

“Lessons on Planning”
Romans 15:22-33
December 10, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

We noted last week the significance of Romans being a letter rather than a theological treatise. There is more freedom in letters, and that freedom is often used to share personal things. If you wrote an essay for school on the assigned topic of the Louisiana Purchase, your teacher would give you a lower grade if you started writing about why or why not Alabama should have been chosen over Florida State for the College Football Playoffs. But if you were writing a letter, such a digression would be acceptable and perhaps even welcome because it would tell you something about the letter writer, perhaps whether or not he was an Alabama fan.

In today’s passage, Paul is talking about his future travel plans, and his words give us insight into the very practical topic of what is involved with good planning and decision-making. Paul was writing from the city of Corinth, and he informs his readers that he plans to come to Rome for a stopover visit on his way to Spain. But first, he plans to go in the opposite direction, to Jerusalem, in order to deliver the relief offerings he has been collecting for the poor Jewish Christians in Israel. After that, he will then come to Rome for a much-anticipated visit with the Christians there.

When it comes to this topic of planning and decision-making, the issue is sometimes stated by asking the question, “How can I know the will of God?” I want to sharpen our focus some by pushing back on that way of formulating the issue. There are two ways to understand the will of God, termed by theologians as the preceptive and decretive will of God. A precept is a command, so the preceptive will of God is simply the will of God as stated in the commands of the Bible. When we pray, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for God’s commands to be obeyed on the earth. We can know the preceptive will of God by the simple act of reading the Bible. The decretive will of God, sometimes referred to as the secret will of God, is the will of God expressed in his sovereign decree of what comes to pass. Paul is referring to the decretive will of God in Ephesians 1:11 where he says that God **“works all things according to the counsel of his will.”** Do you see, then why it is not helpful to ask how we can know the will of God? If the preceptive will of God is meant, the answer is, “Read the Bible.” If the decretive will of God is meant, the answer is, “You will never know that ahead of time because God does not reveal it.” The better question to ask, and the one this passage helps us to answer, is “How can I make decisions about my future that are pleasing to God?” I see in this passage three principles in decision-making and gospel planning.

I. We Make Our Plans in Faith

To make our plans in faith means a couple of things. First, it means that we honor God's specific calling on our lives. Paul has stated his understanding of God's calling in his life. It is to preach the gospel to Gentiles and to plant churches in formerly unreached places (v. 20). It is this calling that Paul offers as the explanation for why he hasn't yet been able to come to Rome (v. 22). **"But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you"** (v. 23-24). Even though Paul had a strong desire to visit Rome, he gave priority to the assignment God had given him to preach to Gentiles. But now, he judges that he had finished that job in regions east of Rome, and wants to extend the work to regions west of Rome. He sees an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Rome lies between his work in the east and his anticipated work in the west. He will stop in Rome and fulfill his great desire to visit the Christians there, while inviting them to assist him in his continued calling.

Have you come to grasp God's specific call in your life? By God's specific call, I mean the particular role God has assigned for you in your life. I don't mean by this just the job God may call you to fill. Certainly, that job is a very important part of God's call. But jobs do change in time for most people, just as my job is about to change upon my retirement next year. But this major job change for me will not end God's calling upon my life. What I mean by calling is something like a personal mission statement. For example, here's a personal mission statement of a young mom in our church, written several years ago in a Sunday School class. This woman "is designed of God to organize complex tasks and groups to accomplish important goals. She works well in administrative tasks where someone else provides the overall vision. She is unique in having a heart of mercy for people, while at the same time being able to organize and manage administrative tasks."

How does a person discover this calling? You may have heard me say before that one's calling can be known when three factors align: desire, ability, and opportunity. Those three factors can be summarized in three questions. What do I want to do? What am I able to do? What doors has God opened to pursue my desires and abilities? The gospel gives us at least two valuable resources in answering these questions. First, it humbles human pride, and pride is probably the biggest obstacle in determining our calling from God. It is pride that causes us to have the wrong standard in life, a standard by which we want to feel powerful and important. But once we come to receive by faith what the gospel says about us, the desperate desire to feel important is satisfied. It's not removed, but satisfied in understanding who I am in Christ. I have the gift of his righteousness, and I am a son or daughter of God. Second, the gospel helps

us be honest about ourselves. The gospel requires that we tell the truth about our sin, and this truth-telling about the core of our hearts trains us to extend that truth-telling to every part of our lives.

If Paul's planning was done in accordance with God's calling in his life, why did he go to Jerusalem? On the face of it, this seems to be a clear violation of his call. He wasn't going there to preach the gospel to Gentiles, but to provide financial relief to Jewish Christians. Furthermore, this would have been no minor detour. From Corinth, where he was staying as he wrote this letter, to Jerusalem was a distance of 800 miles. So this little detour would add to his trip 1600 miles and many months in even the best of circumstances. Were Paul's plans for this trip a mistake, a violation of his call? No, but they do inform us of one other critical component in faith-filled planning.

That component is love. Paul went to Jerusalem not only out of the call of God on his life to preach to the Gentiles, but also out of God's call to all his people to love one another. Caring for brothers and sisters in need is something that God asks us to prioritize. Paul's effort to collect funds for Jewish Christians in Israel occupied a major part of his work as described in the New Testament. We don't know exactly why their condition was so impoverished. It could be a case of persecution by Jewish non-Christians that took the form of boycotting the businesses of the Christ-followers. Also, Luke tells us that there was a prophet by the name of Agabus who prophesied about a great famine that would occur in the days of Claudius (Acts 11:28), which would have been during this period. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of a great famine during this time in Judea that was so severe that "many people died for want of what was necessary to procure food." Perhaps it was a combination of persecution and famine. In any case, there was a genuine need that Paul was willing to devote significant time and energy to addressing.

This suggests a fourth question we need to ask in addition to the ones about desire, ability, and opportunity. We should also ask, "Who are the people God has put in my life to love, and what do I need to do to love them well?" Once Paul had answered that question, he was willing to sacrifice months of his life in addition to the suffering such a trip would require. He also understood that this trip would involve significant risk. Notice how at the end of our passage he asks the Romans to pray that he might be delivered "**from the unbelievers in Judea**" (v. 31). For Paul, love took priority over safety. He had learned that from his Savior. On this second Sunday of Advent, let's remember that our Lord Jesus undertook a trip similar to Paul's trip to Jerusalem. It was an even longer trip, from the glories of heaven to a virgin's womb. And this virgin was a poor nobody in a nation of little consequence in the mighty Roman Empire. Jesus came because of the spiritual impoverishment of the human race. He did so knowing that there would be opposition, and he was not wrong. The opposition was so severe that it cost him his life. Yet it was love that led him to undertake this trip, and it was love

also that led Paul to take his trip. Love should always be the prominent factor in our planning as well.

II. We Hold Our Plans Lightly

We often think that the mark of a wise decision is a smooth and positive outcome. We think that if we make a good decision about a marriage partner, for example, that we will have a great and fulfilling marriage. Or if the Lord leads us to accept that job offer, then we can expect to see great success in the job. Sometimes it does work out that way, but at other times it doesn't. It didn't work out that way for Paul. We know much of this story from Luke's account of it in the book of Acts. Paul made it to Jerusalem with the offering. After only one week, he was seized and beaten by an angry mob, who slanderously accused him of teaching people to forsake the law of Moses. He was rescued from the mob by Roman soldiers, who took him into custody. Forty of his enemies took a vow not to eat or drink until they succeeded in killing Paul. The Roman authorities holding him found out about this plot and took him under guard from Jerusalem to Caesarea. There he stayed in prison for quite some time. The Roman authorities didn't want to risk upsetting the Jewish leaders by releasing him, but they also didn't want to punish him because they knew he had done nothing deserving of punishment. So they just delayed until Paul finally appealed his case to Caesar. After much delay, a shipwreck, a snakebite, and other trials, Paul made it Rome. It had taken the better part of three years to do so. And it didn't happen as he may have imagined it. He was taken to Rome as a prisoner and kept in confinement when he arrived, awaiting the hearing of his case before Caesar.

Did Paul ever make it to Spain? The account in Acts ends before Paul dies, so we don't know from the biblical record. Extra-biblical documents are inconclusive. Frank Thielman has just finished writing a biography of Paul that will be published soon, so I asked him his opinion on this. After considering all the available evidence, Frank said that if he had to guess, his guess would be that Paul never made it to Spain.

If good and godly planning doesn't always yield smooth outcomes, why plan in the first place? We do so because it is biblical. God makes plans, Paul made plans, and as God's image-bearers we are to make plans as well. We do so, though, knowing that God has ultimate control over all things. Just because Paul planned to go to Spain doesn't guarantee that such an outcome would happen. The book of Proverbs repeatedly commends the wisdom of making plans, but it also reminds us that our plans are not ultimate. **"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand"** (19:21).

How should we respond when our plans work themselves out so differently and disappointingly than we planned? We do what God's people have always done. We trust the goodness of God's sovereign plan. God knows things we don't know, and we know by faith that he rules over all for his glory and for our good. God promises this in his word, and when we are armed with this truth we can resist the lies of the evil one, who would have us believe either that there was something fatally flawed about us or about God. God's good purposes will be achieved. Of that, we can be sure. Even if Paul didn't make it to Spain, the gospel did. It has been there for centuries and still is. Our own Stephanie Whitner is there now with a mission team. She is in southern Spain where many Muslims come from North Africa for vacation, and her team seeks, among other purposes, to reach them with the good news of Jesus.

III. We Fight for Our Plans in Prayer

Paul not only made plans, but he prayed for those plans and urged others to pray with him. He wanted the Christians in Rome to **“strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf”** (v. 30). The verb translated “strive” has connotations of striving in battle. Prayer is a battle against the forces of evil. Paul gave them three requests to bring before God in prayer. He asked first that he would **“be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea.”** That prayer was answered, though perhaps not in the way Paul envisioned. He asked next that his **“service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.”** The indications in Luke's account in Acts are that Paul and his offering were accepted by the Christians in Jerusalem. Third, he asks them to pray **“that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.”** Again, Paul made it to Rome, though not as he imagined he would.

Something we learn about prayer here is that we need to be open to God answering our prayers in ways we didn't imagine. Prayer is not like a vending machine, where we put in a request and get out the answer we were looking for. It's a dynamic walk with God. We are to keep asking, but all the time being open to God answering our prayer in different ways, and maybe also with different timing than what we imagined.

CONCLUSION:

Our chapter closes with a wonderful benediction. **“May the God of peace be with you all. Amen”** (v. 33). Note that it is not a prayer for peace, but for the God of peace to be with us. The greatest thing God can give us is not just gifts, as amazing as those are. Rather, it is God himself, and that's what Paul prays for in this benediction. On this second Sunday of Advent, may the God who came down come to you and fill you with his peace!