the time seems to be ripe for his long awaited, long-postponed visit.

### **B. Jerusalem 15:25-27**

This may seem like needless back-tracking. Paul will have to travel another 2,000 miles or so before he reaches

Rome when he could go directly to Rome some 600 miles distant from his present location in Corinth. This is near the end of his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey around 56AD. It is apparent that this mission to Jerusalem must be a high priority, and so it is.

The purpose of Paul's collection of money from the Macedonian and Achaean churches was to relieve the poverty that existed among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem most likely as a result of persecution. A secondary purpose was to cement relations between Gentile and Jewish believers (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8—9 see particularly 2 Cor. 9:13 – the gift leads to glorifying God).

The significance of the offering (the solidarity of God's people in Christ) the so-called 'gift' was in reality a 'debt' The nature of this debt Paul has already elaborated in chapter 11. Although indeed it is through Israel's transgression that 'salvation has come to the Gentiles' (11:11), he has argued, yet the Gentiles must be careful not to get boastful or arrogant (11:18–20). They must rather remember that they have inherited from the Jews enormous blessings to which they have no title. In themselves they are nothing but a wild olive shoot. But having been grafted into God's ancient olive tree, they 'now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root' (11:17).

Only when this task of delivering the gift to Jerusalem because of its significance and value was completed would Paul feel free to press on to Rome and ultimately to Spain.

### **C. Spain 15:28-29**

Whether he reached and evangelized Spain we shall probably never know. The nearest thing we have to evidence is the statement by Clement of Rome in his first letter to the Corinthians (usually dated AD 96–97) about Paul's 'noble renown' as a herald of the gospel: *'To the whole world he taught righteousness, and reaching the limits of the West he bore his witness before rulers.'*

This brings us to the last paragraph – prayer request and benediction.

### **III. Paul's Prayer Request and Benediction Romans 15:30-33**

Towards the beginning of his letter Paul assured the Roman Christians that he was constantly praying for them (1:9f.). So it is entirely appropriate that he should now ask them to pray for him. He asks that it not be a haphazard prayer but for them to "strive together" in prayer. The word is *sunagonidzomai* (a compound word)–to strive (*agonidzomai*) together (*soon*), to struggle in company with. Only time this word is used in the New Testament and could be translated "join fervently with me". Paul requests that their prayers be fervent, heartfelt and intense.

First, Paul requested that these saints pray for him that he "*might be delivered from those who are disobedient in Judea*" (v. 31).

Second, Paul asked the saints in Rome to pray that his service to the saints in Jerusalem might be effective, that it might be "*acceptable to the saints there*" (v. 31). Why is this so important?

In accepting the gift from Paul, Jewish Christian leaders would be seen to endorse Paul's gospel and his seeming disregard of Jewish law and traditions. Yet if his offering were to be rejected, this could cause the rift between Jewish and Gentile Christians to widen irrevocably. So Paul longs that Jewish—Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ may be strengthened by the Jewish Christians' acceptance of its tangible symbol.

Finally, Paul asked for prayer that with "*joy*," and in "*the will of the Lord*," he would come to them and find

*“refreshing rest”* in their fellowship (v. 32).

Was Paul delivered from unbelievers in Jerusalem? ‘No’, in the sense that he was arrested, tried and imprisoned, but also ‘yes’ because he was three times rescued from lynching, once from flogging and once from a plot to kill him (Acts 21:30-32).

Then did he reach Rome? Yes indeed, as Jesus had promised him he would (Acts 23:11), but neither when nor how he had expected, for he arrived about three years later, as a prisoner, and after an almost fatal shipwreck.

Prayer is a powerful weapon.

The book of Acts closes three years from this time, with the Apostle Paul finally in Rome, after being shipwrecked, and after arduous travels (Acts 28:14-15). Now he is on his way toward the capital city, and he is met by a delegation of Christians from the church of Rome. There is a place called the Three Taverns, they sat down and had joy and refreshment together. What an encouragement to the apostle's heart, that these Christians were able to come out and meet him. He was coming as a prisoner chained to a Roman guard, on trial for his life, and sentenced to appear before the emperor. But they encouraged his heart and refreshed his spirit.

### **Conclusion**

One may wonder why Paul was hindered so often from coming to Rome. Answer: to write the letter to the Romans. Because of this, not only the church at Rome, but the church throughout the centuries has been blessed by this mighty epistle. It has changed the course of many lives; it has changed the course of history, specifically, through the Reformation.

Paul's Epistle to the Romans teaches us the power of the pen to minister to saints we may never see. His letter was written to a church he had never visited and to many individuals he had not yet seen.