

Prayer

Great and marvellous Holy Spirit, we wonder at Your power and effectiveness. You, who made the Universe, build us up as we work for the Kingdom. You who spoke through the prophets, reveal the secrets of God and uncover His love in our hearts. You who sustained Jesus in His ministry, heal our souls in the midst of distress. Come, Holy Spirit, and according to Your deep knowledge of our souls, do that work in us which no mortal power can do. We yield ourselves to You Lord God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Spent time in prayer, setting different aspects of your life before the Lord and awaiting His inspiration. Give sufficient time and space for this to let the Lord know your true heart, and your true feelings about what is happening to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the fellowship groups in your church.** Churches have different ways of putting people together for regular fellowship, bible study and prayer. Pray for the different groups and activities in your church fulfilling this need.
- Continue to pray for the situation in Libya and North Africa, pray that there will not be any further war or violence
- Give thanks to God for those who support you and pray for you; and if you feel that no one does this, then ask the Lord to guide you to find this support

Meditation

Be honest with yourself and God;
Your faith is never just your own;
It is yours to share throughout your life,
Or else you do not have it.

You alone say 'Yes' to Christ,
To join with those who say the same.

You alone worship Him who made you,
Together with the saints who know Him!

You alone have a call from the Lord,
To work with others for the good of all!

You alone receive God's blessings,
So these may be shared with those in need.

You alone can perceive God's truth,
And do what's right within this world.

You alone read God's Word and pray,
To share with others His kindness and love.

Be honest with yourself and God;
Your faith is never just your own..

Bible passage - Romans 15:22-33

²² This is the reason why I have so often been prevented from coming to see you; ²³ but now, as I no longer have a role in these parts, and since it has been my desire for many years to pay you a visit, ²⁴ I hope to come on my way to Spain and then be sent on my way after enjoying your fellowship for a little while.

²⁵ Now, though, I am on my way to Jerusalem to bring assistance to the saints. ²⁶ Macedonia and Achaia have decided to share their own resources in order to help the poor amongst God's people in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were happy to do this, indeed, they felt under obligation to them; for the Gentiles have now shared in their spiritual blessings, and so they ought to help them with material blessings. ²⁸ So, when I have finished this and have handed over what has been collected, I shall set off for Spain via Rome. ²⁹ I know that by coming to you I will come with the fullest blessing of Christ.

³⁰ I appeal to you, friends, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to help me by praying for me to God ³¹ so that I may be saved from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints. ³² Then I will be able to come to you in joy, by the will of God, and have a refreshing time with you! ³³ May the peace of God be with you all. Amen.

Bible Study

Review

Now, at last, we have a chance to delve into Paul's thoughts. Why has he written to the church at Rome in the first place? Why does he appear to speak to them so carefully? What is going on in Paul's life at the time of the writing of the letter? What does he want from the church at Rome? What are his plans for the immediate future?

Although this passage of Romans may appear dull at first reading, it gives answers to all these questions. We learned at the beginning of the letter that Paul wanted to go to Rome, but it is hard to say whether his earlier comments about this (1:10f.) are just expressions of goodwill. In this passage, the plan to go to Rome appears more fixed, it was scheduled for after his visit to Jerusalem. As Paul says more about this, we must be willing to read carefully and interpret what he says, because when we connect this passage with what we know of Paul's plans from other letters and from 'Acts', we can come to a number of interesting conclusions.

Firstly, this passage reveals Paul's intention to go to Jerusalem first to deliver a gift (15:25f.), presumably of money, to the poor of the church at Jerusalem. Paul had been working on this for a number of years (see 1 Corinthians 16:13, 2 Corinthians 9:1f. etc.). There was great need in Jerusalem for a number of reasons. For example, believers were being persecuted for their faith by family members, and in addition, Jerusalem remained a Jewish city and Judaism had decided to reject both Jesus and the emerging Christian church. Such rejection meant that many Jerusalem Christians lived in hardship. Paul therefore asked prosperous Gentile Christians living elsewhere in the Empire to be generous to the Jerusalem church, to whom they owed a great debt of spiritual gratitude (15:27, see 2 Corinthians 9:5).

Secondly, Paul explained that after going to Jerusalem, he wanted to come to Rome (see also 1:8-15), and use Rome as a stopping off point before going further to Spain. This is the only place in Scripture where Paul mentions any plan concerning going to Spain. Clearly, Paul had done a great work in Asia (what we know now as Eastern Turkey), and also Macedonia and Greece, but he felt this had been concluded (see Acts 20:36f. and 15:28). He also knew that the church in Rome was already established, so there was no need for groundbreaking evangelistic work there.

Nevertheless, the more we read today's passage, the more we discover that Paul wanted the church at Rome to be more than a stopping off place; he wanted it to be his future base. Now it should have been clear from the whole letter that Paul did not want to be the leader in Rome. Paul believed in churches that were independent in ministry but tied together in practical love and support for the Gospel. His comments on the generosity of the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (15:26) were designed to remind his readers of the importance of mutual support, offering a strong hint about what he would want from them when he came. He wanted a base from which to travel further in evangelism; a place where people would support his endeavours both in prayer and in practical support. This had to be Rome. From there, Paul would be able to go further towards southern Gaul (France) or Spain; no-one knows why he chose Spain!

Lastly, verse 30 is a direct appeal to the Romans for this support. Paul asks for prayer, and also support for his whole ministry, including his safety in Jerusalem and subsequent visit to them (15:30). Paul adds that as a base, Rome would have to be a place where he could be 'refreshed' (15:32). Here, the word for 'refresh' means something like 'recuperation' or 'gathering energy', that is, preparing for what had to be done.

Certainly, Paul needed Rome's support, and he was hoping for much from them in the years ahead! As the book of Acts describes, Paul eventually needed a great deal of help from Christians in Rome (see Acts 24-28), although he was never able to travel further.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Paul's past
- Paul's present
- Paul's future

Going Deeper

We will look at this passage now from the point of view of Paul; his past, present, and future. Certainly, the letter to the Romans was a milestone in Christian writing, but the circumstances of its writing remains fascinating for all who care to read carefully to find the details and connections which make passages such as this so interesting.

Paul's past

Writing to the church at Rome was not something Paul would have done if he had not received some information already about the church there which indicated that it was a potential place of support. Paul had undertaken a number of missionary journeys around the north eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, but clearly wanted to be involved in going much further. We should remember that the Roman Empire at that time was already established in Britain and quite far north in the continent of Europe, and someone as knowledgeable as Paul would have been aware of this 'growth area' in regions of the world where people could visit and preach the Gospel. His vision was never local, and always global. In some versions of the Bible you will come across the expression 'the fullness of the Gentiles' in some parts of Paul's writings, and it is only partly reflected in our passage today (see verse 29, 'the fullest blessings of Christ'), by which Paul always meant the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. There is no doubt that Paul was a missionary – explorer!

At various points in his past missionary exploits, Paul had felt it necessary to go back to Jerusalem for some significant consultation or event. For example, he went to Jerusalem for the famous 'Council' under the chairmanship of Peter, where it was decided that Gentile Christians would not have to keep the general range of Jewish ritual law (see Acts 15). In his most recent journeys, he had become aware of impending tragedy at Jerusalem, for the wealth of the city was wrapped up in the workings of the Temple. When Christian Jews were banned from it because they were regarded as 'apostate' (unbelievers), their own families would often reject them, and their personal means of support would have been ended. For this reason, there were many poor Christians within the church at Jerusalem.

The churches in Macedonia and Achaia had completed their gift, and it appears that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans either at the point of departing for Jerusalem to give the gift, or on his way (15:25). The significance of the gift was of great importance for Paul, because it was probably the first joint church charitable effort ever achieved.

Paul's present

However, Paul was by no means certain that the gift would be received. His request for prayer made in his letter to the people of the church at Rome gives away his real concern. He asks 'that I may be saved from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints'.

Paul knew well that when he converted to Christianity, he had made it his business to persecute Christians and even kill them if opportunity arose. He knew there were others who did this around Jerusalem and Judea apart from himself, and he probably knew who some of them were. In travelling to Jerusalem with a large financial gift, he would be in great personal danger, together with those who would travel with him (see Acts 20:4f.).

Secondly, Paul was concerned that the Jerusalem church would accept the gift that he brought. Tensions continued within the church of the time about the divisions between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, as was clear from Paul's own partly unresolved agonising over the future of God's promises to the Jewish people in the letter (chapters 9-11). Paul was regarded by some at Jerusalem as someone who had not only converted to Christianity from being a zealous Jew, but one who as a Jew, had renounced his circumcision and virtually become a Gentile! Some did not appreciate it, as is clear from what happened when Paul did in fact reach Jerusalem with the gifts (Acts 21:1-15).

Paul's eyes, however, were always on the rightness before God of what was to be done, and he placed his confidence in the Lord, whilst making plans for what would happen in the future.

Paul's future

We have already seen how it was Paul's intent to make Rome a base for his further exploits of evangelism into Spain (see above). At each stage of Paul's own missionary journeys, he had waited upon the Holy Spirit for the right time to go about what he believed God wanted of him (e.g. see Acts 16:9f.), and if he was to travel from Jerusalem to Rome after delivering the gift, then he needed to be sure that the church there would support him not as a leader, but certainly as an apostle with the widest possible vision of the Kingdom of God and the Church. He looked forward to a 'time of refreshing' (15:33) before the next step of his journey to Spain.

The truth is that when Paul went to Jerusalem, his presence did create trouble. We do not know for sure whether he managed to deliver the gift successfully, but Acts records a warm welcome for Paul by James and other leaders in Jerusalem. Before anything further could happen, Paul was advised to go the Temple himself and perform ritual purification in order to show that he was still a proper 'Jew', albeit a Christian Jew (Acts 21:17-26). His very presence in the Temple courtyard was sufficient to spark a riot, from which Paul was extracted by Roman soldiers and taken into captivity for his own safe keeping (Acts 21:27f.) Making a long story short, this led to Paul's trial before Felix and then King Agrippa, before his appeal to the Emperor which led to his deportation to Rome! (Acts 23-28)

It is quite possible that Paul made his appeal to the Emperor, thus ensuring his transportation to Rome (Acts 25:11) in the firm belief that he would be successful in appeal to the Emperor, and thus able to proceed from Rome according to his original plan. In the end, as Acts records, he was held in interminable house arrest, and tradition records his death in Rome before he could embark upon any further missionary work.

Nevertheless, Paul's careful words in this passage today were designed as an appeal to the church at Rome to ensure that he was welcomed there; and when he eventually did arrive, he was indeed accepted, initially by both the Jews and the Christians in Rome (Acts 28:17f.), though his preaching soon polarised opinions about the Gospel (Acts 28:24,25)! He remained there, however, under military house arrest: and that is all we know from Scripture!

Application

It is fascinating to see how this passage of Scripture opens up a whole world of understanding about what was happening in Paul's life at the time of the writing of the letter. It is also interesting to see how what the great St Paul wanted was not what God eventually allowed to happen. Paul's heart was 'in the right place', and his judgement sound, but the troubles and evils in the world did not so much thwart God's plans as Paul's expectation of his own involvement of these plans. At the end of the first century, other evangelists had travelled further across the world than Paul could have envisaged, and many of the established churches around the Mediterranean Sea became great centres of missionary endeavour or Christian learning.

Our passage today contains evidence of the movement and change that is characteristic of God's work in the world, for which we will only be prepared if we, like Paul, are spiritually aware of what our Lord wants of us. Things may not work out as we have thought, but this should never dishearten us in our quest to be obedient to what the Lord has revealed to us about what we should do and when. In addition, Paul highlights the need for prayer support when facing critical circumstances of ministry; prayer that needs to be asked for and arranged, not merely presumed.

Rome did become the 'mother' church of Christianity, largely because it was the church at the centre of the Roman Empire, but it did not claim any pre-eminence until later in the second century, when the church had expanded to the point where it was necessary to establish 'lines of authority' in the general structure of the developing church. Paul's letter to the Roman church was prophetic of its role in years to come.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you ever felt that you had a burden to do something for the Lord, and yet you were prevented from doing it? Share any experiences in your group.
2. Do you think Paul was trying to manipulate the church at Rome into supporting him?

3. How can the 'peace of God' manifest itself to you when all manner of things are happening around you which make life seem uncertain?

Personal comments by author

Do you make plans for the future which make sense of your past, or do you try to make plans for the future which enable you to escape from your past (or present)? Our Lord is a God of consistency and also of change, and this is shown in the way that his plans for people often turn out to make sense of their past as well as looking forward to the future.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider thinking through your own plans with this in mind, and see whether you have missed something that the Lord wants to do in your life.*
- *What does the Lord plan for His people in the world? You may say that this is surely something we cannot know, but surely, unless the Lord reveals this through people, bit by bit, at least, then His future will not come, and we must be faithful to what He calls us to do.*

Final Prayer

God of mercy and of grace, do something new in us we pray. Take us from where we are and use us in Your great plan for the salvation of the world. If there is something we must do, challenge us; and if there are things we should refrain from doing, stop us in our tracks. May we come to know Your touch and grow in obedience to Your Word. AMEN
