



WHEN OUR PROGRAM ISN'T CHRIST'S PLAN

Catalog No. 7174
Romans 1:8-15
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January 21st, 2001

A young man whom I disciplined during my days as college pastor at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto called me recently to say that he and his wife could come up to Brentwood and visit us. We dropped all our plans and invited them to come for dinner and stay the night at our house. This young man, Brent Becker, is now the high school pastor at PBC Palo Alto. He is discipling his seniors, teaching them the same truths we went through together, focusing in particular on Romans 1-8, the crowning passage of the New Testament.

Being with Brent and hearing all this brought me indescribable joy. I love studying and teaching the Word of God and discipling men. I used to be able to devote all my time to that as a pastor, but my God has called me out of vocational pastoring and into a new position as a VP in a firm here in Silicon Valley. My job is exciting, but I'd much rather be pastoring. As far as my work life is concerned, I have a sense of bittersweetness. I would love to be devoted as a pastor in my working hours again, but my program isn't Christ's plan right now.

Today, we're going to talk about deep disappointments, when our program clashes with Christ's plan. Let's take a journey together and learn about God's sovereignty in our lives. Think about a deep disappointment, an area where your program just hasn't been Christ's plan. Maybe it was a relationship that you were certain was God's gift in your life, but that person went away and the relationship ended. Maybe your career plans have been foiled in the dotcom meltdown. Maybe a ministry you were convinced had your name on it has disappeared. Think about your disappointment, that crash between your hopes and dreams and God's sovereign plans. Together we will observe what God did in the apostle Paul's life and learn some encouraging truth to help us along our way.

Our text is one of those passages that come at either the beginning or the end of an epistle, verses that seem to be made up of merely personal notes from the writer to his audience, phrases that we think we don't need to pay much attention to. It's easy to skip over these "sleeper" passages to get to the real meat in Romans 8:16-17, the theme verses of the book. But, as we will see, there is much in these verses that can salve the disappointed heart.

Paul's Audience: A World Famous Church (1:8)

Before we proceed, it is essential to understand the context underlying these verses. During the years 47-57 A.D., Paul had been involved in the great missionary work to which God had called him during the three missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor. The apostle and his team had been used by God to plant churches all around the perimeter of the Aegean Sea during those exciting days of the early church. But, during the year 57 A.D., news reached Asia Minor that the mother church in Jerusalem was suffering through a terrible famine. Upon hearing this news, the young Gentile converts in these new churches collected a love offering for the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Paul was appointed to carry the sackful of coins from the Gentile churches down to Jerusalem. Much of the latter part of 57 had been taken up by gathering that love gift meant to bless the Jerusalem church.

By the time Paul set sail for Jerusalem, the wintry weather had made sea travel too dangerous, so the apostle decided to stop in Corinth and winter there for three months at his friend Gaius' house. The apostle had that time to reflect on his life and mission, knowing he was bound for Jerusalem to deliver that sackful of coins sitting on his desk, and the possibility that he would be imprisoned and possibly even killed in Jerusalem. The religious leaders there wanted to get their hands on this man whom they considered a traitor to their brand of religion.

That winter must have been bittersweet for Paul. For ten years or more he had been nursing a dream of preaching the gospel in the greatest city of his world. But the Lord had shut the door on that dream time and time again. Now Paul was heading in the opposite direction — east, not west, right into the jaws of the lions in Jerusalem. So, in these quiet winter months, at the urging of the Spirit of God, he wrote a letter to the church in Rome. This letter explained the heart of the gospel of God. It was the message he would have preached had he been allowed to go there. He wrote so that the centrally located church in Rome would have a clear understanding of the gospel in the event that he met his end in Jerusalem. Some scholars say that this book, which sets out the very essence of the gospel, is Paul's last will and testament.

The apostle was writing to a world famous church, as we will see. Romans 1:8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you

all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. (NASB)

The church at Rome had an interesting history. The first hint in the New Testament of the founding of the church there is given in Acts 2:10. Luke notes that among some of the foreigners in attendance on the day of Pentecost were “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.” Church historians surmise that some of these Jewish and Gentile Romans listened to Peter’s dramatic gospel message at Pentecost and returned to Rome as newborn believers in Jesus Christ. These new believers founded the first Christian church in Rome, and the new fellowship thrived. By 57 A.D., it was a world-renowned, vibrant church in that citadel of power, filled with believers whose faith was being proclaimed throughout the whole world.

What was even more amazing about the church in Rome was that it had grown strong in faith without direct apostolic influence. On their own, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit alone, this group of believers had grown and prospered. Paul watched this from afar and marveled at them. One of the first things he tells them reveals the longing of his great heart.

Paul’s Longing: To Go To Rome (1:9-12)

For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine.

Only one other passage in the New Testament reveals Paul’s heartache as intimately as these verses. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul writes that he had been burdened excessively beyond his strength, so that for a time he despaired even of life.

Notice two things in verse 9. First, Paul solemnly calls on God to be his witness. He writes, “For God, whom I serve in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness...” These are weighty words. Not once in my life have I felt as though I could rightly call upon God to be my witness. Think of the boundless integrity behind the words of a man or woman who in good conscience can call on God to bear witness to the truth of something they are about to say. Here Paul is calling on God to witness something quite remarkable: “how unceasingly I make mention of you...” God could witness it because God was the only other one privy to the apostle’s prayers.

Secondly, note the word “unceasingly.” What does that mean? I asked my in-house expert on prayer, the person who teaches me how to pray, my wife Blythe. She thought about this and suggested that unceasing prayer is when God burdens your heart with something

or someone so that you find yourself talking with God at various times throughout the day about it. It is like the “home” that your thoughts always return to, even when you are distracted by something else. It has a constant tug on your heart. Paul clearly feels that burden from God for this church in Rome.

In my own life, I have a daily prayer that is very near and dear to my heart. It is the burden of my heart, really. Every night when we are putting our children to bed and praying with them and for them, I pray three things for each child: “O Lord, may this child know how much their mother loves them, how much their father loves them, and most of all, how much you love them; and may they love you with their whole hearts all the days of their lives.” This is my burden in prayer, the passion of my father’s heart for my children.

Listen to the heart behind the words of the apostle’s prayer: “always in my prayers making request, if perhaps...now...at last...by the will of God...I may succeed in coming to you.” The words, “long to see them,” speak volumes about that crash between Paul’s program and Christ’s plan, and it speaks plainly of his personal heartbreak.

How did Paul handle his disappointment? He prayed! Night and day and day and night he prayed to be allowed to visit Rome. But God did not send him there. Even though Paul was the confirmed apostle to the Gentiles, and Rome was the unquestioned capital of all things Gentile in the world at that time, God did not send him there. Even though he was dying to go to Rome, his passions and his heart’s desires seeming to be totally aligned with God’s calling and purposes in his life, God still did not send him to that place. He must have struggled in his soul with this enigma for ten years or more. Listen to the heartbreaking longing in his words: “if perhaps now...at long last...by the will of God...I may succeed in coming to you.” In the midst of his heartbreak, Paul continued to pray and pray and pray.

One other important thing: Paul didn’t muscle his way to Rome contrary to God’s will. He just kept praying. How different this is from the Silicon Valley way. If you are an executive in Silicon Valley and you need to go somewhere, you find a way to do it, no ifs, ands or buts. You have to strive to do whatever it takes to get where you have to go. But Paul’s wisdom was so much greater. This was the crucial test of faith and will for the apostle. Would he get to Rome somehow, or would he pray? Well, as we can see, he prayed. May the same be said of us.

And it was Jesus Christ himself that sustained him in his prayers. Paul learned a valuable lesson through prayer: he learned to be content with being intimate with Jesus Christ himself. The simple reality is this: it is far more satisfying to know Christ and enjoy him than it is to merely know his plans. He would rather walk with us through the dark valleys than simply give us a

map and send us on our way alone. Paul came to know Christ, which is the best of his will.

But perhaps Paul also got used to another thing that we learn in following Christ: His will is full of surprises. Sometimes it is even humorous. Paul White came to Christ at a revival meeting in Australia. His passion was to become a missionary doctor in Africa. After he had qualified as a doctor, he and his wife Mary flew to what is now Tanzania to be medical missionaries. But then the crash occurred between Paul White's passion and Christ's plan. His wife Mary was bed-ridden with a terrible illness for eight months. Then Paul's own problem of asthma weakened him so much so that his orderlies had to transport him from his home to the hospital in a wheelbarrow. The great missionary doctor was now little more than a sick patient. He was forced to send for a replacement. Soon after his replacement arrived, his wife was miraculously healed. Paul was deeply refreshed. Everything seemed to be getting back on schedule. Then they went home on furlough, and another crash occurred. Paul developed a boil on his bottom, making it painful for him even to walk. Once again, missionary doctoring was out of the question. All he could do was sit in a special chair with a hole cut out of the seat. Sitting in that chair, afflicted like Job, all his plans dashed again, Paul White began to write. This launched a fifty-year writing ministry. His *Jungle Doctor* adventure series and some eighty other titles have shared truths about Christ in nearly ninety languages. Sometimes God has to put a boil on a strategic place to slow us down enough so that he can have his way!

The apostle Paul longed to go to Rome to share his spiritual gifts as an apostle, so that this church that did not have apostolic influence could be firmly established. He says so plainly in verses 11-12: "For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine." They needed Paul's unique constellation of gifts of teaching, shepherding and wisdom to help ensure that their foundation was strong. And yet the great apostle was humble enough to know that he needed them as well. In the shadow of the corruption and ugliness of Imperial Rome, their great faith would be a huge blessing to him, and their strength of spirit would no doubt encourage him that the church would thrive long after he was taken home.

These verses contain great wisdom about the truth of any ministry: we need each other. The smallest can encourage the greatest. In a very profound sense we are a part of each other. We have a saying of our wall at home that perfectly summarizes the kind of healthy church life that Paul wants for the Roman church: *In things essential, unity. In things nonessential, diversity. And in all things, love.*

In verses 9-12 then, we learn how much Paul longed

to go to Rome. But he also felt a huge responsibility to visit that church.

Paul's Responsibility: To Preach the Gospel to Gentiles in Rome and Anywhere Else (1:13-15)

By verse 13, we see how the apostle's passion to visit them and experience all this richness of the life of Christ together with them had actually crossed over into the planning stage. Paul writes:

And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. (1:13)

Paul's longing had given birth to specific plans to visit them, but all of his plans had been thwarted. His program had crashed against Christ's plans. In verse 13 we see the surprising nature of God's plan working mysteriously beyond the apostle's passion and planning. Why didn't God send him to Rome? It seems that even the passions and plan of a called apostle were different than the mysterious and surprising plan of Jesus Christ.

An interesting question to ask in connection with verse 13 is, Who was thwarting the apostle from getting to Rome? Modern Christian novelists would see in this a sinister plot. They would say that Satan surely thwarted Paul's plans, afflicting him with territorial spirits. But that would be wrong. I'm convinced that our Lord Jesus Christ himself prevented Paul from reaching Rome, for reasons that we will see.

In the final two verses we observe Paul as a man entirely set apart for the responsibility of proclaiming the great news of God. Here we see another side of Paul's passion to travel to Rome. His first desire was to travel to the city as an apostle to help establish their church, but his second was to preach there, as a man set apart for the gospel of God, the great news to any and all that would hear. His passionate heart must have dreamed night after night about the possibilities of preaching in the great Forum in Rome. His mind must have been filled with visions of preaching to a multinational and multicultural audience in the heart of the Empire. But, like all great evangelists, he wanted to go to Rome not for his own sake, nor for any glory which might accrue to him, but because of his deep and abiding debt of love for the lost ones who would hear his great news. Paul bore a debt, something he owed to the Gentiles of every stripe and nationality. He wanted to travel to Rome for their sakes, that they might hear this greatest news any human will ever hear. How his heart must have been breaking at the seemingly lost opportunities that passed him by each day he was not preaching in the rarified air of Rome.

Look at what he says to them in verses 14-15, in a literal translation of the Greek:

I am one who owes a debt, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the great news to you also who are in Rome. (1:14-15)

The apostle begins verse 14 with a solemn self-description. He says, literally, "I am one who owes a debt." This is a fascinating self-appraisal. Paul is saying that he owes to the Gentiles in general, and the Romans in particular, a debt that he needs to discharge: the treasury of heavenly truth that had been entrusted to him in the precious gospel he preached. But that gospel contained nuggets of pure gold given to Paul by God and meant especially for the Gentiles — God's truth meant for a specifically Gentile audience. Paul was merely the driver of the Wells Fargo wagon delivering the goods from the Sender to the receivers. This was his great burden and responsibility — to preach to all Gentiles. Therefore, he was eager to preach the gospel to those who were in Rome.

Just like that sackful of coins sitting on Paul's desk, raised by Christians in Asia Minor and meant for Christians in Jerusalem, to be delivered by Paul the apostle, so Paul had a heart full of eternal truth given by God to him to be spread far and wide to the Gentiles. He must have awakened every morning feeling this burden of delivering the eternal goods. But, for some surprising reason, God had thwarted him at every turn. Paul's program and his specific scheduling and mapping had crashed against Christ's plan.

Why did God hold back his divinely appointed messenger on so critical a mission? And why does Jesus Christ seem to often thwart our hopes and dreams, even when they appear to be aligned with his kingdom's purposes, when they seem to make perfect sense in light of everything that we can see?

Conclusion: Oh to See the Sovereign Genius of Jesus Christ!

Sometimes the answer is right in front of us but we can't see it unless God opens our eyes. Look at the page in front of you, the page in your Bible that we have been studying. The answer is right before your eyes. Do you see it yet?

The answer can be seen in every word and every verse of the book of Romans. Had Paul been allowed by Jesus Christ to visit Rome during the years from 47-57 A.D., he would have preached his heart out. The crowds would have marveled, and the Roman air would have sparkled for an instant with the mighty proclamation of the great news of God. Then the sparkle would have vanished into the dust of history. Had Paul traveled to Rome before 57 A.D., only the Romans would have heard the great news he so masterfully set

down in Romans 1-8. But because Jesus Christ forbade him to visit Rome, because Jesus Christ seemed to turn a deaf ear to all of his passionate prayers that he might go to Rome, Paul found himself sitting in a chair in Gaius' house in the city of Corinth during the winter of 57-58 A.D., painstakingly writing out the most logical and compelling presentation of the great news of Jesus Christ in the history of the world. Had Paul not written this letter, perhaps St. Augustine would never have read that scroll that day in the garden and come to Christ. Had these words never been penned, Martin Luther might not have been led to discover the truths that fueled the Reformation. Had Paul visited Rome and not written this letter, there is a good chance we would not be sitting here this morning studying the Bible.

Paul had in mind the revival of Rome and the converts of his day. Jesus Christ had in mind the revival of many cities and whole countries, winning converts the world over for two thousand years. Paul's vision was limited, and consequently, so were his prayers. How could he have known when his passion crashed against Christ's plan, that Christ's plan was far greater than anything even his passionate mind could envision?

Oh that each of us might seize this precious truth, that we might yield our passions and programs to the sovereign genius of Jesus Christ for our lives, that he might have full rein to live out his life through us in whatever way he pleases! May we not grow weary when our passionate prayers for our lives or the lives of others seem to go unheeded. Let us keep praying and yielding, and letting our Lord Jesus Christ fulfill his grand vision and plan in our lives and the lives of our dearly beloved. We can rest contentedly in the sovereign genius of Jesus Christ and look expectantly for his miracles, even amidst our greatest disappointments. He may well be accomplishing his greatest works through us at this very moment.

May we not underestimate these short passages filled with personal notes and details as if they were unimportant. In this case, our text addresses one of the central struggles and glorious truths of our Christian faith.

Lord, may the truth of this message sink to the deepest depths of our souls. May it soften our hearts in your hands, making us utterly and constantly available to be used by you, any time, anywhere, in any way. May you be praised forever for the grandeur of your sovereign genius, and may you focus our passions unto the good works you have foreordained for us to walk into. Amen.

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