

Joining in the Struggle, Refreshed in the Company

Romans 15:23-33 on April 14, 2024

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Please read Romans 15:23-33 before going further in this transcript. In these final 2 chapters of Paul's letter to the Roman Church, we're zeroing in on how the gospel is "A Gospel for Everyday People." Given that this letter was written almost 2,000 years ago, the people within it may seem a bit strange or unique, but the people to whom the Apostle Paul was writing, were ordinary, everyday people, much like you and me.¹ Last week Paul Thomas got us started on the many everyday people and places where the Apostle Paul was planting local churches. And over the next two weeks, we'll be working our way through a long list of names of everyday people in Romans 16. We'll consider how the gospel impacted each one of them. Today, we're going to wrap up Romans 15, and as we do that, it would be natural for us to wonder: aren't verses 23-33 a bit extraneous? I mean, do we really need to spend an entire sermon on a recap of Paul's travel itinerary!? (*He's currently headed to Jerusalem, then he plans to head to Spain, but he's scheduled a stop in Rome on his way through. It sounds more like something Paul should be talking to his travel agent about!*)²

Well, verses 23-33 are not extraneous. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul was prompted to record them. And so we're going to take some time to consider what God might have for us within these verses. Today, we're going to consider Paul's gospel ministry philosophy, his "modus operandi" if you will. Paul invites his fellow believers in Rome...

...to join him in the struggle for the gospel ministry, and
...to be refreshed in one another's gospel company.

Romans 15:23-24 begins, "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you, 24 I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while." As last week's message made clear, it's not that the Apostle Paul thinks that there's no ministry left to do in these regions, but rather that Paul's church planting work was completed. Paul's ministry focus was now compelling him to expand westward. Paul's

¹ Yes, the gospel was transforming them into something much grander than ordinary people, but that's just as true for you and me today. By the way, if you're looking for a good fictional book to read on this very topic, check out William Kent Krueger's "Ordinary Grace."

² And furthermore, didn't we already cover most of this way back at the beginning of Romans 1? Some of you may remember that, it was a year ago last February. To be exact, we talked about much of this on Sunday, February 12, 2023. <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/gospel-eagerness/>

travels were from one end of the globe to the other, not due to his own wanderlust, but due to his gospel passion for the unreached. Once enough people had come to faith in Christ to begin a local church, that local church would then carry out the long-term ministry to their particular corner of the globe. Our own E-Free Bemidji is part of this ongoing church planting effort. 100 years ago, our local E-Free church got its start in this region of Minnesota. Our ministry focus includes the region of Beltrami County, as well as the surrounding Clearwater, Hubbard, and Cass counties, and sometimes even further out than that.

Now it's a little unclear as to whether Paul made it to Spain or not. But there are good reasons to believe he likely did, during what is known as his 4th Missionary Journey.³ However, unlike his first three journeys, his 4th isn't recorded in the book of Acts. Acts 28 ends with Paul being held in a Roman prison, but a historian, named Eusebius, implies that he was released from this 1st imprisonment. So we're led to believe that Paul did indeed take the gospel to Spain, and that he was then later imprisoned once again in Rome, where he was eventually martyred for his faith.⁴

Verse 24 reveals that **“joining in the struggle” includes gospel partnerships with each other’s ministries.** When I first read Paul’s suggestion “to have you assist me on my journey,” it struck me a little funny. It seemed just a little bit presumptuous. From the sound of verse 24, he’s pretty much inviting himself over for dinner! “Well, I’ll be passing through your area (on my way to Spain), and I’d like to enjoy your company while I’m in Rome. You know, have some fellowship over a cup of coffee, then probably stay with you for a while, see what you’ve got in the fridge, that kind of thing. Then, at some point, I’ll be on my way. And oh, by the way, I’m thinking you could help me with the logistics and any associated costs of my ministry to Spain.” Now, there’s probably a bit more information behind Paul’s travel plans than just what we’re reading here, but it does come across a little presumptuous at first. However, upon further reflection, verse 24 begins to make a lot more sense. You see, Paul had a very unique apostolic call to the Gentiles, and by this time, his calling was fairly well known to most of the churches. Paul opened his letter in Romans 1:1, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.” And last week in Romans 15:19, Paul clarified that his ministry was... “by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.” These signs and wonders demonstrated God’s affirmation of Paul’s ministry. So Paul isn’t necessarily being presumptuous, he’s simply being confident in God’s will for his life;

³ See map on pp. 2038-2039 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

⁴ See article connected to the map on pp. 2038-2039 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

he's confident that God will provide whatever's needed for the ministry in Spain to which God is calling him. God has always been faithful to provide in the past, and He'll do it again! And He'll likely do it the way He's done it before, through gospel partnerships with other ministries.^{5 6}

“Joining in the struggle” also includes giving toward each other's financial needs. Romans 15:25-26 go on, “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem.” This financial contribution was for Jewish Christ-followers who were impoverished by no fault of their own. The most likely reason for their destitute situation was either a terrible famine in the land, or severe persecution by the unbelieving Jews who had ostracized the believing Jews for turning to Christianity.⁷ Either way, resources were stretched incredibly thin, and options for gainful employment were slim pickings. Charitable giving provided a much-needed temporary stopgap until their financial prospects could be improved.⁸ The more we read through the New Testament, the more it becomes clear that believers are to help with each other's financial struggles, as we're able. As Christians partner together for the gospel, it includes our love and prayers and words of encouragement, but it also includes our dollars. Paul urges the Corinthian believers in 2 Corinthians 8:7, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” When Paul was sharing his personal testimony with the Christ-followers at the Galatian Church, he pointed out that even from the very beginning of his gospel ministry, he was mindful of those who were facing financial difficulties. In Galatians 2:9-10 he says, “James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. 10 All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.”

Now to be clear, Paul's ministry wasn't professional fundraising, nor was it a full-scale Benevolence Fund program. Even so, Galatians 2:10 reveals

⁵ “As Paul writes to the Roman Christians, therefore, he writes from the consciousness of an authority that few others could claim.” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 193.

⁶ “Spain was a long way from Paul's ‘sending church’ (Antioch), and he needed financial and logistical help from a church closer to his new ministry area.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2320 footnote on Romans 15:24.

⁷ “The Jerusalem believers may have become poverty-stricken because of the famine recorded in Acts 11:28 or because of the persecution of Jerusalem Christians [in Acts 8:1].” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1947 footnote on 1 Corinthians 16:1.

⁸ Let's keep in mind that Paul also said, “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

that all long he was eager to remember the poor. We'd do well to follow his example of remembering our fellow believers who have material needs, whether they're here in our own local community, or whether they're on the other side of the world.

Romans 15:27-28 goes on, "They [*the churches in Macedonia and Achaia*] were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. 28 So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way." This is a curious way for Paul to put it. He begins by declaring how pleased these churches were to help, but then he adds that they owe it to them, which seems to kind of spoil it. In one sense, I suppose that Paul is simply stating the logical connection between how the SPIRITUAL blessing from the JEWISH Messiah has led to the MATERIAL blessing from the GENTILE Christ-followers. But Paul was probably phrasing it this way in light of the tensions between the Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman Church. So, in another sense, and more to Paul's point, he was highlighting their mutual faith, and their shared spiritual blessings in Christ, which then led to this sharing of financial resources. Joining in the struggle includes giving toward each other's financial needs, and these Gentile believers were putting their money where their mouth was, by being generous out of the overflow of their hearts.⁹

Financial generosity was a tangible way for the Gentiles to refresh their impoverished Jewish brethren. Back in Romans 13:8 we talked about our continuing debt to love one another. And 1 John 3:16-18 puts it this way, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."¹⁰

"Joining in the struggle" also includes receiving prayer support from one another. Paul has some significant concerns about delivering this financial gift, so he asks for prayer support. In Romans 15:30-31 he says, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. 31 Pray that I

⁹ "It was important for the Jewish Christians to understand that the contribution provided by the Gentile believers demonstrated their love and affection for their brethren in Christ." (Robert H. Mounce, Romans, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 269.)

¹⁰ We find this principle of tangible acts of Christian love toward one another all throughout the New Testament. For example, see James 2:15-16 and Galatians 5:6.

may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there." Some Bibles translate verse 30 something like, "strive together with me in your prayers..." It carries the idea of a common effort, where we fight a shared battle, back-to-back, contending for the faith that we all know and love.¹¹ ¹² Paul is far from arrogant or overconfident here. Despite his unique ministry calling, and his incredible giftedness, and his track record of powerful signs and wonders, Paul was NOT a one-man show. We'll see that even more clearly next week when we begin digging into Romans 16, but we also see it right here in his genuine appeal for prayer support. Paul was filled with boldness and gospel courage, but he was also filled with humility, because he had a reverent understanding of his own desperate dependence on God. The fact is, he consistently pleads for prayer support throughout his New Testament letters.¹³

As it turns out, Paul's concern for his safety, was well founded.¹⁴ The book of Acts records how, shortly after arriving in Jerusalem with this offering, he was physically assaulted and almost killed. While he was being kept in jail for his own safety, some of the unbelieving Jews bound themselves with an oath to kill him, and he narrowly escaped.¹⁵ Ultimately, Paul ended up getting to Rome by appealing to Caesar. So the prayer support that Paul solicits here, was much needed, and it was effective in keeping him safe from very real and present dangers. In fact, those prayers not only resulted in keeping Paul safe, but in providing him with safe, free passage, all the way to Rome!¹⁶

Paul doesn't just request prayer for safety from the UNBELIEVERS, he also requests prayer for a favorable reception by the BELIEVERS. This seems like a bit of an odd request... I mean, why wouldn't Paul's fellow

¹¹ "join me in my struggle" συναγωνίζομαι = "to join with someone in a common effort, fight/contend along with." (William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 963–964.

¹² "The Roman Christians were one with Paul in their love for Christ. This provided the essential motive for their entering into the problem he faced. An additional motive was the love inspired by the Spirit. Awareness of a fellow believer's difficult situation will move the authentic Christian to join that person in prayer." (Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 270–271.)

¹³ Ephesians 6 is another great example of this. After painting an incredible word picture of the armor of God, Paul says in Ephesians 6:19, "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel." See also 1 Thessalonians 5:25; Colossians 4:3; and Thessalonians 3:1.

¹⁴ Not only did he have a track record for being run out of town by unbelieving Jews, but the Holy Spirit had warned him. See Acts 20:22-24 and 21:10-11.

¹⁵ See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd Ed. Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 755.

¹⁶ Some of you may remember when we did our series through the book of Acts, that Paul gets a military escort out of Jerusalem by the Roman authorities. Not only did they rescue Paul from a Jewish plot to kill him, but they ended up giving him an all expenses paid trip to Rome, which is exactly where God wanted him to go. See Acts 21:17-28:14. It was quite an amazing journey and Paul's need for prayer is evident all throughout! By the way, this was also an odd, yet still accurate, way of seeing Paul's prediction in Romans 15:29 fulfilled, "I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ."

believers be glad to receive this financial contribution? Especially if they were in a time of such financial need? Well, first of all, delivering financial help can be a tricky business. It takes prayerful consideration, and wise planning to know who should receive help, and how much help they should receive. There's a need for keen discernment as to when help is truly helpful and when it becomes hurtful or counterproductive. Paul may very well have these kinds of dynamics in mind when he requests prayer for these contributions to be "favorably received."

More specifically though, Paul's prayer request was probably prompted by the ongoing tensions between the Jewish and Gentile believers.

My Study Bible points out that: Paul viewed the delivery of this financial assistance "not only as a work of charity but also as a way to ease the developing tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church of his day. Getting Gentiles to GIVE money to their Jewish brothers and sisters, and [then] getting the Jewish believers to ACCEPT IT, was a practical way of binding the two groups together."¹⁷ When fellow believers learn to love one another deeply, from the heart, it becomes the most natural thing in the world for us to care for one another's financial needs.¹⁸ BUT delivering this offering to Jerusalem ALSO had the potential to refuel any tensions that still remained. Some of Jewish believers could have very well refused to accept this monetary support from their Gentile brethren. So Paul asks for prayer, for a favorable reception.

You see, Paul wasn't just concerned about the security of these funds (*although it was probably a fair amount of funds*), nor was he just concerned about the successful completion of their delivery. Paul wanted to do SO much more than just fill hungry bellies, he wanted God to be glorified; he wanted this contribution to achieve its greater gospel purpose – the further uniting in Christian love of these dear brothers and sisters in Christ. So Paul made an appeal for the believers in Rome to PRAY, PRAY, PRAY to that end!

Romans 15:32 goes on, "SO THAT I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed." With joy, not just with relief that we got the task done, but with joy that God's good, pleasing, and perfect will was done! In 2 Corinthians 9:12-13 Paul explains it this way, "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else." You see,

¹⁷ NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2321 footnote on Romans 15:31.

¹⁸ Consider Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

when we join in the struggle as fellow believers, it results in God receiving the glory. There's an overflow of many expressions of thanks to God for what He is doing in and through His people. His people who have JOINED together, PARTNERED together, GIVEN together, and PRAYED together for His greater purposes to be accomplished. This is what we mean by "becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus TOGETHER."

Well, not only are we "joining in the struggle," but we're also "refreshed in the company."

"Refreshed in the company" means that we're renewed by gathering together in each other's physical presence. Romans 15:32 ends with these words, "...and in your COMPANY be refreshed."¹⁹ Now when Paul says that he's looking forward to this refreshment, we need to keep in mind that he likely wrote this while he was still in Corinth. He hadn't even left for Jerusalem yet. So, before he would actually be in their company to receive this refreshment, he still needed to travel some 3,000 miles! (*And there were no airplanes back then! And the ships on which they sailed were nothing like our modern-day luxury cruise ships! Paul had a long and arduous journey ahead of him.*) And yet, in spite of all this, Paul's heart found great encouragement as he looked forward to this future time of mutual refreshment. You see, at the beginning of his letter, Paul had already informed them of his longing to be a blessing to the church in Rome. Back in Romans 1:11-12 Paul declared, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—12 that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."²⁰ Paul longs to see them so that he can be a blessing to them, even as he also looks forward to being blessed by them. This is the way that God has designed healthy gospel fellowship to work.

We aren't just refreshed by each other's prayers and financial gifts, or whatever else, we're refreshed by one another's COMPANY, when we're together, right in the midst of each other's physical presence. That's why it's SO important for us to be in the church building together on Sunday mornings, and not just watching online, unless that's really our only option. And it's why it's so important for us to gather together at other times throughout the week, for Life Groups, and for Bible studies, and for kids and youth ministry and Trail Life, and on and on. So let's make it a gospel priority, to spend time being refreshed in one another's company.

¹⁹ Consider Hebrews 10:24-25.

²⁰ By the way, this is probably what he means in Romans 15:29 by "I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ."