

Romans 15:22-24 Transitions in our lives

In 15:22 Paul makes a summary statement concluding the previous section (15:14-22), *This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you*. In 15:23a he explains that his ministry in *these regions* has come to a conclusion. In 15:23b-24 he expresses once more his desire to visit Rome, and now that he is planning on visiting Spain he will have the opportunity. These few verses give us the opportunity to consider Paul's calling, and ours; and to think about times of transition in our lives.

Paul had been delayed in visiting Rome because he was busy fulfilling his ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles in *these regions*, which were from *Jerusalem and all the way round to Illyricum* (Romans 15:19). Paul had a clear sense of his calling as an Apostle (Romans 1:1). We do not have Paul's call, but we have all been called to follow Jesus and serve him with the gifts God has given to us. According to the dictionary, an apostle is a) one of the 12 disciples chosen by Jesus, b) a leader of a Christian mission to a new country or region. Paul wasn't one of the 12, but he was a pioneer missionary into new regions, breaking new ground, winning people to Christ, and establishing new congregations with viable leadership. Paul received this calling at his conversion (Acts 9:15), and it was because he was fulfilling this calling *from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum* that he was unable to visit Rome sooner.

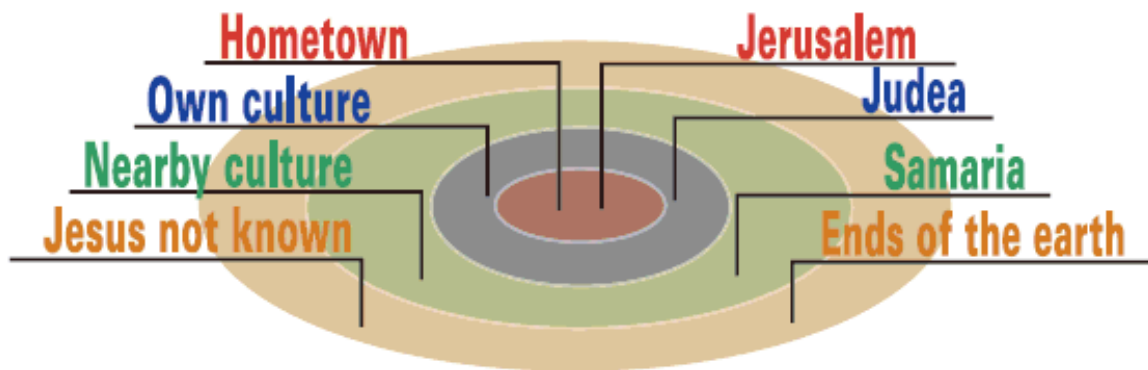
The same can be true for us. We may have unfulfilled desires, unfulfilled God given desires, but circumstances have not been right, and it has been important to busy ourselves with the task the Lord has given to us 'now'.

The map below shows the regions Paul was working in.



Illyricum was a prosperous Roman Province, in the region of modern day Albania, Croatia and Slovenia. Paul didn't preach in Illyricum, but he reached the edge of the Province. Interestingly he didn't really minister much in Jerusalem either! And Jerusalem wasn't either Gentile or virgin soil!

What did Paul mean by saying he had preached all the way *from Jerusalem*? It is most likely that Paul sited Jerusalem since Jerusalem was the starting point for the Gentile mission in general (see Isaiah 2:3). After His resurrection, Jesus explained His will that the gospel would go out into all nations, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). They were empowered by the Spirit to witness to the gospel, beginning at Jerusalem, and spreading outwards.



The book of Acts is structured in the same way, with the gospel preached first in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and then into all the world. In Acts it is Paul who pioneers this mission into all the world. Acts finishes in chapter 28 at the centre of Imperial Power, in Rome. But the Christian mission didn't end, and it is as if we are all still living in Acts 29!

Paul undoubtedly shared the vision given by Jesus, and we should also. But in the light of church history, we should be reminded that preaching the gospel in all the world isn't a bid for dominion or political power, but it is a witness to the gospel of Jesus which has the power of transform the lives of sinners (Romans 1:17). Furthermore, Paul wasn't a lone wolf, doing his own thing, but he stayed and worked within his own (Jewish) community.

God gave Paul a unique insight into the gospel (Galatians 1:12) to enable him to be Apostle to the Gentiles. It was sufficiently unique that Paul was able to call it *my gospel* (Romans 2:16, 16:25, 2Timothy 2:8). The unique insight was that Gentiles could become members of Israel, the family of God (Ephesians 2:12) without becoming Jewish. This was the major issue at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), the outcome of which was an affirmation of "Paul's" gospel. It has also been the central message of Romans. Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-10). Paul's contention was that no-one could be made right with God by *works of the law* like circumcision, Sabbath, festivals etc, i.e. those things that define someone as Jewish, but through faith in Jesus Christ alone.¹

In the same way, we cannot be saved by being born into a Christian family, or going to church, or celebrating Christmas, or anything like that which would define us as Christian to a watching world. Rather, it is only through repentance and faith in Christ we can be saved (Acts 15:11).

¹ Throughout this series I have understood *works of the law* not as 'good works' or the law/Torah in general, but rather as a narrower category of works such as circumcision, which would define someone as Jewish. In doing so, on this point I am following theologians like NT Wright, but also teachers with a Messianic perspective. This approach does not undermine justification by faith (alone) but rather clarifies the Biblical perspective on faith and works.

So Paul's calling was unique; but so is ours. There is a saying of the Jewish sages, *When a human being makes many coins from the same mint, they all the same. God makes everyone in the same image – His image – yet none is the same as another.* Each one of us is different, with different calling, gifts, personality. But we should all share in the outward looking vision given by Christ for reaching the whole world (at least our part of the whole world) for Him. Nevertheless there is tremendous variety in the expression of that calling.

There are also times of transition in our lives. Paul was in a time of transition as he realised that his work in *these regions* had come to a conclusion, and that there was a need to embrace new things. Paul kept hold of the heavenly vision to press on to the uttermost parts of the world, which at the time was Spain: *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* (Romans 15:23-24).

Transitions involve change and change is usually unsettling. It can involve change at work, or in the family, or ways we are serving in church. The key in times of change is to seek the Lord and to ask for His direction, *for as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God* (Romans 8:14).

When Paul said that he *no longer has any room for work in these regions*, there are two things he didn't mean. 1) He didn't mean there was no more work to do. There will always be more work to do! Rather, he had completed his pioneering ministry in *these regions*, and he could now pass the work on to others (1Corinthians 3:10). 2) He didn't mean it was time for a holiday or retirement. There is no retirement from following the Lord. We have an important role, even if it is a changed role, until the Lord takes us to Himself. This calls for patient endurance.

Paul's ambition was to reach Spain. But did he ever reach Spain? This is a matter of considerable debate! The problem is that there is no biblical evidence that Paul reached Spain. Paul's ministry in Acts finishes in Rome. However, the Spanish think he reached Spain; there are plenty of churches of San Palau in Spain! More significantly, writings of the church fathers indicate it is quite possible that Paul reached Spain. For example,

1 Clement 5:5-6 *By reason of jealousy and strife Paul by his example pointed out the prize of patient endurance. After that he had been seven times in bonds, had been driven into exile, had been stoned, had preached in the East and in the West, he won the noble renown which was the reward of his faith, having taught righteousness unto the whole world and having reached the farthest bounds of the West [i.e. Spain]; and when he had borne his testimony before the rulers, so he departed from the world and went unto the holy place, having been found **a majestic pattern of patient endurance.***

Although this is not definitive, and in once sense it doesn't really matter, it is interesting. Furthermore, we get an insight into the high esteem Paul was held: *a majestic pattern of patient endurance.*

It is particularly in times of transition and change that we need patient endurance to press on into the new phase of our lives into which God may be leading us (Phil 3:12-14).