

**Life Lessons from Travel Plans—Romans 15:22-25—2/17/2013**

**Copyright by Mark Vaughan 2/2013**

Keywords—missions, providence, perseverance, relationships

Today as we continue in our verse-by-verse study of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, we come to verses on his travel plans.

Turn there & let's start by reading Romans 15:15-29. [READ]

This is the closing section of this letter where Paul shared personally after writing at length on doctrinal issues.

Paul had written with boldness & here he explained why.

He highlighted how God had graciously called him to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and how that was confirmed in various ways.

And he rooted his passion to preach where Jesus was not named in OT promises of reaching the unreached.

But here's a question—if he was called to the Gentiles and Rome was the capital of the Gentile world, why had he never been to Rome?

What had he not started a church in Rome?

And now that a church was established in Rome, why visit now?

If he wanted to preach where Christ was not named, why go to Rome where Christ was named now in this church he wrote to?

I think we can forget that a letter like this—though inspired by the Holy Spirit—was still from a real person to real people.

And if you have any experience with people, you know that we can easily misunderstand each other, can't we?

Even adults can have issues over silly stuff like who went first.

Or issues can be much more complex and related to our own past hurts or experiences and how we are tempted to read people or situations and respond to them.

So it's helpful to remember that Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, was a letter from a real man to real men and women.

And since it was a letter to a church Paul had not started or visited, his opening and closing remarks are a little different from other letters to churches he had founded.

Paul was humbly forging a relationship with the Romans while authoritatively communicating as a Spirit-inspired Apostle.

And that required some explanation.

It required some sensitivity and diplomacy to guard against misunderstandings and to clearly state his purposes.

So what we find today are some carefully worded travel plans that communicate far more than travel plans.

We can read verses 22-25 to learn that Paul had not been to Rome, but planned to go there on his way to Spain after he went to Jerusalem.

Those are all valid facts from Romans 15:22-25.

But since God's Spirit was inspiring Paul as he wrote this, we want to learn much more from this than merely Paul's travel plans.

We want to learn from the perspective he had about his past travels and his current status and his future plans.

We want to learn from the underlying worldview and approach to life and ministry that Paul had as he shared personally with the Romans.

As we've said before, we do not have the same gifts or calling as the Apostle Paul and we do not live at the time in history.

So here's a basic tip for proper Bible interpretation—don't read this and assume it means you need to go to Rome or Spain.

We need to interpret Paul's words in their original context before we begin to make any applications to our lives today.

But as we grasp who Paul was & how he approached life and ministry, we can learn principles that apply to our lives and ministries today.

In the past few weeks, we've learned from Paul's ministry perspectives, from his boasting, and from his proven path to fruitfulness and we pick up similar themes today.

We look at Paul's travel plans and how he communicated them to the Roman church and we can learn 5 life lessons for today.

You might think of it like this—have you ever walked into a situation that could be sticky or tense or difficult and watched someone handle it so smoothly that you were just amazed?

We can certainly think of situations we read in the Gospels where Jesus turned trick questions and traps into opportunities to teach or to turn the tables and expose the hypocrisy of others.

Or in our culture today, you probably have lines from movies that you can recall and recite because you just thought that was so cool how it handled a situation or whatever.

That's kind of what I'm getting at as we approach this text.

So let's start unpacking Romans 15:22-25 to discover 5 life lessons for our plans & experiences as we travel through life.

To get at the 1<sup>st</sup> one, let's read verse 22 again. [READ]

The phrase 'for this reason' points back to Paul's previous ministry commitments that he was fulfilling.

As verse 19 says, he had fully preached the Gospel of Christ all through the regions from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

He had gone to those places where Christ was not named and Christ had established His church in those areas through him.

For the reason of his diligent commitment to all that work, Paul had been hindered from coming to the Roman church before.

The idea of the imperfect verb here is that this was a repeated hindrance and the English word 'often' is a translation of the Greek word for many.

So Paul was saying he had not merely been hindered once or twice from coming to Rome, but many times as he was occupied in the ongoing demands of preaching the Gospel where he had traveled.

He had no lack of opportunity to preach and in order to be faithful to where God had him, he had to delay travel to Rome.

Paul could not travel everywhere and be with everyone all the time.

He was one man with a clear mission and staying focused on that mission meant he could not do everything.

In order to be faithful where God put him, he might be perceived as neglecting Rome, but that was not because of a lack of desire.

No—the passive voice of this verb for hindered is described as a divine passive, meaning the implied hinderer was God.

And that divine perspective is what shaped Paul's travels plans though he still desired to go to Rome.

God was sovereign over where he was able to go and what he was able to do and how much he was able to accomplish.

God was ruling over which desires were fulfilled and when they were fulfilled and as Paul shared that, he noted that God was in charge.

It's like he said, "Hey, I wanted to come earlier, but God gave me so much opportunity to minister, so much fruit to pick, that to be faithful, I could not move on to Rome yet."

Turn back to chapter 1 to see that he brought up this issue before so it must have been a question in at least one person's mind.

Look with me at Romans 1:8-13 and let's read where he mentioned his desire to come to them as he opened the letter.

Follow along in Romans 1:8-13. [READ]

After communicating his love through his thankfulness and prayers for them, he expressed his desire to come if God in His sovereign, planned will would allow it.

And he wanted fellowship with them both so he could minister to them and so that they could minister to him.

In chapter 1, he did not say what prevented him from coming, but back over in chapter 15 as he explained his travels and ministry, it is apparent that God prevented him.

God prevented him from going to Rome earlier because God had all kinds of other fruitful ministry for him to do first.

Turn back over to Romans 15 & read verse 23 again. [READ]

Now Paul was near the time to fulfill a desire he had for many years to come to Rome—but notice why he now felt freed to go to Rome.

He could go now because his work elsewhere was finished.

He had no further place in those regions where Christ was not named.

In other words, there was a church among each people group in those regions where the Gospel was preached.

It was not that Paul had preached to every living individual in those regions, but his role as pioneer missionary there was done.

As we said last week, Paul was a frontier missionary.

He was a pioneer, going to places that had no Gospel, no NT Scriptures, and no knowledge of Christ.

And his role was to see that a church was planted there to continue the outreach to each region.

Only when that work was done could he move on and that leads us to note a 1<sup>st</sup> life lesson for us today.

Life lesson #1 today from Paul's travel plans—#1—trust in providence.

Learn to trust God's good providence in your life.

Life lesson #1—trust in providence.

Kids—providence is just a big word to describe God's control over everything—that He is in charge and He is working in every big and little thing in our lives and the life of everyone else.

God's providence is His sovereign rule over all things.

You younger kids recently studied God's providence in Sunday School lessons about Joseph's life.

Though Joseph faced some bad stuff, God was working out good plans for Joseph and the Israelites, wasn't He?

So in the end Joseph could tell his brothers that they meant evil against him, but God meant it for good, as Genesis 50:20 records.

Joseph's story is a classic on God's good providence.

And for believers, for those who trust Christ—we can know that God's providence is always good for us because Romans 8:28 tells us that.

Romans 8:28 says God works ALL things together for our good if we are called by God to trust Christ & love Him.

So if we trust Christ, we can trust His good plan for us.

When we are hindered from something we want to do because God gives us an opportunity to do something else instead, then we can joyfully embrace it and strive to be faithful in it.

That will keep us from a lot of whining & grumbling, won't it?

And by the way, I'm not giving these life lessons from Paul because I'm good at living any of them because one of my kids just confronted my grumpiness the other night.

I offer these lessons today because they are inherent in the text and I pray they are transforming for my life as much as anyone's.

So whether it's in the car in traffic or it's in some bigger trial, we can change our response if we trust God's providence.

If we see the telephone call or visit that delays everything else we had planned as a divine interruption, then we can accept it.

We can receive it as a chance to bear more fruit than we might have if everything went according to our own plans.

And our responses can be transformed beyond small interruptions.

For example, some of you parents might like to reach out more or read more good books or pray more and you can never find the time because you are always caring for your kids.

If there's always a child in need of something else, take comfort in God's good providence that He is the One who gave you children.

Maybe you'll not preach the Gospel from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum in the next 10 years, but you can preach the Gospel from infancy all the way to adulthood with your kids.

And if that task consumes much of life now, then gladly embrace those blessed opportunities as God's good providence in your life.

Or similarly, if you have some sickness or are at an age where you can't do what you wish you could, one thing I remind our shut-ins of is that they can still pray.

If we believe God answers the prayers of His people, then it is never insignificant for your ministry focus to be praying for others.

Of course, we never want to use God's providence as an excuse for disobeying Him when we should do more than pray or we should do more to reach out or serve.

So we need to be careful not to rationalize our laziness or selfishness by blaming it on God's providence.

But we do learn from Paul's travel plans and other Scriptures to have a thankful heart to receive the lot in life God gives us.

We must submit to God, accept what He's put in front of us, and then do everything we can to be faithful in what's given us to do.

Trusting providence involves passionate action to meet the needs in front of us, to obey the commands directed to us, and to trust God with what we can't do that we want to do.

And that helps us remember that we are not God, that we cannot be everywhere at once or meet every need that arises or please every person who may want us to do this or that.

You can't do everything.

So trust God's providence and do the things most clearly commanded of you in your current situation in life and trust Him for the rest.

That's life lesson #1—trust in providence.

Then life lesson #2 is this—train for perseverance.

Life lesson #2 we learn today from Paul's travel plans—#2—train for perseverance.

Perseverance is dedication & commitment & faithfulness over time.

It means continuing to do the right thing, no matter what, pressing on the path of obedience & diligence even if it's hard.

It's staying focused and not giving up.

I get that lesson from Paul continuing in the work of preaching the Gospel in the regions he described until the work was done.

Paul had a desire to go to Rome—after all, it was the capital of the empire and maybe he'd have more influence if he got there.

More so, he wanted to go there to continue the mission, to reach that far with the Gospel as he traveled north and west.

Verse 23 says he had the desire to go there for many years.

Think of that—Paul was pouring himself out in ministry all through the regions of southeastern Europe and for years wanted to get to Rome to keep spreading the Gospel westward.

But he could not abandon the responsibilities God had given him to preach first through those regions.

So he persevered in what was in front of him for over a decade [15 years] holding out hope of getting to Rome & even beyond.

Think of the temptations to be discouraged or give up and just leave what he was doing to go on ahead to Rome.

Of course, Paul was not Jesus so we dare not hold him up as perfect through all his years or ministry.

We know & can read of times when Paul was discouraged or worried.

But we can learn from his example as he sought to follow Christ and that's what we're doing here.

And his perseverance was through persecution & trials, not easy times.

So that's what I'm pointing out here as a life lesson for us.

Verses 22-23 say Paul wanted to go to Rome for many years, but was hindered by the many opportunities for ministry God gave him and he needed to be faithful to finish those first.

He persevered in fully preaching through all those regions and then he was taking steps toward the next goal for ministry.

That's encouraging to me in times when I'm plodding along, doing the next thing, maybe not seeing any spiritual fireworks go off but walking by faith to try to do what God said.

We're tempted to think we're just normal, plain people whose lives are not all that significant and can't make a big difference.

But those are lies that fight against our perseverance.

That's why it's encouraging to have an annual meeting like tonight where I'll rehearse to God's praise some of the things He has done through you as a church body over the past year.

It was helpful for me to look back and think through it all.

Your small, daily practice of faithfulness matters.

And its power and influence increase each week and month and year.

So lesson #2—train for perseverance.

Train spiritually not just for one event or a short run or for the next AWANA segment or memory verse or SS lesson or sermon.

Do all those little things with the goal of training for life, for the long haul and marathon of perseverance.

Lesson #1—trust in providence.

Lesson #2—train for perseverance.

Then lesson #3—try to plan.

That's right—I said these were simple--#3—try to plan.

That's a basic lesson that Paul's words help us to remember.

And that's important to note after talking about God's providence because God's providence is an excuse not to plan.

Just because God is in charge over what finally happens, that does NOT mean we should not plan for what we think should happen next.

As we plan how we'll serve God at work or at home or in ministry in other ways, God's providence gives us comfort that God will work our plans for good.

But we still should try to plan like Paul obviously had been doing and like he explained in verses 24-25—so read verse 24-25 again. [READ]

We just read Paul's plans for his travel and ministry.

Paul did not live by some kind of mysterious approach that depended on what he saw in the clouds or mystically perceived.

He made plans to do the next thing.

And the next thing on his travel and preaching agenda was to go to Rome and then head from there to Spain.

We find this desire to go to Rome mentioned by Paul in Acts 19:21 just before he wrote this letter to Rome and before he then headed to Jerusalem.

As his ministry in Ephesus finished, Acts 19:21 says “Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome.””

Paul's calling as a pioneer missionary directed him to Rome and then on westward to Spain where Christ was not named.

And one main purpose for going TO Rome was to go THROUGH Rome on the way to Spain and to be supported on that journey.

When verse 24 mentions seeing them in passing, it does not mean he did not care to stay there or build relationships.

It meant he would stay and build relationships and be refreshed in fellowship enough to prepare them and him for heading on to Spain.

But his plan was to get to Spain to spread the Gospel.

And his plan also included support from the church at Rome to help him get to Spain.

That's what the phrase “helped on my way” means because it uses the Greek verb ‘propempe’ that's used for churches sending out missionaries.

In Acts 15:3 & 21:5 that word is used to describe the church sending out Paul and Barnabas or escorting Paul to be sent out.

That term became like a technical term for that official sending support relationship of a church with a missionary.

So in case you wondered where the idea of churches supporting and sending out missionaries is found—here's one place.

I could mention several others like 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 16:6, 11 & 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 1:16 & Titus 3:13 & 3<sup>rd</sup> John 6.

The spreading of the Gospel requires Christians to give to Gospel ministry and churches to support, pray for, and send missionaries.

We must either be going or sending or we are disobedient.

So please don't miss that Paul was asking for missionary support here.

As he made his ministry plans, he also was making plans for how God might provide support for his work.

Paul did not fly by the seat of his pants like some people try to make him out to be as if living by faith does not involve sitting down and making a budget and planning wisely and prayerfully.

No. Please note that the Apostle Paul made plans.

Of course, like with all of us, God sometimes changed Paul's plans.

Acts 21-28 record what happened with Paul's plans and how he was arrested at Jerusalem but preach to crowds and leaders.

Then finally after delays and trials and a shipwreck, he made it to Rome as a prisoner who had appealed to Caesar.

And it's not clear from history and church tradition whether he ever made it to Spain like he wanted.

But still he made plans and moved to live out those plans.

When I was preparing for this sermon this week and for our annual meeting tonight, I couldn't help but think of how we spent months last year planning for building expansion.

And then after we presented that to you, God moved in the needs of one of our widows to bring about a different plan where we bought the final duplex within our boundaries to get a buyer for her house.

That wasn't wasted planning because it led to God working out better plans that we continue to see unfold.

Faithfulness doesn't mean our plans always come true.

But when possible, it is faithful & responsible to try to plan.

So life lesson #3—try to plan.

Then as he made those plans, notice what else he was doing.

Lesson #4—tend to relationships.

Life lesson #4—tend to relationships.

As Paul made plans to go to Rome and then to Spain, but first to Jerusalem, in all those things he was tending to relationships.

And by tend, I mean taking care of, cultivating relationships where he was caring for others and where he was also accountable to others and depending on others.

He was submitting himself to accountability to the church at Rome by sending this long support letter that explained the Gospel.

And he was expressing dependence on them to support him with supplies and people to guide him and maybe go with him.

He was maintaining a connectedness to the local church and the relationships he would need for support through the church.

And he was also making sure they would understand his detour to go to Jerusalem first.

After he had explained at length his desire for many years to go to Rome and how he was hindered, you can imagine that it could've been misunderstood when he then said he'd come there after Jerusalem.

And since he probably was writing this letter from Corinth, Jerusalem was the opposite direction from Rome.

This was a 1000-mile detour in the opposite direction.

I mean, if I wanted Paul to come visit me, I can certainly hear my own sinful, cynical heart saying, "Yeah right, Paul, sure you want to come see us—that's why Jerusalem is first!?"

Maybe you don't have sinful thoughts like that, but Paul wanted to guard against those by explaining why he had to go to Jerusalem first.

And they would've known about the famine in Jerusalem and the needs of believers who were especially poor there as they were ostracized by Jews there.

So he shared in verse 25 and following about going to Jerusalem first.

You can read about all that in Acts and we'll talk about this collection for the saints in Jerusalem more in coming weeks.

But for today, the point is that Paul communicated clearly & carefully about his intentions and reasons as part of tending to relationships.

And even his personal taking of the gift to Jerusalem was part of his overall concern for relationships among Jewish and Gentile believers.

We've seen that topic come up again and again from Romans 9 through Romans 15 and it's all over the NT as the church was this coming together of Jews and Gentiles as a new family of God.

The gift for believers in Jerusalem was what Paul was serving.

He was deaconing the collection to be sure it arrived safely and honestly as a clear expression of love from Gentile believers and Gentile churches for their Jewish brothers and sisters.

So even the gift and trip to Jerusalem were about relationships.

And that's so right—most of the time we as leaders find ourselves coming back to this as a principle to live by—it's not the details of the stuff or task or whatever, it's about what God is doing in relationships.

People are the ministry.

So we must tend to relationships like you would tend a garden where weeds can pop up and suck the life out of the plants and steal the energy meant for the growth of the plants.

Relationships take work to begin and to cultivate and grow and deepen and maintain and protect.

And again, this is a perspective Paul had that lay below the surface of these details he was writing about his travel plans.

When we dig down into it, we're reminded of this simple life lesson that we need to care about one another.

We need to tend to relationships.

That means we work to communicate & be sensitive to others' needs, and we submit to accountability with others and don't hesitate to ask for help and depend on others.



And it means we also ENJOY one another as Paul indicated by his words in verse 24 and by what we read earlier from Romans 1.

He expected to be refreshed by their fellowship and to be blessed by their gifts being used in ministry to him.

He was not self-sufficient or a lone ranger Christian even though he was single and was an Apostle and pioneer missionary.

He still needed and appreciated other Christians.

So life lesson #4 is this—tend to relationships.

Lesson #1—trust in providence; #2—train for perseverance; #3—try to plan; and #4—tend to relationships.

Then quickly and lastly today, #5—treasure truth.

Life lesson #5—treasure truth.

I get this lesson from the fact that this was a missionary support letter.

This massive theological treatise that we've been studying for over 4 years that is like the systematic theology of the NT 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.

You don't often find that from missionaries today.

But oh how we need to learn from Paul's example here how important truth and theology and our view of God and the Gospel are.

Especially when asking for help from others, we should never be threatened or insulted if they have a load of questions about what we believe or what we plan to do.

So we need to be saturated with truth and overflow with the truth that drives our lives so that it is clear to others what we are about.

That's true in all of life in various ways.

So life lesson #5—treasure truth.

And the most vital truth of all that weaves through the fabric of everything Paul wrote in Romans and through all the Bible is the Gospel of Jesus Christ

We as humans are sinners—we violate God's law and deserve punishment but there is one Man who never sinned and whose life deserved heaven forever.

That man is Jesus Christ who was both God and man and lived a perfect life that He graciously offers to be counted as ours if we turn from trust in ourselves to faith in Him.

And that same Jesus also died on the cross to pay the punishment that sin deserved and He also offers that death as accomplishing forgiveness for all of our sins if we trust Him.

And 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 and 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.

Now let's pray and ask God to help us #1—To trust in providence; #2—To train for perseverance; #3—To try to plan; #4—To tend to relationships; & #5—To treasure truth.

Pray with me as we close.