

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 15:28-33

As we come to this next set of verses, we get a glimpse of Paul's challenges as an apostle. While we often think of Paul as the confident, daring minister he was – here we get to see him dealing with the adversarial parts of his life.

Paul has just explained his purpose for visiting Rome. He's actually on his way to Jerusalem, to take the offerings he has been collecting for the impoverished Christians there.

He is already focusing on his next long westward journey to Spain, where he intends to continue the apostolic missionary task of preaching the gospel and planting new churches.

Rome is not really his destination, but he intends to spend some time there encouraging the churches. He hopes the Romans will contribute to this missionary effort and help him on his way to Spain.

Paul's pattern is very evident in his letters to the other churches. About two years before, Paul told the Corinthians he was hoping to preach the gospel in the regions beyond them. He may have been eyeing Spain for some time.

There is some interesting history behind Paul's desire to preach the gospel in Spain. Centuries before Christ, Phoenician mariners from Tyre and Sidon had traded with Spain. The Phoenicians also established colonies there.

During the reign of Emperor Augustus the Iberian peninsula had been annexed by the Romans and organized into three provinces. It's possible that Paul was going to Spain while envisioning taking the

gospel to borders of the Empire. Historians suggest he was possibly thinking of expanding to Gaul, Germany, and Britain.

Did Paul go to Spain? It's an interesting question. Here's what we know from the Book of Acts: In 57 A.D., Paul was arrested when he went to Jerusalem and spent about two years in a Roman prison in Caesarea Maritima. He was then sent to Rome for trial before a Roman court (Acts 25).

Paul was acquitted of the charges, but Luke doesn't record his journeys after his release from prison. Instead, Luke leaves us with a statement that Paul was in his own rented house for two years.

Luke does not tell us if Paul then went to Spain, neither does any other biblical record. However, we do have some extra-biblical evidence that seems to point us in that direction.

One of the earliest references is by Clement of Rome, one of Paul's co-workers, who is mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Clement was the Bishop of Rome from 88-99, and is one of the earliest Apostolic Church Fathers.

In a letter written some 20 years after Paul's death, Clement wrote,

"... He won the genuine glory for his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world and having reached the farthest limits of the West.

The phrase "the farthest limits of the West" was often used by Paul's contemporaries to reference Spain.

Around 100 years later, a famous fragment of a list of then Canonical New Testament books suggests Paul did go to Spain. It notes:

"For 'most excellent Theophilus' Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence—as he plainly shows by omitting the martyrdom of Peter as well as the departure of Paul from the city (of Rome) when he journeyed to Spain." - The Muratorian Canon 34-39

Let me give you one more example. Cyril of Jerusalem, an Early Church theologian in Jerusalem states, "... From Jerusalem, and even unto Illyricum, [Paul] fully preached the Gospel, and instructed even imperial Rome, and carried the earnestness of his preaching as far as Spain..." - Catecheses, Lecture 17.26

In July of 64, the Great Fire of Rome occurred. The Roman populace demanded an explanation, so Nero blamed Christians and started an Imperial Persecution.

Peter and Paul were netted by the Roman authorities. According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down. Because he was a Roman citizen, Paul was afforded a quick death by decapitation.

So, what can we say about Paul's intentions to go to Spain? There is no biblical evidence of this journey, but fairly contemporary accounts seem to suggest Luke simply didn't chronicle the trip.

It is possible that Paul was released from his confinement in Rome and resumed his missionary travel to Spain. If this is the case, during the Neronian Persecution he was re-arrested, imprisoned and eventually executed.

Let's continue with verses 29-33. In verse 29, Paul makes a statement to his friends. He says, "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

There are a couple of ways to understand what Paul is saying. First, Paul can be saying that he expects the overflow of Christ's blessings to be available when he ministers to the Romans. Second, Paul can mean that he has Christ's full approval for this visit to Rome. Perhaps, he means both.

Now this is interesting, because Paul's next words show he expects opposition to his plans to visit Rome and Spain. Look at what Paul writes in verse 30-31:

“I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord’s people there...”

When Paul references a “struggle” he is no doubt speaking of wrestling with principalities and powers – demonic entities that control geographic regions. We need only to read Ephesians 6 to see a parallel thought about this spiritual opposition.

Paul therefore requests that the Romans pray for him. While his first statement is quite general, Paul gives his friends 2 specific things they can pray – one dealing with non-believers and one dealing with believers.

First, he says, “Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea.” Paul is expressing his awareness of the dangers of unbelieving Jews that he will no doubt encounter in Judea.

He has faced previous plots by these opponents. You may recall his experience shortly after his conversion. In Acts 9 we read:

“After many days had gone by, there was a conspiracy among the Jews to kill him, but Paul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.” – Acts 9:23-25

Paul anticipates renewed efforts to either delay him – or possibly kill him. This becomes clear when he later writes, “I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Paul’s second prayer request for his Jerusalem visit is related to the Jewish Christian community. He tells his friends, “Pray ... that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there.”

Why would Paul anticipate a problem with delivering benevolence funds to Jewish Christians. Here's how John Stott explains it:

"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."
– John Stott.

Paul has spent a great deal of time in Romans talking about the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This second prayer highlights yet another dimension to the problem of Jewish—Gentile unity.

He's hoping their solidarity will be strengthened by the Jewish Christians' acceptance of these offerings from mostly Gentile believers.

Paul sees both these prayer requests as critical to his trip to Jerusalem. He also believes that his trip to Rome depends upon the success of the trips to Jerusalem. Notice what he says in verse 32: "...So that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed."

One way of understanding Paul's requests is that whatever happens to him in Jerusalem ... he will be looking forward to a time of refreshment among the Roman believers.

But there is something deeper in Paul's prayer request that we might miss because we are so used to seeing it. Paul ties his requests to God's Will.

This is not a passing thought in the apostle's mind. Back in Romans 1:10 Paul said, "... I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." In Romans 15 he again ties God's Will to his desire to see the Romans.

There is an implicit teaching on prayer here. It's one I think Christians often miss or forget: All our prayers must be anchored to the Will of God. John Stott gives us a great insight on this when he writes:

“The purpose of prayer is emphatically not to bend God's will to ours, but rather to align our will to his. The promise that our prayers will be answered is conditional on our asking 'according to his will'. Consequently every prayer we pray should be a variation on the theme, 'Your will be done.'”

Over nearly five decades of serving Christ, I have heard so many different teachings on prayer. I'm sure you have too! One teaching that has made the rounds many times is that our prayers must always be precise, specific, and confident.

Some say that to add, “if it be your will” shows either a lack of faith or laziness in prayer. Let me ask you something. In Romans 8:26, as Paul talked about the role of the Holy Spirit in prayer, he plainly said, “

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

It's difficult to be precise, specific, and confident when, at the same time, “We do not know what we ought to pray for...”

How do we balance these realities? One strategy is to remember that we have both God's general will and his specific will to consider.

There are many things that we face that God has given us a clear indication of his will. For example:

- We know that God desires everyone to be saved.
- We know that God has promised to give us wisdom if we seek him.
- We know that if we pray according to his will, he hears us.

But what about the very specific circumstances we face? Do we always know God's particular will for each of us? Are their scriptures to tell us whether or not we should buy a particular automobile? Are their scriptures that tell us whether or not we should have a medical procedure done?

The reality is, we do not know God's specific will for every situation we face. To claim we do is to suggest that we know what God knows. Since this is the case, making our needs known and asking God to act "according to God's will" is not a lack of faith – it is a sign of trust!

As one bible scholar put it, "It is not unbelief, but a proper humility."

Returning to Paul's prayers, were they answered? The qualified answer is "Yes" and "No". Yes, they were answered in principle, but no – not the way Paul envisioned it.

Was Paul delivered from unbelievers in Jerusalem? "Yes" and "No". Luke tells us that Paul was arrested, tried, and imprisoned. On the other hand, three times he was rescued from a lynch mob, once he escaped being flogged, and once a plot to kill him was foiled.

Was Paul's gift to the impoverished saints at Jerusalem accepted? Interestingly, Luke doesn't really discuss it. He does records Paul's statement to Felix that he had come to Jerusalem "to bring my people gifts for the poor". We can probably safely assume the gifts were accepted.

Thirdly, did Paul reach Rome? Yes, he certainly did, but it wasn't as a free man. Three years later, he arrived in Rome as a prisoner – after a near-fatal shipwreck.

What do we learn from this? Prayer is important to our lives as believers, but it does not automatically produce what we ask for.

As Stott puts it: "Praying is not like using a coin-operated machine or a cash dispenser. The struggle involved in prayer lies in the process of

coming to discern God's will and to desire it above everything else. Then God will work things out providentially according to his will, for which we have prayed." – John Stott

As we come to verse 33, Paul ends this part of his letter with yet a third benediction. Now that he has asked for prayers from the Romans, he prays for them. It's a short benediction and prayer, but it's appropriate. Paul simply writes, "The God of peace be with you all. Amen."

For Jews peace or "Shalom" is at the center their relationship to God and one another. Paul chooses this benediction purposefully. After all he has said about Gentile-Jewish unity, he prays for peace and reconciliation, not just for the Jews, but for everyone – both Jew and Gentile.

As one scholar put it, "Paul the Jew, who is also apostle to the Gentiles, says the Jewish benediction over his Gentile readers." - Professor Dunn

Next, we look at the last chapter of Romans.