

Gospel Lessons for Life's Itinerary

Romans 15:22-28

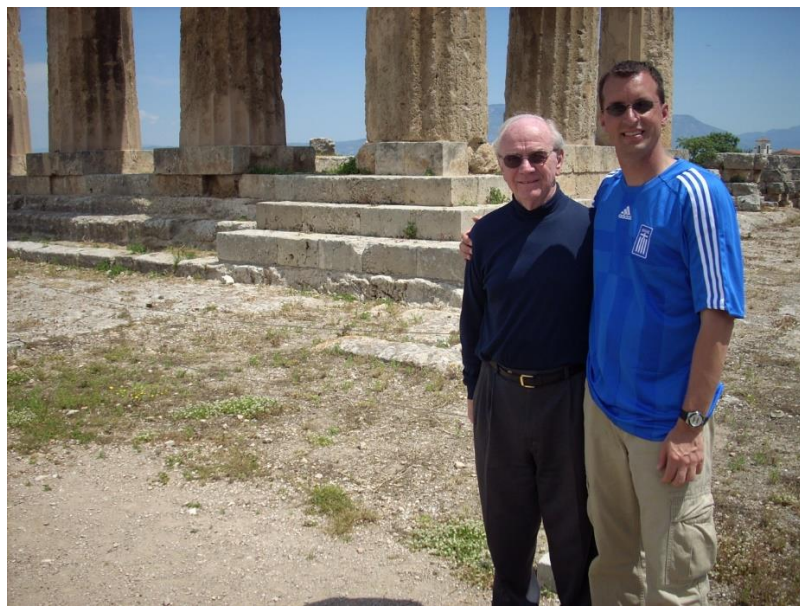
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How would you describe yourself? Homebody? Bags are packed, let's go? How many say, your home is your favorite destination? How many are road warrior types? Many of you probably are somewhere in between where it's great to be gone and then it's great to be home. *Aunty M, Aunty M, There's no place like home.*

I'm definitely on the love to travel side. For those of you like me, there is a wanderlust we have. We want to see things. Different things. Spaces. People. Culture. Different food...most of the time. Ask me about goat brain sometime.

This pandemic has really cramped our wanderlust. Now going to Costco feels like an adventure. While there I half expect to run into Rick Steves. So, the travel bug is strong but suppressed right now.

If you read my recent *1 Bethelonians* to you all, then you know that I recently lost my dear friend and travel companion, Dr. Wilbur Williams. Dr. Williams was an Old Testament professor, archaeologist, poet, and perhaps the godliest man I have ever known. I'll never forget going to the Israeli museum in Jerusalem and him pointing out artifacts under glass that he personally discovered on archaeological digs.



I'm not sure how many tours of Israel with church groups I did with him. I went to Egypt with him. We did a Steps of Paul tour through Greece together. Some of you were on those tours. Dr. Williams taught me so many things *on the road*. Yes, biblical history and archaeology, but so much about life—seeing him travel, sensing his love for God and people, observing his generosity firsthand, financial and relational. He was truly an amazing man. He called me his son, like son in the faith. Walking with him over the ruins of biblical history, I learned about life and manhood and faith.

That's the thing about travel. You don't really know people until you travel with them. When we are out of our comfort zones and the unexpected happens, the real us comes out. That is often fun and zany but sometimes not so fun. Today we are *on the road* with the Apostle Paul. We glimpse the way he lived his life in the travel itinerary of his life; what was important to him? How did he make plans while leaving room for God? I love sections of Scripture like 15:22-29 because they are so personal and they feel more like real life. It's a longer portion, so we will take it in parts. Listen to the traveler, Paul, explain first why he hasn't been to Rome yet.

"This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 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 (Romans 15:22-23 ESV).

No longer any room to work? Is he saying every person in Asia Minor is a Christian? Of course not. No more than everyone in Northwest Indiana is. As we saw last week, Paul's mission was trailblazing church planting. *No room* means the major urban centers each had a church planted, leadership established, and he viewed his mission to that part of the world complete.

Now he sets his gaze west. He has his eye on three places, each with a different purpose. *Jerusalem. Rome. Spain.* Sounds like a great tour, doesn't it? My bags are packed, let's go. But Paul is no tourist; he was commissioned by Jesus as the apostle to the Gentile world and each of these stops serve a different purpose and each provides challenging principles for all of us. First on the itinerary is Jerusalem.

Jerusalem: Poverty, Generosity, and Harmony

"At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia 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 ought also to be of service to them in material blessings" (Romans 15:25-27).

Paul writes Romans from the city of Corinth. Corinth is in modern-day Greece. My picture with Dr. Williams was in the ruins of Corinth. The Jerusalem church was in a time of famine. This may have been because of weather or it may have been the unintended consequences of the communal days of the early church. We don't know. But there was great material need there.

Paul's motivation is certainly charity but also ethnic harmony. Romans is largely written to Jewish and Gentile Christians at Rome who were not getting along. What better subtle challenge then to let them know that the Gentile Christians in Greece not only love their Jewish brethren but are generously giving money to meet their needs. *Hint, hint, Roman Church.* Love gives of itself and few things say "I love you" better than *cold, hard cash.*

Christian charity to the poor is a hallmark of God's people from the earliest days of the church. Remember in Acts 6 the apostles were involved in providing for the widows of the church. When Paul was commissioned to the Gentiles by Peter, James, and John, here's what they said, *"They asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do"* (Galatians 2:10). Compassion for the financial and material needs of the poor, especially the poor within God's family, is a critical component of any church or Christian ministry.

Here at Bethel Church, we act as a gateway for your giving to the needy in our community. You may not know people in need personally, but we have channels through which we can bless folks. Obviously, our Benevolent Fund is for this express purpose. We regularly host NIPSCO days and a whole team of folks meet with community people and we help them pay off that monthly bill. We do many other significant helps like this. We are particularly thankful for Stephanie Ward who provides leadership for this ministry. Also, through our missions fund, we give to the global poor. This is primarily through agencies that work in these regions and we can resource them and are happy to do so.

Here's the question, are we happy to do so? How important is joy in giving? When it comes to financial giving, is it something we have to do or something we want to do? Paul says it must be both. *"...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 material blessings"* (Romans 15:27 emphasis mine).

Where did the church start? Jerusalem. With whom did it start? Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians have been graciously included in the tree, grafted into it. But the roots are solidly in Jerusalem and Jewish Christians. On this basis, Paul argues Gentile Christians have an obligation to give to the impoverished Jewish Christians. They have received immeasurable spiritual blessings from Jerusalem and therefore ought to share their material blessings with Jerusalem. It was an obligation.

But that's not the whole story.

"For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor...For they were pleased to do it..." (Romans 15:26-27 emphasis mine). Were they obligated? Yes. Were they happy to do it? Yes. This is the reality of all giving to God in support of gospel ministry—it is an obligation. It is the financial response to the spiritual blessing. Spend some time in 2 Corinthians 8-9 for more on the obligation to give to God.

Pastor Steve, are you saying we must give financially to God? Yeah, but it's like asking if you have to kiss your wife. Yes, but then there is another side to that question. The pleasure side. Paul highlights that twice here. These Grecian Christians were pleased to do it. Happy to do it. Excited to do it. Why? Because they treasured the spiritual blessing of the gospel so much. When God is treasured here (heart), giving to God is a happiness. Money and heart are so closely aligned that Jesus said, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). And, where your heart is, your treasure will be also. In life they fly together.

So, when giving to God is without happiness, it indicates our hearts are not treasuring the spiritual blessing of salvation, forgiveness of sins, or eternal life. As the spiritual treasure is elevated, the joy in giving financial treasure is elevated as well. These Gentile Christians owed it to the Jerusalem Christians AND they happily gave. It was their pleasure. This is what lies behind this key verse on giving:

"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

God loves the cheerful giver because the gladness in giving reveals a gladness in God, even more than gladness in holding on to money. For most people, money is pretty high on the treasure list. We only give it away to something treasured higher than money. Over the years we have talked about this as our "oblitunity." We have to and we want to.

What would Paul say about the generosity culture of Bethel Church? Or perhaps individually, to your giving? To the poor? To Christian ministry and gospel work? To missions? Would Paul write, *Oh, the Bethelonians, they were so pleased to give!* Let's ask God to increase our treasuring of what we have spiritually in Christ so that our giving feels less like an obligation and more like the pleasurable opportunity it is.

First stop on the itinerary? Jerusalem. Next stop? Rome.

Rome: Fellowship and Sponsorship

"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" (Romans 15:24).

Why Rome? It was the capital of the world; the center of everything. Have you heard, *all roads lead to Rome*? With an urban strategy for gospel mission, what better city than Rome? This was the most influential city in the world for a thousand years. He had never been there. But Paul was no tourist. He didn't want to see the sights, he wanted to see the saints!

He has two priorities. The first is *fellowship*.

"Once I have enjoyed your company for awhile." Isn't it great how as Christians we have this bond between us? Even Christians we just met. Haven't you been on a trip, and one way or another discover that the other family in the hotel or at the beach are Christians? Instantly there's a unity and friendship. A local church is where this is enjoyed to the max. In three weeks, we will have an entire message on Christian affection from Romans 16:16 and the famous holy Christian kiss. Stay tuned and get ready to pucker up.

Paul's second reason is support for the next leg of his missionary journeys. He wants to go to Spain. Spain was the edge of the known world and it's the third leg of the itinerary. What I want you to see here is that Paul views the Roman church as a base of support and operations. He hoped they would equip him, outfit him, support him, and send him. He isn't bashful in saying so.

As we have opportunity as a church or even individuals to support Christian workers, here is the paradigm. John writes in 3 John concerning Christian workers, *"You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God"* (3 John 6). Gospel ministry has always been dependent on God's people supporting it. Certainly with prayers, but also the kind of practical support that meets practical needs. Let's keep our eyes open for divine opportunities to do this. This brings us to our third stop on the itinerary: Spain.

Spain

"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.... When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you" (Romans 15:24, 28).

Why would Paul want to go to Spain? Today, we know the world globally, spherically; back then, Spain was the edge of the known western world. The farthest frontier. It was a place of commerce and would produce a couple future emperors of Rome. So, it was civilized but

west of Spain is what? Ocean. In terms of the gospel mission, it was as far as you could go. With this, let's transition to lessons we learn from Paul's itinerary. The first one is obvious.

Learning from Paul's Itinerary

See what Gospel courage looks like

We see in this the Apostle Paul's holy ambition and gospel courage. It's inspiring. *I'm going to Jerusalem to meet needs of the church there. I'm going to Rome. Never been there, but can't wait. Then I'm going to Spain. Edge of the world. Let's see what God does!*

I wonder what represents Spain in your life. That challenging place or person that only for Jesus would you consider seeking to evangelize. But for Jesus you will. That's Paul. It was a dangerous journey; an uncertain journey. How will he make a go of it so far from the support structures of Jerusalem and even Rome? That's the life of faith that propels God's people into the uncomfortable and the uncertain.

What or who is your "Spain"? Who or what might God be calling you to go to, to reach out to, to do the uncomfortable, even the dangerous, in Jesus' name? David Livingstone went to Africa with the gospel. For this reason, Jim Elliot and the other four missionaries went to the Waodoni in Ecuador only to be speared to death. There's example after example. Here in our comfortable Midwest middle class American church, let this challenge each of us to something bigger, something risky. Where's your Spain? Who's your Spaniard?

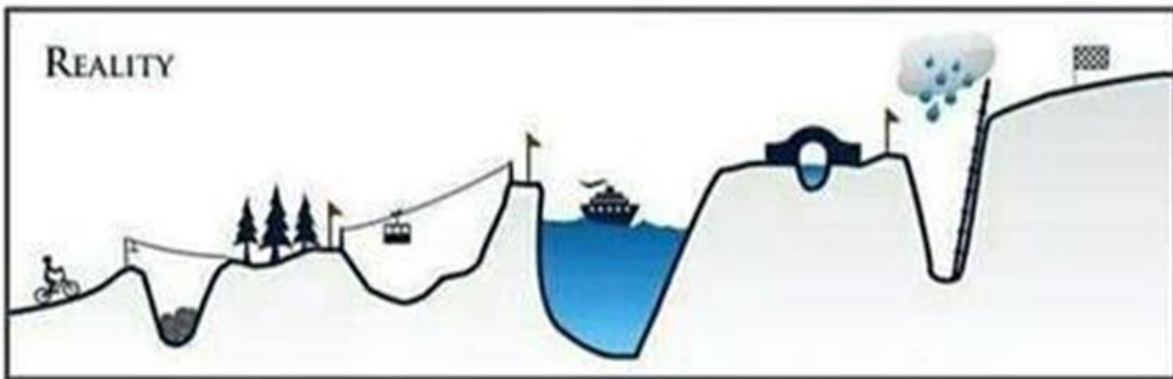
Paul's ambition challenges us from getting comfortable or settling into the status quo. Church family, are we content with what we've done thus far? Who have we reached? Where are we at? Or do our missional eyes see farther horizons and are we ready to go where we've never been? God, where's our Spain? Who's our Spaniard?

We make our plans, God directs our steps

So, what happened to Paul? Did his trip to Rome go as planned? He made it to Jerusalem with the gift. The book of Acts tells us that after arriving there, a mob scene ensued, and Paul was arrested by the Romans for his own safety. There was a plot to kill him, so a Roman cohort of soldiers escorted him to Caesarea on the Mediterranean. There he spent two years in prison and only got out because as a Roman citizen he could appeal to Caesar. So, off he went under arrest to Rome.

Only this didn't go well either. They were caught on the sea in a terrible storm. They had no food for days. They gave up ever surviving. But then they shipwrecked on Malta. There Paul was bitten by a poisonous viper. He didn't die. He didn't even get sick. Eventually, they left and finally made it to Rome. Only there he remained under arrest for two more years and that's how the book of Acts ends. Paul told the Romans, *I'm coming to see you*. Did it happen the way he expected? Not at all.

Isn't that how things go in life? We make our plans. *I'm going to Rome*. Our Rome may be our vision of our ideal future or some achievement or healthy family and kids and whatever. We see a straight happy line ahead. What happens? Life happens. The unexpected. The undesired. Can you relate to this?



That was Paul. He writes Romans in 57 AD. He doesn't get there for three years. Most of that time he was sitting in a prison! Did he make it to Spain? Scripture doesn't tell us, and we don't know for sure. One early church writer said he did. Here's the kicker. He looks forward to going to Rome in 57 AD and as early as seven years later, he is martyred in Rome. That wasn't on the itinerary.

Are you OCD about your plans? Your life? How everything is going to be? Then you get divorced. Then your child has a long-term health issue. Then you lose your job. Then you get cancer. Do any of us have death on our life itinerary?

We need to learn from the life itinerary of the Apostle Paul. Dream big. Make big plans for your life. Go big for God! Young people, I think many of you think too small. You think American dream: buy this, live there. But what would a God-sized vision for your life inspire you to do? I urge you, to dream big, ambitious gospel dreams.

But all of us must hold our plans with an open hand. We don't know what lies around the corner. But we do know that all things work together for good, for those who love God. We know that he will never leave us nor forsake us. And we know Jesus is with us, even to the end of the age.

Our certainty in God's presence and provision should propel us into the uncomfortable and the difficult. It assures us in the twists and contortions of life. How do we do it? How do we make it? By faith, knowing that our travel companion on the itinerary of life loves us,

intercedes to the Father for us, and provides us with all we need on every stop along the way. His name is Jesus.

So, dream big, make your plans, pack your bags, and buckle up on this great gospel adventure of life.

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