

Hindered to “Without Hindrance”

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Text: Romans 15_22-33

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SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, our scripture reading as we are near the end of our series of studies in Paul's letter to the Romans, is in Romans chapter 15 and verses 22 through 33. You'll find in the pew Bible, the English Standard Version that we use on page 950. And the section is headed. And this is no part of the scriptures, but is an accurate enough heading, at least, in part, "Paul's Plan to Visit Rome."

This, he says, 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, 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. The present however, I'm going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and the care have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, 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. When therefore, I have completed this, and have delivered to them, what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will, I may come to you with joy, and be refreshed in your company. May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

SERMON:

We have come, actually do come this evening, virtually full circle in Paul's letter to the Romans. He began, as many of us, I hope are able to remember in chapter one, saying to the Romans that he had often wanted to come and visit them. And he had longed to do so, so that he could impart some spiritual gift to them. Or as he tweaked that language so that they might share together in fellowship with one another, and in each other's giftedness. Actually, he began by wishing them God's peace. And now you notice he brings the substance of the letter to a conclusion in chapter 15, verse 33, by again wishing that not now simply they may know peace, but the very God who is peace and who gives peace might be with them all.

And indeed, this whole section here, forms a kind of bookend with the opening words. He wanted to come to Rome, to preach the gospel in Rome. He had often been hindered. Now, he says he is coming to Rome, although he has often been hindered. And his desire to visit Rome he prophesied is now going to be fulfilled. "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've longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you." He wants to go to Rome. He has never been in Rome because he has often been hindered.

But some time ago, I can't exactly remember when, some time ago in our studies, in this letter to the Romans, we cheated, didn't we? We did the thing our elementary school teachers didn't allow us to do. We looked at the back of the book to see the answer to the mystery of Romans. And interestingly, the answer to the mystery of Romans was that Paul didn't really want to go to Rome to stay there. He wanted to go to Rome, to go somewhere else.

Neil Mathias and I were talking at lunchtime during the course of the week, about places to go before you die. And I mentioned to them, although I don't own it, not have I read it, the book 100 Places to Go or 100 places to See Before You Die. Paul planned to go to three places before he died. And you'll notice that he mentioned them all in these verses.

First of all, he wants to go to Rome in verse 22, and was planning to come. He actually wanted to go to Spain. And that was why essentially he was going to Rome, in verse 24. But first of all, in verse 25, he was going to Jerusalem. He was going to Rome, in order to go to Spain. But before he went to either of these places, his plan was, first of all, to go to Jerusalem.

And it's important that you realize that looking at the map, Jerusalem is that way, Roman and Spain are that way. You don't go to Spain by going to Jerusalem unless you've got one of these very cheap tickets that will fly you from Corinth to Jerusalem, and then back to Corinth, and on from Corinth, to Rome.

So the first thing that should strike us as unusual, mysterious, intriguing is why when Paul wants to go to Rome in order to go to Spain, he is going in the very opposite direction to Jerusalem. In a strange way, he's doing the very reverse of what Jonah did. Jonah was told to go in one direction and disobeyed and went in another direction. So how is it that if God by His Spirit has impressed upon the apostle Paul, that Spain is the next destination for his missionary endeavors that Paul plans to go in the will of God in the opposite direction to Jerusalem?

And while you're puzzling over that question, let's first of all look at why he is going to visit Rome. He tells us, doesn't he, that he is now free to do so. Because he has no longer what he calls any room for work in these regions. And indeed he's explained in verse 22, the reason he had been hindered from coming to them — was a divine reason, or a series of divine reasons. Because there were these places where God had impelled him to preach the gospel where it had never been preached, and to establish churches. And it seems to have been Paul's deep conviction that as an apostle, sent to preach the gospel where no one else had labored the key to that idea was by and large, that he would go to the great centers of population. There he would establish churches that themselves would plant other churches all around the area. And so in a sense, in the creation of an entire web of churches round these basic centers of population, the gospel would spread outwards, in this way, in a kind of centrifugal fashion —throughout the whole area to which God had called him. And now as he writes the letter to the Romans, probably from Corinth, he has this deep sense that everything that God called him to do in

this area from Antioch away round indeed, from Jerusalem as he'd said, in our passage last week, the away around to Illyricum that ministry God had given to him had been marvelously fulfilled. And he says, There is no longer any room. The reason the reason isn't a specific place any longer he senses to which God is impelling him to plant a church and to see that church itself multiply itself by planting other churches in the surrounding area. And he has this deep, deep, deep, deep desire to see Rome. Just to experience —chapter 16 indicates to us, he knows dozens of Christians by name in Rome. He may — this amazing he may know more Christians in Rome than most of us know in any other city, apart from Columbia, South Carolina. And if that's the case, this is an indication of how marvelously, as we'll come to see, the Gospel has spread to Rome. And here is this man who has been called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Of course, he wants to visit Rome, because he wants to see how Jesus Christ's lordship is beginning to topple the lordships of the Caesars. And how, as in coming days for all the Emperor Nero may seek to destroy the people of God, the kingdom that Jesus Christ has established will be like that stone in the vision in the book of Daniel that rolls down the hill and gathers speed, increases momentum, and eventually will fill the whole earth.

This is, we might say, Paul's journey to the center of the earth. And it's a great lesson for us. What a thing he must have prayed for. It's — you know, you don't know this number of Christians names unless you pray for them. And it was an indication that in Paul's little prayer list, there were these Christians in the center of the Roman Empire for whom he had been praying, with whom he had been corresponding, because he wanted to see the lordship of his Savior established there.

But he's not going to stay. He just — the language he uses, actually in Romans is quite marvelous. He just wants to enjoy it. He wants to savor the sense that Jesus Christ is fulfilling his prophecy. That the gospel would go to the center of the world, to the extremities of the earth, and that he would be with his people to the end of the ages. What a vision this man has for the establishing of the gospel.

And yet, now, this mission field, he has prepared to leave this mission field into which he has poured his life blood for all together virgin soil in Spain for the proclamation of the gospel. And he feels free to do so. Verse 22. I've been often hindered, largely, I think he means God has hindered me. God has said to me, Paul, there is more work for you to do here. But now God is setting me free to go somewhere else.

There is a great lesson here, actually, for some of us. I had a minister say to me quite recently, how do you know it's time to leave your congregation? What would you have said to him? Because they start sending you hate mail? Maybe it's time to stay. But here's a clue. Listen, this is a real clue, not just to ministers of the gospel, but to all of us in general. Because wherever God has placed us, he has placed us where we are for the sake of the gospel, not for the sake of our health, or if he's placed you hit in Columbia, South Carolina for the sake of your health, it's so that you want to be healthy for the sake of the gospel. And Paul is thinking two things: Number one is, the work God has given me to do has come to some kind of resolution and completion and until it has I dare not move. And the second thing is this, I think this is a very interesting thing. He has a desire to go to Spain, that will not leave him. That's true of ministers of the gospel. That's true of each of us. I hope nobody in this room tonight goes for another job just because you'll get more pay in North Carolina than in South Carolina. But that you move only because you have some sense that God's purpose for your life here in Columbia, South Carolina has come to some sense of closure, and that there is an answering aspiration in your heart to serve the Lord Jesus Christ somewhere else.

Did it surprise you this morning, those of you who were here for the lecture, that two young couples would buy houses in a particular place in order to serve the Lord there? Do you ever think about that? In movements - in job - in the places where you live? Is the gospel absolutely first in your life? This is a wonderful illustration of the way in which in all things even where he served, indeed especially where he served the Lord Jesus Christ. For the apostle Paul, it was always Jesus absolutely, first.

So he is free now to visit Rome. But second, he actually hopes to go to Spain. And this is such a fascinating thing. Because it's the immediate -- if you think about it, it's the immediate reason for him writing Romans. Now scholars have written endless articles and indeed entire books entitled, *The Purpose of Romans*. Why did Paul write Romans? Well, the immediate reason Paul wrote Romans, paradoxically, is because he wanted to go to Spain. And in order to go to Spain, as it were propelled by the church in Rome, just as he had been propelled in his early missionary journeys by the church at Antioch. Because he wanted the Roman church apparently to become his sending congregation to Rome, he realized, I need to explain to these Roman Christians what my gospel is. You remember, he used that expression in chapter two. Uses it again, in chapter 16. The letter to the Romans is Paul's Gospel, as he lays it out to the Roman Christians with the aspiration that they embrace that gospel with him that they embrace him in that gospel, and they will send him somewhere else and support him. In other words, and this is for us here, I think, immensely significant. What are we going to do with Paul's letter to the Romans? And if the answer is not -- share in world evangelism -- we've missed the reason Paul wrote Romans.

It's the passionate exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not simply that we could sit here over these months, and listen to this extraordinary exposition of the gospel. But that so this extraordinary exposition of the gospel would lead us so to embrace the gospel. And so to embrace the apostolic commission, that we ourselves will, with the Roman Christians impel our best and our brightest out into the world, to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. And we ourselves will be caught up with the same missionary zeal here. If I can put it like this. This letter to the Romans was not just written for the Romans, it was written for -- and I put it this way -- the Hispanic community. The Spaniards. I hope, although of course we've not a shred of evidence to think so, but I hope -- because I'm sure Paul knew that what lands beyond Spain... That this was just the next stage. Maybe in my retirement, I should sit down and write the posthumous letter of the Apostle Paul to the church in London, saying I want to go to Glasgow. You see his horizons are as expansive as the ends of the earth. And that's why he wants to go to preach the gospel in Spain and to plant churches there. Because the gospel is the gospel of a missionary God. The apostle as a missionary minded apostle. And his hope is, as he reaches out with this letter to the Romans, that the Roman church is a missionary minded church. And so in verse 24, when he says to the Romans, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey. The language that he uses here is used elsewhere in the New Testament Scriptures quite specifically, to mean helped big time. You know, if a missionary writes to our missions committee and says, Can you help me? He means help me! He means prayer! He means support! He means provision. He means financial resources. And that's exactly, I think, what Paul means here. Same language is used in the end of the epistle to Titus in Titus three, verse 13, when the Apostle Paul says, do your best to speed Zenas, the lawyer and Apollos on their way, see that they lack nothing. You see what he's saying? My this is a lesson for us. Isn't it? About giving two world missions. About opening the heart and the wallet, and making sure there is provision for world missions.

Just in parenthesis in our denomination as well as our elders have discovered, particularly last year, in many missionary societies, many works of gospel mission have been crippled this last year for lack of

resources. And they need help. And that means money. What are you doing with your money? Actually, that's part of the impact of Paul's letter to the Romans. Open your pockets, Romans. Maybe they got paid more in Rome than they did anywhere else. They often do at the center of an empire. Has God given you a largess? Then this is a call to you. There are missionaries who would love to write to you. And indeed, if you can't see, that's what they are writing. You must be purblind. We need resources if we're going to carry on this mission.

I mentioned a couple of months ago, that recent book by some sociologists of religion, entitled *Passing the Plate* -- very clever title. Because we pass the plate, but they meant passing the plate. In that book, the sociologists work out the almost endless billions of dollars that would be available to the work of the Gospel throughout the world if those of us who actually come to church -- regularly, consistently, constantly -- gave, I think they mentioned 10% of our net income. I had the privilege, the joy of being severely dressed down in wonderful love by one of our older men at the church door the Sunday I mentioned that. He said, what's this about net income? You giving sacrificially to world missions? That's what he's asking for. God save us from the super glue of the almighty dollar. God save us from it as Christians. This is how he hopes to get to Spain. Because he longs for them in every sense to be partners with him in the Gospel. And this is why he's writing this letter. I need to bury my head in the sand if the exposition of Romans over these last 18 months doesn't produce in us a passion for world missions. And for missions in Colombia, South Carolina. Because world mission begins with personal mission. And Paul wants when he seen Rom to go to Spain.

Why then is he heading east? The journey to Rome via Jerusalem is about three times as far, certainly as the crow flies, as the journey from Macedonia to Jerusalem. And so this is, don't you think very odd. What may seem at first sight even odder is that he is apparently going to Jerusalem with money. Verse 25. "At present, however, I'm going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and a care have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessing, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessing." So it's not only odd, he's going in the opposite direction. But he is going to do deacons work. In this church, and Paul was a Presbyterian, I don't think I need to argue that point here, do I? In Presbyterian churches, it's deacons that handle the money. Think Paul had lost trust in the deacons? A bit suspicious of the elders? Thought the only person I can trust with the loot here is myself. No, no, no, this is the clue. I wonder if you realize what he's speaking about here, this contribution. This is actually the only collection that the apostle Paul ever speaks about. Those passages in Paul's letters, in which he speaks about the collection, he is not talking at all about the offering that we have just taken. He is talking about a collection that was taken quite apart from whatever resources that were needed in order to provide ministry and services in the local churches. He is speaking about a collection that at times almost seemed to be obsessive to him. That the Gentile churches, under his leadership, were gathering in order that that collection might be given to the saints in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers, that it might be given by the Gentile church to the Jewish church, as a token of the way in which they embraced one another in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So although these passages Second Corinthians eight and nine have often been applied to our Christian giving, they've got nothing whatsoever to do without ordinary Christian giving. They are entirely to do with what we might call this super Christian giving, that was entirely devoted to this great vision. That in a world that was beginning to see there what three races of men, as one of the Latin writers said. There were Gentiles, there were Jews, and there were Christians. But they were going to

show that Jew and Gentile who embraced Jesus Christ also embraced one another in Jesus Christ, where there was neither Jew, nor Gentile. And Paul saw this,, interestingly, amazingly, really, as we as a great symbol of one of the central burdens of His ministry, to show that the gospel could do what no power on earth could do, that in Jesus Christ, it could bring together those who had been alienated from each other in their own flesh, but were now bound together in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. So that the offering given by the Gentiles might be acceptable to these Jewish believers.

And as you look back on Romans, you see, -- you can see how all the way along he's been laying the groundwork for the significance of this. Because he said that the gospel is for both the Jew and the Gentile. Because both the Jew and the Gentile are lost and under divine condemnation. But in Jesus Christ, they are united together. And that God's purposes in history in chapters nine and 10, and 11 have been such that ultimately he has brought all under condemnation for their sin, in order that he might show glorious mercy to both Jew and Gentile. And those chapters that we've been reading and chapter 14 and 15, where the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers seem to have been at odds with one another over the observation of the holy days of the Old Covenant, and the dietary laws of the mosaic administration. And he wants to see in Rome, and he wants to see in Jerusalem, and he wants to see everywhere he goes, the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ, publicly demonstrated in the way in which these Jews and Gentiles embrace one another. And especially the way in which these Gentiles come to their Jewish fellow believers, and kneel before them with this gift, and say: The Lord Jesus has given us riches to share with you in your poverty. And Paul actually says, in order to stir up the Corinthians, don't you know that believers have given out of their poverty and beyond their means for this ministry. Cause he is so passionate to see the gospel work through in every area of life.

And so as some scholars suggest, it may even be that he's thinking of these Old Testament passages about the mountain of the Lord, and the gathering of the people of the Lord, and how the Gentiles will come with the treasures of the world as a sign that Jesus Christ is Lord of all who believe.

And it's so important to him that he, that he desires nothing more than fellowship with these Christians in Rome, and nothing more than that they should send him on in his mission to Spain. But he doesn't want to do that until he's given expression to his Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem in their need, that the Church of Jesus Christ in the Gentile world really cares about them, and wants fellowship with them. Indeed, the word that he uses here "contribution" is actually the word fellowship. We are one in Christ. He wants to say. What a bunch of tightwads we are. Don't you think? All that Christ has given to us and all the needs of the world church -- all the needs of our missionaries. My dear friends is heartbreaking. heartbreaking to see letters coming from our denominations missionary arm to speak about the way in which some of our missionaries are so desperately underfunded when we sit together on a pile of riches. And Paul plans to visit Jerusalem because he wants to see the fellowship of believers expressed in concrete form.

And then you notice as he comes to the end of this passage, and says that he's sure he'll go to Rome in the fullness of the blessing of Jesus Christ. He issues an appeal. And this evening, all I want to do is to point out to you what that appeal is for. He is begging them to pray for him. Now this is interesting because I think anybody in their right mind looking at the New Testament would say, if there is a man in the New Testament apart from the Lord Jesus who knows how to pray it is the apostle Paul. But here's the interesting thing. Those who really know how to pray, are those who simultaneously will be begging other people to pray. That whatever sphere of ministry they are engaged in the Gospel may prevail.

That they may be given strength and defense, and that they may have a glorious future usefulness in the service of Jesus Christ.

I was reading some words of the great missionary of the modern missionary movement, the man who in many ways stimulated the modern missionary movement, William Carey. When he wrote to his friend Andrew Fuller, on going to India, he says, "I will go into the pit, but you must hold the ropes." "I will go into the pit, but you must hold the ropes." This is the great need. And I dare say that much more hidden than the way in which we employ our financial resources is the issue of whether we pray. Do you pray?

Are you holding the ropes for anybody? My this is a deeply challenging passage to me. I don't know what it sounds like to you. But it's deeply challenging to me. And not least, to say, as a minister of the gospel in however a localized fashion it may be, and in a small sphere by comparison with the sphere of the apostle Paul, pray for those who preach the gospel. Plead with God for the power of the Spirit to come upon the preaching of the gospel. Do you think this is all there is, my friends, in the preaching of the gospel?

When the ministers were praying together before the service. I prayed this. It kind of shook me that I pray that that we were grieved to hear this morning that out of a population of 60,000, or whatever, in the area of Leith and Scotland, that would only be 1000 people worshipping God at 11 o'clock in the morning, and I prayed or God in a city of Columbia, how many people are worshipping you tonight? It's overwhelming isn't it? By and large, the Church of Jesus Christ in our city, and in every city, in our hemisphere, in its western part, is doing something else tonight than praying or adoring? Is this all there is? Is this, is this all God wants to be worshiping Him tonight and to be propelled out into the world with the gospel? Is this all there is? Oh, says Paul, I fulfilled this ministry all the way around from Jerusalem to Illyricum. And all the way around churches are planting churches and planting churches and planting churches. And I'm going to Spain, so all Romans when I go over there to Jerusalem pray for me that the ministry may be acceptable there. That I may be guarded there. That I may come to you in the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because I'm no longer being hindered from coming to you.

Now, almost every single one of us knows how these prayers were answered. He went to Rome from Jerusalem as a prisoner under guard, and this sermon, I'm not very good at sermons titles.. And you might have thought I was really scraping the barrel with this one, From Hindered to Without Hindrance. The hindered -- I'm no longer hindered -- that comes from here. Do you know where the without hindrance comes from? It's the last two words of the Acts of the Apostles. And they describe how the apostle Paul preached the gospel while he was a prisoner in Rome, "without hindrance."

He's been saying all along in these closing chapters to the Romans, there's no where the gospel doesn't work. It doesn't matter what your circumstances are, nothing can hinder the gospel. And he's about to prove it.

So this is deeply instructive passage for those of us who want to serve Christ. Paul has a very clear vision of what he's for. Do you know what you're for? That clarifies almost everything in your life, if you know what you're for in Jesus Christ. Are you willing to make sacrifices like this? Do you have a burden for mission? Have you ever said: Where next Lord with the gospel? What are we going to do when we finish Romans? Here's the answer: World Mission. Columbia mission,. Office mission. Church mission. In order that the name of Jesus Christ may be known and in the 1000s of places where it's not yet

known. That's a lot of chapters to get people engaged in world mission. That's because it takes a great gospel to get people involved in world mission. May God get us involved like that.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father we bow again before the surprising -- heart searching -- soul illumining word that comes from your mouth. And we confess how impoverished we are, by comparison with what you call us to be. We bewail our lethargy as a people. We cry out to you to cleanse our eyes, to soften our hearts, to open our ears, to fill us with the kind of passion that your Holy Spirit gave to the Apostle Paul. And for this, we pray that our sense of the greatness and glory and worthiness to be worshipped and adored of our Lord Jesus Christ may increase because of our study in this letter. And we ask then, that we may more and more become a people who not only seek knowledge, lest in seeking it we be puffed up. But become a people more and more full of love that we may lead others to find and to grow up into Jesus Christ. Hear us Oh Lord. Have mercy upon us. Bless us, propel us to serve you better, for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.