



Romans - Chapter Fifteen

VI Romans 12:1-15:13 - God's righteousness in everyday life
(continues/concludes)

VI.b Romans 14:1-15:13 - The weak and the strong (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

The chapter commences with Paul wrapping up the arguments from the previous chapter by clearly stating that both the weak and the strong have a responsibility to uplift and support the other, for all are one in Christ, and it is to him believers should look; not to their own hearts' desires. Paul supports this by once again supplying some cleverly crafted scriptures and a further prayer to God.

Paul then gives a brief summary of his mission and ministry to date; that he has brought the word of God all the way from Jerusalem right the way round to Illyricum, forming an arc around the whole north eastern Mediterranean Sea area, visiting places where no other apostle had brought the Gospel of Christ. Paul is clearly boasting, not in himself but in the power and majesty of Christ that has been working through him, in order to bring many Gentiles to a position, not just of believing in God but being made presentable to him.

Paul then goes on to the main reason for writing his letter to the Roman congregations. He had wanted to visit Rome for some time and explains some of the reasons why this had not yet happened, but now he plans to do so. He not only wanted to visit them but he wanted to use them as a base for his next intended mission to Spain. But before he could come to them, he explains that he has one further important task to complete and that is to take the financial offerings of the churches in Macedonian and Achaia, at least, and possibly Asia as well, to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul knew he would face personal danger from the Jews there and also there was the distinct possibility that these offerings would be rejected by the church leaders in Jerusalem as they came predominately from Gentile believers. Paul therefore asked the Romans to pray for him earnestly and diligently for God's protection on both these counts.

He finally requests they also pray that he will come to them with joy and calls upon the God of peace to be with them in Rome, which was the traditional Jewish benediction, but here given to a predominately Gentile church by a Jew, who was himself an apostle to the Gentiles.

VI.b.iv Romans 15:1-6 - Unity: modelled by Christ, encouraged by scripture

Paul continues in his plea for mutual forbearance in the indifferent things of church. Paul wishes to conclude his epistle with a firm argument to bring unity into the church where there were

clearly elements of discord.

He draws the conclusion in six sections:

1. His precepts to them.
2. His prayers for them.
3. His apology for writing to them.
4. His account of himself and his own affairs.
5. His declaration of his intent and purpose to visit them.
6. His desire of a share in their prayers.

We all have our weaknesses but some more than others, so it is for the strong to support and mentor the weak. Our first duty to Christ is to deny ourselves: <<Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me>> (Matthew 16:24). That Christ did not do things to please himself is the strongest argument believers have to say that all of them in church should do what pleases others, and that does not mean some of them, as all too frequently there seems to be more takers than givers.

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Romans 15:1-3

The strong, i.e. those whose faith in Christ has given them full freedom from the restriction of the Judaic laws, have a responsibility to tolerate and support the weak, instead of living selfishly to satisfy their own desires. Equally, if the conservative are thus willing to restrain their condemnation of the more liberal, then it is for the strong to make the concessions necessary to maintain the spirit of community. The Christian life centres on strengthening others.

Christ is the supreme example of living for the glory of God, as is shown in the citation of Psalm 69:9b, the first part of which: <<for zeal for your house consumes me>> (Psalm 69:9a), is used in John 2:17 after Jesus had cleared the temple. Paul's reference to this Psalm is not just a random phrase from a Messianic Psalm but is carefully chosen, for Psalm 69 is a beautiful Hebrew poem about Israel's suffering in general and the Messiah's suffering in particular. In it, David is indicating that the Christ would deny all natural inclination to undertake the grievance of his spirit for the treatment he received in order that others would benefit. Every sin is a reproach to God, especially presumptuous sins; now the guilt of these fell upon Christ, when he was made sin, that is, a sacrifice, a sin offering for us. When the Lord laid upon him the iniquities of us all, and he bore our sins in his own body upon the tree, they fell upon him as upon our surety. The scriptures were there for the Roman readers and for modern day Christians. Paul had applied what David had written about himself to Christ, with great accuracy. What Christ took upon himself believers can now take upon themselves, albeit to a much lesser extent, to help those weaker and in need, whether inside or outside the church. The scriptures are there for their edification but they are also there as their guide to live their lives practically; it is important that they not only learn the scriptures but are able to apply them.

The thrust of Paul's counsel is actually to commend weakness, or at least the weakness of self-denial and active love of neighbour, as the paradigm and model for Christian conduct. The obligation is for the self-styled strong to support the failings of the weak. The wording may be

odd. To bear up the weaknesses of the weak, not the weak in their failings; in fact the Roman leadership would probably recognise that the language has been drawn from the picture of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:4 <<Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted>>, and Isaiah 53:11 <<After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities>>, as reflected also in: <<This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" >> (Matthew 8:17). That is to say, what is in view is not commendation of or approval for these weaknesses and failings, but a lived out, ready acceptance of the consequences of these failings, a degree of identification with those who are weak, so that the failings become theirs in the day-to-day experience of living for one another. The balance which Paul calls for, between disapproval of attitudes, and sympathetic identification with those who hold them, is presumably modelled on the identification Christ achieved with sinful flesh with a view to its destruction.

In v.2 Paul recalls the two great principles which, as he had already explained, must condition the liberty of the strong and govern their attitudes and conduct in relation to the weak; love of neighbour and the benefit of the congregation.

In v.3 Paul shows that above all is the example of Christ. What had been implicit in the echo of the teaching of Jesus in Chapter 14, in the appeal of Christ's death on behalf of those same powerless ones, in the echo of the picture of the suffering servant (v.1), and again of the command by which Jesus summed up all the law affecting personal relationships (v.2), is now brought to the fore with climactic force. The model is Jesus: if he was willing to suffer misunderstanding and abuse to the extent of giving up his own life in such dramatic and excruciatingly painful fashion, how could those who both gloried in their own strength and had called Jesus their Lord refuse the much less self-limitation of curbing the liberty of their conduct when it was causing fellow Christians to fall? Greater strength means greater responsibility towards others.

In fact, Paul here is simply working out the implications of the whole Christian understanding of strength: God's strength manifested in the weakness of the Cross: <<For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength>> (1 Corinthians 1:25), and: <<For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you>> (2 Corinthians 13:4); God's power coming to perfect expression in Paul's weakness: <<But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong>> (2 Corinthians 12:9-10); true greatness lived out in the indignity of servitude and powerlessness of slavery: <<Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" >> (Mark 10:42-45). The message that Paul has been working out all along is implicit here too. Strength is illusory if it means claiming independence of God; only in the weakness of confessed dependence on God is there real strength.

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

For everything that was written in the past includes the whole of the OT Scriptures. Paul expresses confidence that all of the OT was written down for the instruction, i.e. to teach us, and encouragement of God's people, thus indirectly implying that all the words of the OT are words of God, words that he wisely directed to be written not only for his purposes at the time they were written but also for people living in later centuries.

The scriptures contribute to this strength because they show that God's purpose in salvation history was frequently worked through weakness and suffering, and that God's purpose is of sure fulfilment. So they both provide support and encouragement from the past and direct the vision beyond the immediate limitations and frustrations to be sure hope of what God will accomplish. Paul does not hesitate to describe the reason why the scriptures were written in precisely these terms: not as a source book for all sorts of information, historical and scientific, but to teach us, to sustain faith and renew hope. And so again the Roman congregations are reminded that all their thinking and doing must take full account of the eschatological tension between what has already been fulfilled in and through Christ and the not yet of hope.

Scriptures are also there to bring hope: what to hope for from God, on what grounds and in what way. Paul writes of endurance in the scriptures which normally means trouble and sorrow that we must bear patiently and with fortitude. As we have already seen: <<Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us>> (Romans 5:3-5). The more patience we exercise under our troubles, the more hopefully we may look beyond our troubles; there is nothing more destructive to hope than impatience.

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:5-6

Paul waters his message with a prayer, for he can only speak to the ear whereas God, who gives the increase, can speak to the heart. Paul notes that Christ is the God of endurance and consolation for all believers; that should immediately bring hope to the hearts of all believers.

Paul rounds off this most lengthy exhortation by praying for the harmony and oneness of the mind of his readers, Jews and Gentiles, strong and weak, conservative and liberal, traditionalist and non-traditionalist, in this most divisive issue; as in all issues of great moment for the identity of the new churches and for their understanding of the Gospel.

He asks that the Roman church should bring glory to God the Father with one heart and mouth. The foundation of Christian love and peace is laid in like-mindedness, consent in judgement as far as can be attained, or at least a concord and agreement in affection. And that like-mindedness must be in accord with Christ Jesus, i.e. let Christ Jesus be the centre of their unity. Agree in the truth, not in the error. The method of their prayer must be first for truth and then for peace; for such is the method of the wisdom from above: it is first pure, then peaceable. This is to be like-minded according to Christ.

In v.6 Paul points out that this is all for the purpose of bringing glory to God, which should be the aim and purpose of all that Christians do and say. And they do so to God as the Father of their Lord Jesus Christ, in accord with John 17:21, as they are one: <<that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world

may believe that you have sent me>>. That believers may be one is Christ's hope for the unity of the church.

VI.b.v [Romans 15:7-13 - United praise under Christ's universal rule](#)

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

[Romans 15:7](#)

As is often the case, by picking up the language of the adjoining section, Paul succeeds in linking the concerns of the preceding paragraph into what follows, while shifting the focus or theme of the discussion. Therefore, in conclusion, both the strong and the weak are exhorted to accept one another, for they have been accepted by Christ even though they are sinners. Such mutual acceptance will bring great glory and [praise to God](#). The importance of this seemingly slight change should not be lost sight of. For it means that, after putting so much stress on the obligation of the strong to support the weak, Paul's final word on the matter is to remind all the parties and individuals involved that acceptance must be two-way, must be mutual, if it is to be in accordance with [their acceptance by Christ](#).

Paul repeats his arguments and exhortations again from the previous chapter as he clearly feels this is of great importance to his readers. As he says to the Philippians: <<Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you>> (Philippians 3:1). They are to accept each other as Christ had accepted them and there cannot be a more cogent argument than that. Christ receives believers for the glory of God and to show them his glory: <<Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world>> (John 17:24).

⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs

[Romans 15:8](#)

In fulfilling God's saving promises to the Jews, the Lord's truthfulness, i.e. [God's truth](#), and faithfulness to his word are demonstrated. The point Paul is demonstrating here is it was not Christ as an agent of God that had brought them hope and faith, but indeed it was the Jewish Messiah himself, the very Son of God, who [became a servant of the Jews](#) and then extended his servitude through the Cross to the Gentiles as well. The point should not be lost that Jesus was and is a Jew, he continues to minister to the circumcised people of God and thus the promises made by God to Abraham still hold true, for God is faithful.

The enmity in Rome and elsewhere came about often because of the different viewpoints of Gentile and Jewish converts, but Paul here points out that Jesus receives them all. Elsewhere, he explains it even more fully, showing that in God's eyes they are all one: <<For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility>> (Ephesians 2:14-16).

[Romans 15:9-12](#)

Paul cites verses from 2 Samuel 22:50 or Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, and Isaiah 11:10, which emphasise the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God along with the Jews. If the first reference is from 2 Samuel 22:50, citations are provided from the historical books, the law, the writings, and the prophets. The one people of God, both Jews and

Gentiles, will praise God forever for his great mercy extended to them in Christ Jesus, showing that the worship of God is his ultimate aim in salvation history.

⁹ so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name.”

Romans 15:9

The comments made on v.8 should be amplified with equal importance that Jesus’ mission also had the Gentiles in sight from the outset. The whole of Romans emphasises the inclusion of the Gentiles as well in God’s saving plan. They will also praise God for his mercy to them.

I will praise you among the Gentiles is quoted from either 2 Samuel 22:50 or Psalm 18:49, as David writes the same in both, and the disciples and apostles of Jesus, sent by him to the Gentiles, did just that.

The effect of this summary intermeshing of key motifs of the whole preceding argument is very powerful. It holds together the most important strands of that argument in an amazingly comprehensive way, which prevents the whole fabric from being pulled apart either in theory or, if maintained, in practice. Jesus, still a Jew and servant of the circumcision, even though now exalted, the last Adam and Lord of all; the tension between Jewish priority and universal fulfilment maintained within Christ himself; and, not least, the unified concept of God’s truth and mercy, expressing that unity in the combination of his faithfulness to the circumcised and his mercy to the Gentiles. It is such fundamentally theological insights which lie behind Paul’s concern to unite Jew and Gentile in Christ, and on the practical level should provide sufficient impetus for Jew and Gentile to accept each other fully. The Gentiles should never forget that they were called through the Jews, and the Jews that their own calling had the Gentiles in view from the very first. The Gentiles should remember that Christ was the servant of the circumcised people of God, and the Jews that his risen lordship is universal. Clearly implied is Paul’s conviction that God’s glory can only be complete when there is such united and universal praise.

¹⁰ Again, it says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

Romans 15:10

Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people is from Moses song in Deuteronomy 32:43, in fact it concludes that song. Moses then went on to tell the Israelites that these were not just idle words.

¹¹ And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples.”

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him.”

Romans 15:11-12

Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples (v.11) comes from Psalm 117:1, the shortest Psalm in the bible; and then Paul includes a final quote (v.12) from Isaiah 11:10, stating the root of Jesse, i.e. David's father, would spring up, rule over the nations, and the Gentiles would place their hope in him. Thus the Christ is both the root and branch of Jesse: <<A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit>> (Isaiah 11:1), elsewhere referred to as the son of David, whose eternal throne was promised by God: <<Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever>> (2 Samuel 7:16). Jesus was confirmed as both David's son and his Lord: <<If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?>> (Matthew 22:45), and: <<"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" >> (Revelation 22:16).

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

Paul again injects a prayer, this time to the God of hope. It is good practice to give God an appropriate title of praise relevant to the subject of the prayer, in this case because God is both the object and author of our hope: <<Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope>> (Psalm 119:49), <<a living hope>> (1 Peter 1:3c).

The final prayer wish echoes that in vv.5-6, but focuses even more on the theme of hope, which is the link word from v.12, see also v.4. Paul's prayer is not for himself but purely for the Romans that they might know the joy and peace that abound always from God, for our life is meant to be pure joy and lived in peace as we place our hope in God through his Holy Spirit. Elsewhere we read the response of Christians should be to: <<Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds>> (James 1:2).

The source of two of the great human desirables, joy and peace come from trust in God, but such trust is finally the gift of God, for believers overflow with hope only by his grace. Hope is the key and the greater our hope the more joy and peace we will know, and the Holy Spirit will receive all the glory for that.

Out of this, despite the still prevailing contradictory and incomplete features, flows and overflows the sure hope that God will yet completely fulfil his original purpose in creation and in the call first of Jew but now also of Gentile.

VII Romans 15:14-16:23 - The extension of God's righteousness through the Pauline mission

Paul focuses on his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles, adding some greetings and final instructions.

VII.a Romans 15:14-33 - The establishment of churches among the Gentiles

Paul explains his unique ministry to the Gentiles and exhorts the Roman church to be a sending base for his mission to Spain.

VII.a.i Romans 15:14-22 - Paul the minister to the Gentiles

¹⁴ I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

Romans 15:14

Paul had started his epistle: <<First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world>> (Romans 1:8), by commending the Romans and he will conclude it in the same manner. This will help them to come to terms with some of the sharp rebukes he felt it necessary to inform them of for their benefit and for God's ultimate glory. But it is always good to end on a positive note of exhortation for the saints. It was not however done in flattery but was a sincere compliment to show the high esteem he genuinely had for them by their excellent reputation. Praise from Paul was praise indeed for he was too discerning to be duped and too honest to flatter idly.

Paul addresses the Roman congregations as my brothers, although he had never met the bulk of them; such was the feeling of belonging to a family, with Christ as the eldest brother, which Paul had enjoyed in so many other congregations in the East, and which transcended the old ties of blood and kinship, that Paul could take it for granted that the Roman Christians would share a similar depth of feeling and mutual regard for each other; and indeed for him also.

The fulsome language, although very positive and uplifting, is exaggerated, in the way that courteous compliments in the East tended to be. Paul would not expect to be taken literally and phrases the first two items in deliberately vague and nonspecific terms: full of goodness, and complete in knowledge. The third phrase though is different.

The church in one sense did not need to hear what Paul wrote since they already knew the truths in the letter. Instruct translates the Greek word *noutheteō*, which can mean instruct, admonish, warn, or counsel, and is often used as a warning against wrong conduct: <<So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears>> (Acts 20:31), <<I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children>> (1 Corinthians 4:14), <<We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ>> (Colossians 1:28), <<Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone>> (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14), and: <<Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother>> (2 Thessalonians 3:15). Paul encourages ordinary Christians, no doubt especially those who have greater maturity and wisdom, to give one another practical, real-life wisdom and counsel.

¹⁵ I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:15-16

Paul acknowledges that this letter in places is blunt and that he is repeating some things they already knew, which is also acknowledged by Peter: <<Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking>> (2 Peter 3:1). However, Paul is commissioned by Christ to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and Rome was predominantly a Gentile church. Paul makes it clear that he is not trying to interfere or lord it over them, but that his credentials give him authority to make the recommendations and observations that are detailed in this epistle. What Paul has done is to expound the Gospel of Christ and he pointed out the ways they had deviated from it.

Paul is striving to find a satisfactory balance between his own sense of commission and responsibility toward Gentiles, and his desire that the churches of the Gentile mission grow in responsibility for themselves and maturity among themselves. So here, having laid on the compliments in no ungenerous spirit, he goes on immediately to stress and elaborate the other aspect, i.e. his own commissioning and enabling by God as minister of the Gospel.

The skill and delicacy of Paul's diplomacy, i.e. quite boldly, to remind you of them again, would no doubt be recognised and appreciated. Likewise his characterisation of his commission in terms of the grace God gave me, rather than explicitly as authorisation or command, would not strike his readers as in any way threatening, but rather remind them that all believers were thus commissioned and responsible for others; grace never as something merely received or possessed, but as God's powerful outreach in, through and with a view to its extending to others.

Paul functions, so to speak, as priest relative to the Gospel, and the offering he presents to God is Gentile converts, an offering acceptable to God. This offering is pleasing to God since it is set apart into the realm of the holy, i.e. sanctified by the Holy Spirit. By speaking of the Gentiles as themselves being the sacrifice, the same Gentiles who could not even approach the altar of sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple, who were instinctively regarded by the typically devout Jew as outside the covenant, unclean, and sinners. Paul confirms that for him the cultically defined barrier between peoples, between Jew and Gentile, had been broken through and left behind. In view of the tensions within their own congregations on matters of ritual purity, the Roman readership would not need reminding that cult and ritual served then, as ever, to express group identity and to mark out group boundaries. Nor would they need reminding that their weekly meetings without priest and without sacrifice or libation were highly unusual phenomena for their time. Paul's purpose seems to be to underline that, within God's redefined people, those set apart by the Holy Spirit, all ministry on behalf of others is priestly ministry: <<But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs>> (Philippians 2:25), and that cultic sacrifice had been replaced with the sacrifices displayed in day-to-day living in personal relationships.

¹⁷ Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.

Romans 15:17

Therefore, Paul, in a certain sense, actually boasts of his ministry, for in doing so he glorifies not himself but Christ, who has worked through him in his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul gives encouragement to the Roman church by giving a brief account of his work around many countries that shows the Romans are not alone but there are many like them around the empire. Paul does not do this in any way to magnify himself but gives the glory to God for the way this obedience to Christ has spread so widely and so rapidly in the face of such adversity: <<Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness>> (Psalm 115:1), and: <<Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" >> (1 Corinthians 1:31).

¹⁸ I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done —

Romans 15:18

What Christ has accomplished. It was Jesus Christ who was the authority behind both Paul's Gospel and Paul's mission, although in Paul's eyes the two were one anyway; hence again the tight cohesion of the central block of the letter with the personal explanations on either side of it; and not with the authority, remote and exalted in a distant heaven, but the one who was in fact acting through Paul. This is why Paul could boast, because he could take no credit for what

he had done. And what Christ had done, and not just Paul, was at work in leading the gentiles to obey God.

Paul summarises his entire ministry up to this point by saying that Christ accomplished his work through him by word and deed, i.e. by what I have said and done, that is, both by Paul's preaching about Christ and by Paul's actions revealed in his lifestyle and with the mighty works that accompanied those words.

¹⁹ by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

Romans 15:19

By the power of signs and miracles, or wonders in some translations, refers to the miracles that accompanied Paul's Gospel proclamation throughout his entire ministry. Such miracles gave a sign of, or pointed to, the power of God, the divine origin and truth of the Gospel, and God's mercy and love for people. They were wonders in that people were amazed by them: <<Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus>> (Acts 4:30), <<The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade>> (Acts 5:12), <<So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders>> (Acts 14:3), <<The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them>> (Acts 15:12), <<The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles – were done among you with great perseverance>> (2 Corinthians 12:12), and: <<God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will>> (Hebrews 2:4).

Paul has fulfilled his mandate to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles from Jerusalem to the Roman province of Illyricum, which in Paul's day was approximately the region of Dalmatia, but by 321 AD encompassed roughly the region comprising what is now Albania and also what was formerly Yugoslavia, see the image.



How can Paul say that his work has been complete when many still have not heard the Gospel in this area? It can be seen from the following verses that churches have been planted in key centres, and from there Paul's co-workers would continue the work in order to bring the Gospel to outlying areas, e.g. Epaphras in Colossæ: <<You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf>> (Colossians 1:7).

Paul tells how he went to places where Christ was unknown, although God was worshipped there through local Jewish populations, because he was the first Christian preacher to go to these places. Apart from Judaism, only idolatry and witchcraft existed. Therefore, Paul's success is all the more glorious and he gives full acknowledgement that it was not he but Jesus that produced the fruit of Paul's labours: <<But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me>> (1 Corinthians 15:10).

²⁰ It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. ²¹ Rather, as it is written:

“Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.”

Romans 15:20-21

Paul's aim was to preach the Gospel in areas where no churches existed. His calling was not to plant churches where they already existed. Thereby he was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 52:15 <<so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand>>. As ever, where Paul can find a scripture to round off a line of argument he likes to do so and, once again, from his favourite, Isaiah. It confirms what he had said and makes his successful work all the more remarkable. Those who heard, not only saw and understood but they came into obedience of Christ by accepting the full Gospel; thus many souls came to salvation.

Paul had preached effectively and consistently. His ministry was accompanied by many signs and wonders: speaking in tongues, the lame walked and the dead were raised. Yet Paul is the first always to acknowledge that it was not him but the power of Christ's Holy Spirit in him that achieved everything done in the name of Jesus.

Although Paul's work was extensive and to be admired in the arc from Jerusalem to Illyricum, he did not claim that it was complete. Paul saw his mission as working in major population centres, e.g. Corinth and Ephesus, as setting up the base for a regional ministry, like lighting candles in an arc around the north eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean Sea area, then leaving it to fellow co-workers to expand the light into the wider region once the flames were burning steadily. His intention now was to set up Rome as his base for the north western quadrant, with Spain especially in mind. Thus Paul manages to maintain the strong implication that his missionary strategy and plans dovetail into his theology of the Gospel in a way which shows the structure of the letter to be ever more compact and integrated.

²² This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

Romans 15:22

Paul had been prevented from coming to Rome because of his work of planting churches in unreached areas in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, i.e. the key cities from which the Gospel radiated outward, had not been completed.

VII.a.i i Romans 15:23-33 - Paul's plan to visit Rome

Now at last Paul comes to his most specific request and reason for writing to his Roman fellow Christians. He had prepared the ground in general terms at the beginning of the letter, and his language here deliberately picks up and repeats the same general concerns, i.e. the long sequence of hindrances which had prevented his coming before, the long cherished desire to visit them, and the desire for mutual benefit and refreshment from the visit. But now he can be more specific and he wants their help and support on two matters.

²³ 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 see you, ²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Romans 15:23-24

Paul has a gracious tone to his writing, making it clear that he desired to come to them to enjoy fellowship with them, just as he has heard they desired to speak with him. It is not the great city that attracts him, not the opportunity to debate with learned philosophers, who abound in Rome as much as in Athens, but it was to the poor saints of Rome that he desired to be with, those who loved God and were loved by God: <<As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight>> (Psalm 16:3). It was only God's will that Paul should do other things that had kept him from coming sooner; those who delight in God have the desire of their hearts fulfilled: <<Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart>> (Psalm 37:4), even if all the desires of the heart are not humoured!

Paul now feels that his work in the East has come to an end. So he hopes to see the Roman church, and desires that they would function as his base of support for his mission to Spain. By the 1st Century AD Spain was firmly a part of the Roman Empire, providing significant crops to the empire, and it was the fatherland of several important Roman authors and a few later emperors as well; thus it would have been a strategic location for Paul to evangelise. No visit of Paul to Spain is recorded in the NT, but it is possible he went there after his release from prison in Rome, after Acts 28:30-31 <<For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ>>, which would have been approximately AD62. There is some historical evidence after the NT suggesting that Paul did preach in Spain, but it falls short of clear proof.

Paul's intentions to travel to various places had been hindered, sometimes by the devil: <<For we wanted to come to you — certainly I, Paul, did, again and again — but Satan stopped us>> (1 Thessalonians 2:18), and sometimes by the Holy Spirit: <<When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to>> (Acts 16:7). Paul was always obedient to God's call and discerning of barriers. Man has intentions but it is God's will that is done: <<In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps>> (Proverbs 16:9), <<Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails>> (Proverbs 19:21), and: <<I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps>> (Jeremiah 10:23). The Gospel does not come by chance to any place but always by the will of God. Paul may have desired to go to Rome but God had more important work for him to do; even a season of lost souls may mean they are lost for all eternity thus, those called to mission, cannot be diverted, even for a short while. The church in Rome was relatively secure compared to the regions Paul worked in, so Rome could wait while Paul did what was right, as did Mary by sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to him: <<"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her">> (Luke 10:41-42).

Whether or not Paul got to Spain, he probably received God's blessing for considering it just as David did in desiring to build the temple in Jerusalem: <<But the Lord said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a temple for my Name, you did well to have this in your heart>> (2 Chronicles 6:8). Paul writes that it is his desire to visit, not his intention, as he knows it is not his decision: <<Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth>> (Proverbs 27:1), and: <<Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that">> (James 4:13-15).

In terms of a rapid sweep, ground breaking strategy, Paul's work in the East could be regarded as complete. There was, without doubt, plenty of scope for building on the foundation he had laid and for expanding from the centres he had established. But in comparison with the virgin territories in the West, there was no longer the same need or scope for his particular apostolic calling. For one thinking in terms of a broad circular strategy, the two most obvious regions were southern Gaul and Spain. For whatever reason, no longer available to us, Paul set his sights on Spain.

This is a very delicate matter that Paul is addressing. He does want to visit Rome and to spend some time sharing with them in fellowship, but he makes it clear that he is not looking for a position of leadership in their church. Nor is he claiming to be their apostle. This can be determined by comparing the language he uses here with that written to the church in Corinth, which Paul had planted and felt a part of: <<Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord>> (1 Corinthians 9:1-2). However, he is looking to establish Rome as a base and hoping they will provide financial and logistic support for his new mission. In addition to that, there seems to be an expectation, or a hope at least, that the congregations in Rome will become his fellow workers just as others had done in the churches he had established in the East.

Romans 15:25-29

Paul's language as this section continues to show his absolute certainty of the things of God but a reluctance to pin such hope on those things that are of men. We cannot expect too little of people and we cannot expect too much of God. Paul clearly expected to come to them full of the blessings of God and the Gospel to do them good: <<I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong>> (Romans 1:11).

Secondly, Paul wants their support in his more immediate task, that is, to take the collection to Jerusalem; and for this he desires their prayers (v.30). This was a task on which Paul placed the highest priority. More immediately important than extending the missionary sweep to the West (v.25); a task to which he had devoted considerable resources of time and energy for some years, as we know from the correspondence with Corinth itself. The way Paul speaks of it here, using terminology, e.g. service, which was unspecific in itself, but which had become established in his earlier correspondence on the subject, i.e. 2 Corinthians Chapters 8-9, indicates Paul's confidence that the subject would be well enough known among the Roman Christians. So he would probably expect them to recognise the same delicacy of touch which characterised his approach to them. On the one hand, he describes the recipients of the collection in terms which would resonate very positively with the Jerusalem believers themselves, e.g. 'the saints there', 'the poor among the saints in Jerusalem', etc. Although Paul has already made it clear to his readers that he would have no truck with such a title being used of Jewish believers in a sectarian or exclusive way: <<To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ>> (Romans 1:7), the double use referring to the Jerusalem saints here in

vv.25-26 indicates willingness to find common ground and non-contentious language on an issue of great sensitivity. Similarly, the continued use of cultic imagery and talk of Gentile obligation toward Jerusalem (vv.27-28), Paul would no doubt be aware, could be taken within a strongly nationalistic Jewish Christian church to give some support to the eschatological expectation of Gentile tribute to Jerusalem and Gentile acknowledgement of the Jerusalem Temple as the focal point of God's final rule (v.16).

²⁵ Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.

Romans 15:25

The trip to Rome cannot be carried out immediately. Paul's next task is to travel to Jerusalem to bring the money he had arranged to be collected for the poor saints there: <<Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me>> (1 Corinthians 16:1-4), and confirmed in 2 Corinthians Chapters 8-9. Paul did indeed travel with them, collecting the offering from Corinth in person, then visiting Macedonia and Asia on his way to Jerusalem. The account of this is recorded in Acts 20:1-21:20. It also lists the men who were chosen to accompany him.

²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

Romans 15:26

Christians from the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia had gladly contributed to the collection. These provinces were roughly equivalent to northern and southern Greece today. This collection would include gifts from such cities as Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth, which are all shown on the previous image.

Pleased to make a contribution. Paul emphasises twice, here and at the start of the next verse, that this is a freewill offering from the Gentile churches. He mentions two regions but it is almost certain there were other contributors, especially Asian churches based around Ephesus, which is acknowledged by the list of those that would accompany Paul with the offerings to Jerusalem, both to provide security and to support Paul's integrity in the matter.

His description of the poor saints may well have had the impact of enticing the Roman church to make an offering of their own and Paul's language would not be accidental in this, for it was one of his commitments that he had made to the other apostles when setting out on his ministry to the Gentiles. It has always been that Christians are amongst the poorest generally, although there are many believers who are blessed with wealth, however, poverty for Christ is not a curse but a privilege, for it is often caused by a world that hates Christians. That Jerusalem had poorer saints than elsewhere could be that all the people of that declining nation were getting poorer, that the famine that had hit much of the empire in the days of Claudius were still having an impact in Judæa, or that the malice of the Jews was stronger in Jerusalem than elsewhere and so the persecution was fiercer: <<You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions>> (Hebrews 10:34). It was only a generation ago that it was the Jerusalem saints who were laying their gifts at the feet of the apostles to care for the Hellenist widows (Acts Chapter 6). Although the giving of alms leads to righteousness: <<He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor, his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be lifted high in honour>> (Psalm 112:9), it was not for this reason that the Greeks were now expected to give to the poor Jewish Christians; it was because of their spiritual heritage that gave them the greatest gift of all that they should share in their material wealth.

²⁷ They 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.

Romans 15:27

They were pleased. The gladness of the Gentiles in providing for the needs of Jewish Christians is fitting. They stand in debt to the Jews, for they enjoy the spiritual blessings of the Jewish people and hence should happily assist them financially. Paul assumes that financial aid for needy Christians is a normal part of the Christian life.

They owe it to them. Although the churches had a Christian heart for the poor, Paul goes on to point out the obligation that Gentiles had towards the Jews, for it was through the Jews that they had received their own salvation. Paul speaks of this obligation in Galatians 2:10, see comments made on v.28. However the Jerusalem leadership might understand it, for Paul himself it was an act of service, the recognition of a need in one part of the people of Christ which could be met by other parts; it was an act of fellowship arising out of the common experience of grace given in terms of need not merit, the same level of mutual concern and interdependence which characterised the body of Christ at the local level.

There were several reasons for there being so many poor Christians in Jerusalem, some of which have already been expressed. Many people were attracted to the city because it was the centre from which the faith had spread and they were drawn to it. In doing so, they had often spent what little money they had on the journey to get there. In addition, Judæa was now a very poor region, the land was becoming even more barren, the Romans had first pick of the crops, so food prices were high, and the burden of taxation was heavy. The Jews themselves were reliant on the Temple tax that came in annually from the Diaspora Jews who lived in wealthier parts of the Roman Empire and were, in the main, exempted from some of the Roman taxes if they paid the Temple tax. However, many of those that had come over to the Christian faith were then cut off from their synagogues and, indeed, often from their families and communities as well, for the choice they had made to follow Christ Jesus. Therefore, the offerings from the Christian churches in other regions could be used in a similar way to the Temple tax and would show a close affinity between different Christian groups, and indeed would acknowledge the role played by the Jews in bringing salvation to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.

²⁸ So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.

Romans 15:28

After I have completed this task. Paul did not take the offerings by neglecting his other duties but performed the collections as part of his various visits. He had no money of his own, other than that which he earned as a tent maker, relying solely on the charity of others, yet was faithful in transporting money to others in need in line with his promise to the apostles James, Peter and John: <<All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do>> (Galatians 2:10).

Paul refers to the offerings as this fruit because it is the fruit of righteousness.

After the collection has been delivered in Jerusalem, Paul plans to travel to Rome and then on to Spain. Paul was imprisoned, however, after he arrived in Jerusalem. Paul's plan to come to Rome was realised and is recorded in Acts Chapters 22-28, but not in the way he had intended, since he arrived in Rome as a prisoner three years or so later due to a plot by the Jews to kill him at Corinth, and then his imprisonment in Jerusalem and Cæsarea.

²⁹ I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

Romans 15:29

Paul declares in full confidence that he will finally reach Rome after several years of hoping to do so and that his visit will be truly fruitful for that is what he means by saying I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

³⁰ I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

Romans 15:30

The reason why Paul explains his objective in going to Jerusalem only becomes clear in this paragraph. He appeals to them once again as brothers, appealing for their prayers in terms both of their commitment to the same Lord: <<That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved>> (Romans 10:9), and to their common experience of the love of God and neighbour given by the Holy Spirit: <<And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us>> (Romans 5:5). Whether he thought Roman contacts with Jerusalem would be able to influence the outcome at Jerusalem or not, or would be in time to do so in the event is unclear and unlikely. What Paul asks for is their prayers. This is no light request though, for Paul believes in the effectiveness of prayer. And no light request either, for what he calls for is a hard discipline of prayer, an earnest striving, an agonising. The language should not be treated lightly; Paul envisaged his time in Jerusalem as his severest challenge yet, a fierce contest in which he might well be the loser. This is confirmed by a statement he later made to the Ephesian elders in Miletus on his way to Jerusalem: <<I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me>> (Acts 20:23).

³¹ Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judæa and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there,

Romans 15:31

Two prayer requests are found here:

1. that Paul would be rescued from the unbelievers in Judæa, and
2. that his offering would be acceptable to the saints in Jerusalem.

Some think the first request was not answered since Paul was arrested in Judæa at the impulse of the Jews. But it seems his prayer was answered, for the Jews desired to put him to death, refer to Acts Chapters 22-28, and this desire was frustrated, so that Paul did go to Rome, even if not in the way he anticipated. Further, Acts suggests that the offering was accepted in Jerusalem: <<After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings>> (Acts 24:17).

In view of all the issues that Paul believed he would face in Jerusalem, the strength of Paul's determination to personally deliver the offerings becomes all the more impressive, and his determination to maintain the continuity and unity between the Diaspora churches and Jerusalem, even at the risk of his own life, can be seen in its full significance. The sharpness of the differences and the breadth of the diversity gave him no desire to break Christianity up into discontinuous entities.

³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.

Romans 15:32

Paul arrived in Rome in an unexpected way, at least it was unexpected at the time he wrote this letter but became increasingly clear to him through the Spirit, that it was as a prisoner that Paul would eventually arrive in Rome, but he did come with the joy of Christ and as an encouragement for fellow Christians: <<The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they travelled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged. When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him>> (Acts 28:15-16).

³³ The God of peace be with you all. Amen.

The strain which Paul is under as he contemplated the possible outcome of his trip to Jerusalem continues to be reflected in his closing remarks. To complete their prayers they should ask that he be able to come to them, so that in their company he could relax and find rest and refreshment after the tensions of even a successful visit to Jerusalem. And his concluding wish appropriately is addressed to the God of peace. Paul the Jew, who is also an apostle to the Gentiles, says the Jewish benediction over his mainly Gentile readers.

The reason why Paul has inserted his lengthy exposition between the two sets of personal explanations: <<First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome>> (Romans 1:8-15), and here in vv.14-33, and why he delayed going into detail regarding his reasons for writing has now become clearer. The long discussion from Romans 1:16-15:13 was preparing the way for these more detailed requests in two ways: on the one hand, it served as an indication of what Paul could contribute to them in the mutual sharing of their faith, i.e. the teaching embodied in the letter is in part exchange for the help he asks from them; and, on the other hand, it indicated the argument he would use to defend himself in Jerusalem, if called upon to do so, as he no doubt fully expected to be. This recognition of the significance of the structure thus helps explain the character and unified but several purposes of the whole letter.