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Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith
Message: The Best Laid Plans

Transcribed Message
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Romans 15:22-29

There is an old adage. It seems to me that it is somewhat cynical as well. It says that man plans and God laughs. Man plans and God laughs. I do think that is a bit cynical. I don't think it's true to that extent because I do believe that God wants us to plan. I believe he wants us to then submit our plans to him. After all, as we read in Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 and 6, we're to trust in the Lord with all our hearts, to not lean on our own understanding. In all our ways acknowledge him and know that he will direct our paths. In the 16th chapter of that same book Proverbs, we read this: Commit your way to the Lord and your plans will be established. Same chapter verse 9: The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. The 19th chapter verse 21: Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. Or even in Jeremiah chapter 10 verse 23: I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. Those truths in Proverbs and Jeremiah I think are reflected in Romans 15 verses 22 to 29. When you first read these verses, it would almost seem that Paul has given us some travel plans. He's telling us what his itinerary is going to be going forward. But there's a lot more in here than that as you would imagine.

Here's what we want to see. It is true. Man proposes and God disposes. When I look at that statement, to me it just simply means we pray, we plan, and we ultimately submit our plans and our prayers to a sovereign God. It's not unlike what we saw last week when Paul talked about this matter of signs and wonders. How do we see that? We see that again, I think ... I hope ... as we pray. We ask God to intervene. We ask for miracles at times but always with the understanding that God is the one who disposes. We propose. He is the one who disposes.

Just a word of introduction before we jump into these verses. Behind these verses is clearly a missionary mindset. That's what we've seen these last couple of

Sundays. This is the heartbeat of Paul. This is a man who takes the Great Commission with great seriousness. This is a man who was given his life over to it. This is Paul saying to us our God is a missionary God. Our God is a seeking God. We need to be looking out there. We come here and we enjoy this time and we're hopefully encouraged and equipped and built up. All the while, the endgame is to be able to take this out there. We always need to be thinking with that in mind. We need to be thinking about who is it that God has in our lives that he wants us to be making that next connection with, that next step, that next conversation. That ought to be something that we pray about regularly. That's the heart of Paul.

Remember I quoted John Piper last week at the end of the morning. Piper also said regarding the Great Commission there are three possible choices for every Christian. You can go. I hope there's some people, maybe even here this morning, and God is going to be at some point stirring in your heart to go and to take the gospel to some other place from here. If you don't go, he said the second possibility is that you send. You're a part of the sending. We want to see ourselves as a sending church. We've got over 30 missionaries around the world that we have all collectively been a part of sending. Do you know what the third choice is? You can go. You can send. Or you can disobey. That's the three categories. You go. You send. If you don't do either one of those then you're basically disobeying because it's a command. This is not the mindset of Paul as a missionary.

The second thing I want you to see behind these verses is an extraordinary missionary experience. An extraordinary missionary experience. As Paul comes to the end of his third missionary journey, look at the map and you think of what the book of Acts lays out by way of Paul's missionary journey. Three different times the book of Acts records for us Paul venturing off into the unknown parts and taking the gospel to these places. He's at the end of the third of those missionary journeys so he's had a life of experience. We won't turn there but jot down 2 Corinthians chapter 11 and about verse 23 to 28 and just read the missionary experiences of the apostle Paul. He recounts them and he recounts all the things that he has gone through, all the dangers that he has faced – the beatings, the imprisonments, the shipwrecks. He lists them out for us to see what it is that has happened to him. It's an extraordinary experience that God has

used this man to achieve and to realize. You just have to look at this and say the mindset of Paul is whatever it takes. Whatever it takes I'm willing to do it. Whatever I have to endure, I'm willing to endure for the sake of the gospel.

Let's look at these verses this morning and just simply see the plans and priorities of Paul. It lays out very simply three steps that Paul put before us with regard to his plans and his priorities. They have to do with a destination that he has in mind in each of these cases. The first one is he says he has a plan to visit Rome. That we see in verses 22 to 24. Remember first Paul's ambition. What is it? What was Paul's ambition? When you look at verse 22: "This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you." he starts off that 22nd verse "this is the reason" or "for this reason". But what reason? What is the reason that he's lifting up? Look back at verse 20: "And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named lest I build on someone else's foundation." That was Paul's mandate. Paul, as we said, was a pioneer missionary. He was a frontier missionary. He wanted to take the gospel where nobody else had gone. That was just the way he lived his life. we said last week that's not God's call on everybody, but he didn't want to build on somebody else's foundation. He wanted to go where the gospel had not yet been taken.

Today we would probably call that unreached people groups. There are all kinds of unreached people groups all around the world. A lot of them in what we call the 10/40 window that stretches across the world and in that section of the world where the gospel hasn't fully penetrated. There are regions beyond that as well. But we call them unreached people groups. Why do we call them that? We call them that because obviously they haven't been reached with the gospel, but one of the reasons we call them that is because they're often very resistant to the gospel. It is hard work. It is a hard ministry. I had a friend who ministered in a Muslim country for over 20 years. When he returned to the states because of things that were happening in that country, he told me he could count on both hands how many people he knew for absolute certain had come to understand the glory of the gospel. Those are hard places. Those unreached people groups are unreached oftentimes because their resistance of the gospel.

Sometimes, they're unreached because they're hard places to get to oftentimes for geopolitical reasons. You just don't go into these countries. We had a missionary

couple many years ago that went into a country like that. They came in not as missionaries, but they came in under a medical identity. These places are often unreached because they're hard to get to and of course sometimes they're not safe. There are concerns for one's personal safety. That's what Paul is saying here. His ambition is to take the gospel where it had never been before and that's what is happening in some places in our world even today.

Now look at verse 23. But now, he says. But now. Something has changed. "But now since I no longer have any room for work in these regions..." Let's just stop right there. Something is different. Something has changed. There's an adversative at the beginning of that verse. He's wanting us to stop and say okay, there's some change now. He made that comment and now there's something that's different. He makes this amazing statement. Look at that 23rd verse: "since I no longer have any room for work in these regions." What the world does he mean? He certainly doesn't mean by that everybody in that region has come to hear the gospel. That isn't even humanly possible. He doesn't mean that. He certainly doesn't mean that they've all heard and believed. That can't be what he has in mind. What he means is as he looks at his missionary ventures – the first trip, the second trip, the third trip – he looks at those and he strategically in each of those missionary trips had gone to places where he knew the gospel would have its greatest impact and influence. As he looks at the landscape of his ministry and those missionary journeys, he says I hit the areas that were of strategic importance. We know that to be the case because when he wrote to the church in Colossae, he said I want to commend you because I've heard basically of your faith being spread throughout all of that region. That's what Paul's heart was – to take the gospel to these strategic centers, the cities of influence. Have people come to Christ, the church established, and then the influence of the gospel goes out from there. He's basically saying I've come to the end of the third missionary journey, and I want to find a new frontier. That's the statement I think he is making.

Remember Paul's relationship with the church in Rome. What do we know about Paul's relationship to the church in Rome? Let's read on in verse 23: "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 once I have enjoyed your company for a while.” Remember Paul had never been to Rome and to the church there. He did not establish that church. Of all the strategic places, obviously Rome was the epicenter of it all. It was the place of greatest influence, the greatest impact. This is the imperial center of the world. But Paul wasn't a part of the founding of that church. When we get into chapter 16, he knows a lot of those people and he's going to commend them and speak to them personally by name. He knows a lot of the people who are at the church of Rome. It's just that he didn't establish that church. He hadn't been there and so the desire he expresses is that he wants to get there. He's heard of their reputation. We saw that in verse 14. He knows the influence that they're having in that strategic place.

Then he tells them that he had tried to go there many times. Remember way back in chapter 1 verse 9. “For God is my witness whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son that without ceasing I mention you (the church in Rome) always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you that I may impart to you some spiritual gifts and strengthen you, and you can in turn strengthen me.” He said in the opening chapter his heart was I want to get to Rome. I want to go and see what God is doing in the church at Rome and just how the influence of the gospel is impacting this great city of Rome. He says he wants to go to Rome and then he wants to go on to Spain.

We don't know that Paul made it to Spain. Scholars have differing ideas about that. The reason they do is because the Scriptures don't explicitly tell us that he made it to Spain. There are a couple of references by early church fathers that Paul made it all the way to the western part of the empire which would have been no doubt Spain. But we know that he made it to Rome eventually. We know he died in Rome as a martyr at the hands of the Roman government. But remember this third thing.

Remember that it is God who directs our steps. It's God who directs our steps. Paul shares his ambition. Paul shares his heart. Paul shares his plans. Paul shares his desire to get to Rome. But ultimately it is God who directs our steps. Our plans are always subject to God's sovereign will. That's what we want to remember. Paul is clearly a planner. That can be seen throughout all this section of verses. He's planning. He wants to go to Rome. He wants to go to the next point and so on. I've got a feeling

Paul was a list maker. For those of us that are list makers, I think we've got Paul in our company. He was a planner. He was a list maker. He put stuff down and he checked it off. Getting to Rome was one of those things that hadn't happened yet. But while he was a planner and a list maker, he was a man who constantly submitted his plans to a sovereign God. He held his plans loosely, if you will. He had a plan, but he didn't remain inflexible. It wasn't that he couldn't change. He was sensitive to the Holy Spirit. He was living out those verses we read in Proverbs. You make your plans. You determine out of your heart what it is that you would like to do, and God will direct your steps. You go ahead and propose. God is the one who disposes.

Think of it this way. Paul is in Corinth at the time of the writing of the book of Romans. He's wanting to go to Rome by way of Spain. God changes the plan. God changes the plan and instead of immediately getting on a boat and going to Rome, he settles down for this period in Corinth and he writes a letter to the church at Rome. We call it Romans and we're thankful to God, aren't we? We're thankful that God interrupted Paul's plan and had Paul stay in Corinth for this period to direct him to write a letter to the church in Rome. Paul didn't know when he'd get there but God did. He doesn't know when he was going to get there but God wanted him to write a letter. We have the book of Romans because of God interrupting his plan and saying this is the way it's going to go. We're thankful to Paul that he was listening to the voice of the Spirit of God. But I think ultimately James 4 says it best. James 4 verse 13: "Come now you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? for you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say if the Lord wills we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance." So, Lord willing, next Sunday we're going to look at Romans 15:30 to 33. That's how we live our life according to God's will. James says it so well. There's Paul's heart. He wants to make it to Rome.

But now look at the plans. He wants to visit Jerusalem is the second thing that is up. In verses 25 to 27 he talks about his next step being a trip to Jerusalem. The mission that he has view of is a ministry to the poor. Look at verse 25: "At present however I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints." You read verse 25 and we

say what? That would be what you would say. What? Paul makes this pronouncement in verse 25 "At present however I'm going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints." The whole church at Rome would go, say what? You said you wanted to come and see us and now you're telling us that the next thing up on your plan is you're going to come to Rome by way of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is just 1000 miles in the opposite direction from Rome. He is announcing that he is going to make a 1000-mile trip the exact opposite direction of Rome and then he'll have to make that same 1000-mile trip back just to get to where he is right now. It's almost like Jonah saying yeah God, I'm going to Nineveh by way of Tarshish. I'm going in the opposite direction from what you told me to do. Why would Paul do that?

What would cause Paul to make yet another long dangerous journey? Because make no mistake, anybody who traveled in the 1st century if they went on a trip like this, they were taking their life in their hands. Not only travelling over land being what it was, but traveling by sea was very dangerous as he tells us in 2 Corinthians 11. What would motivate him to now say I'm sitting here in Corinth but I'm going to go over to Jerusalem. He tells us in the 25th verse he is going to bring aid to the saints. Look at verse 26 to 27. He tells us the motive and the message behind it. Verse 26: "For Macedonia and Achaia I have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem for they were pleased to do it and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they are also to be of service to them in material blessings." There's a lot going on in these two verses.

I want you to see two main things. Two things there that are so important. The first one is this. The gospel creates generous people. The gospel creates generous people. Two times Paul says they were pleased to do this. They were pleased to do this. The word speaks of delight. The word speaks of joy. It's 2 Corinthians 9:7. The Lord loves a cheerful giver. That's what he is stating here. Their generosity is born of a spirit of joy, of gladness of heart. There isn't any sense of compulsion. Nobody had to twist their arm. Nobody locked the doors of the auditorium and said we're going to take a collection until we get the amount that we need. This is all free will, no compulsion. This is truly grace giving.

Do you know what generates grace giving? The gospel is what generates grace giving. The gospel creates generous people. The context here is obviously money but it's more than that. Any time the gospel is at work in our life creating within us a spirit of generosity – it could be the sharing of our lives with each other, the sharing of our time, of our energy, of our gifts, of our talents, our resources, our money. I marvel at the fact that every Sunday and all through the week there are all kinds of people who make the life and ministry of Covenant possible and happen because of their service. The generosity that flows out of the gospel touched heart. The fact there are 40 or 50 people that are working right now taking care of all our little people. The fact that a whole bunch of you are going to go back in the second hour and you're going to disciple our children and students. Some of you engage in things that happen before most of us even get here in terms of all that takes place on any given Sunday and then through the week. That is a generosity that is born out of the gospel. That is the understanding that the song we just sang that he truly is the Lord of it all, that we're just giving of ourselves to each other.

We're not told why the church in Jerusalem was under such dire need. We know that there was a time not that far back where there was a terrible famine in that whole region. It's possible I suppose that famine was still having an economic impact on the life of people in that region. It's even more likely I think that these were largely Jewish believers. These believers in the church in Jerusalem were almost 100% Jewish in their background. What happens when they step away from Judaism and into Christianity? Their family disowns them. They're ostracized. They're put in financial jeopardy because they don't have the support system. All those things in addition to simply persecution are playing in this. Paul says I know the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Again, just look at that map. Paul is in Corinth. It's just the region to the north of where he is. That's Macedonia and Achaia. That whole section right there are the people, the believers, who are concerned about their fellow believers in Jerusalem, and they've taken up this collection.

If you want to know what that collection looks like just go to 1 Corinthians 16 and go to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. If you ever wonder where in the New Testament could I go to read about God's heart for giving. What does that look like? What are the principles

that God wants me to govern my giving by today under the New Covenant? Just go to 1 Corinthians 16 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. When you look at those passages that are specifically about giving, you find all kinds of principles that are generated out of a gospel centered response. You don't find any percentages as to how much you're supposed to give. There isn't anything there about tithing. There isn't anything there about 10%. There isn't anything there about a number. It's all about gospel generated generosity. God prospers you and you give in a way that is prosperous to others.

Now look at the other thing. The gospel creates a unified people. This is so cool. The gospel creates a unified people. Look at verse 27: "For they were pleased to do it and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in their material blessings." This is a beautiful picture. This is so crucial to what Paul has been talking about beginning in chapter 14. You remember chapter 14 is when you step into that whole discussion that was dividing the believers in the church at Rome and was dividing them up between Jews and Gentiles. It was dividing them up over their understanding and misunderstanding about the application of the law and the things of the law to living under the New Covenant. Paul spoke about those things, and he said those things are just matters of opinion. Don't let them be divisive. Don't let them cause division and wedges among you.

Now here this is the context at the church at Rome and he is saying to them in verse 27: "For they were pleased to do it and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them and material blessings." The Gentile believers are indebted to their Jewish believers. Indebted to the Jewish believers. How did the church at Rome even start? It most likely started from the people who were gathered in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. Jews would come from all over the world to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. They came there and their lives were changed forever by the gospel. Then, they went back into the far reaches of the world including Rome and many believe that's how the church in Rome began. It didn't begin with Peter. He wasn't lifted up as the first pope in that church. That didn't even happen. If Peter was in Rome and Paul wrote a letter to the church at Rome and he doesn't even mention Peter, that would've been an

offense that could not have been overlooked. Peter wasn't in Rome. Peter didn't start the church in Rome. Here is Paul saying as Gentile believers you're indebted to the Jewish believers because Romans 11. You and I as largely Gentile believers we've been grafted into the vine. We've been brought into the vine and into the blessing because of the faith of these Jewish believers in God's work in creating the church and then including Gentiles to be in that.

Spiritual blessings motivate the sharing of material blessings. Listen. The gospel bridges every divide. The gospel bridges every divide. It bridges the divide between Jew and Gentile. It bridges the divide between male and female. Galatians 3. It even bridges the divide between the free and those who aren't free. It bridges every divide. It is the only thing, my friends, that can bridge the divide in our world today. We're a divided world. What can possibly bring about a sense of unity? The only thing that brings a lasting and true unity is the gospel and that's what Paul speaks of here.

Now lastly, the plan is to visit Spain. He wants to visit Rome. He is going to make a trip to Jerusalem. Now he lays out the third part of his plan in verses 28 and 29. In verse 28, Paul is just laying out the plan saying I anticipate that you're going to be financially helping in this. Look at verse 28: "When therefore when I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you." back in verse 24 Paul had talked about I hope to see you again as I go to Spain, knowing that you will help me on my journey. That's a very technical word. The idea of them helping and being involved in Paul's hopeful trip to Spain is basically a word that speaks of supplying what Paul might need – everything from supplies to financial things to even people that might accompany him. He fully anticipates that when he comes ultimately to Rome and uses that as a launching pad to go to Spain that they're going to engage with him in this ministry together.

Now notice this last thing. Paul was so certain that he looked forward to this time of sweet fellowship with them in Rome. Verse 29: "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ." I know, he says. He's confident. He is going to be trusting that God has this as a part of his will and desire. Don't you like the way he phrases that? I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. What's the fullness of the blessing of Christ? It has to obviously

center around the gospel. It has to center around the gospel. It is the sharing of life together. It is the sharing of what God is doing in each other's lives. When we share in the fullness of the blessings of Christ, we're sharing in the gospel. We're sharing together in what God is doing in our lives. We're reciprocating that ministry to each other. Last week we talked about developing a culture of honor. That's what that is. When you have a culture of honor you are stepping into this blessing of the fullness of Christ. You couldn't possibly have it any other way. Here we are honoring each other which is one of the commands. Honor one another. If we're doing that, then we're enjoying that fullness of the blessing of Christ.

Here's the thing. Paul makes it to Jerusalem. Paul makes it to Rome. We don't know if Paul makes it to Spain. But here's the thing. None of that happened the way Paul planned. None of it went down the way Paul had thought it would in his own heart and in his own plan. He goes to Jerusalem. Remember, while he's in Jerusalem bringing this offering to the poor and persecuted believers in Jerusalem, while he's there the Judaizers agitate against him and have him arrested. Paul spends a couple of years in prison in various places in and around Jerusalem. That wasn't exactly what he had planned. Then you remember he appeals to Nero. He appeals to Rome. As a Roman citizen, if you're appealing to Caesar then to Caesar you will go. He gets to Rome. He gets there on an all-expense paid trip by the Roman government. He comes there in chains to the city of Rome. When he's in the city of Rome, he is under house arrest. For a couple of years, he is under house arrest in Rome. Not exactly what Paul envisioned when he laid out a plan to go to Rome.

But you know what he tells us? In Philippians he tells us that while he's in Rome under house arrest, people are coming to him, even the praetorian guard, the imperial guard. It's reaching into the very network of Caesar, and Nero himself is being impacted by the gospel. These people are hearing the gospel being shared by Paul as they are around him day-to-day. While he's in Rome under house arrest, he writes what we call the prison epistles. He writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. All those things happened in a way that Paul never envisioned that they were going to happen. He had a plan. He proposed his plan, but God disposed another way.

What do we take away? Here's what we take away, I hope. Plan with a sense of anticipation and then joyfully yield your plans when they don't turn out as you think they should because God is still at work. I don't know about you, but I love the doctrine of the providence of God. The doctrine of the providence of God is simply the understanding of the truth as you look at your life and as you step back to reflect on your life and the choices in your life, even the disappointments in your life, that you see the fingerprints of God all over your life. You see how you have proposed but God is the one who disposes. You see how a sovereign God intervenes and interrupts and at times changes our plan and ultimately, as Paul says in Romans 8, has something better for us. For we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose. I say to you this morning for you to consider what is God doing in your life today. Consider the very fact that you're here as a part of God's divine providence in your life. Consider the fact that you're here and the gospel of the grace of God comes into your life today.

That gospel that says all of us have sinned and fallen short. None of us has the capacity, the ability, or even the will to live our life in such a way that we could ever achieve the glory of heaven. We just can't. God requires perfection. But you know what that gospel also says? That while all of us have sinned and fallen short, and that the wages of sin is death, the gospel tells us that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. My prayer is that God has you here this morning by divine providence, that he is putting his fingerprints on your life this morning so that you would simply hear and believe and respond to this glorious gospel and trust Jesus as your Savior this morning. Those of you that know Jesus as your Savior, that you would step back this morning and look at your life and say God, even in the midst of what I thought of and may even now think of as disappointments I am so glad that you are at work doing what only you can.

Let's pray. Father God, thank you for your grace. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you for your kindness to us Lord. Thank you for a man like Paul who lived his life in such a way that while he planned, he held his hands open so that you could redirect and change and move him. Here we are this morning. We are the recipients of that grace in his life. We're the recipients of that obedience on his part and we have the

glory of studying together your word that the Holy Spirit used Paul to give to us. So, thank you for that. Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his life. thank you for his death. Thank you for his resurrection. Thank you that this gospel comes to us. Lord, we pray even now if there is someone living within the hearing of my voice that has never put their trust in Jesus as their Savior that they would do it even now. Right in this moment, right where they're sitting, they would simply say yes, I believe that what Jesus did is enough. I believe that what he has done for me is enough and I trust him and him alone for the forgiveness of my sin and for the gift of eternal life. We thank you in Jesus's name, amen.