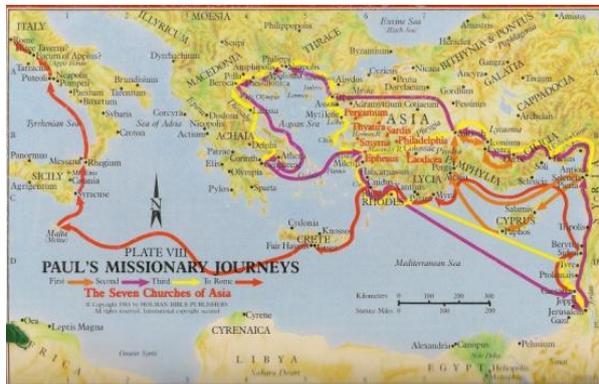


## Romans 15:25-29

Last week we left off with Paul planning to extend the Gentile mission to the ends of the earth, as far as Spain, and planning to visit Rome on the way. But he decided to take a detour first, via Jerusalem, to take a gift of aid to the poor believers in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25). This entailed going in exactly the opposite direction from Rome, assuming Paul was writing from Corinth (see map).



This 'slight' diversion of about 2000 miles didn't seem to bother Paul. It would, after all, be his last opportunity to visit Jerusalem before launching out to the outermost parts of the earth, and he attached much importance to this trip.

We usually want to go from A to B as quickly as possible, but in life God often leads us the long way round. For example, after the Israelites came out of Egypt, God led them the long way round to the Red Sea. He knew that their faith wasn't strong enough to face the Philistines, and that at the first sign of danger they would want to return to Egypt (Exodus 1:17-18). God led them the long way round because it was the safe way round. God always knows best, which is why we need to do our best to trust in His leading.

There is no question that Paul longed to visit the Roman believers, and there is no doubting his desire to further the Gentile mission. But he had this matter of aid to attend to for the Jerusalem Church first.

Paul had been fund raising. Not though, by doing a sponsored walk! But by encouraging the churches in the regions he had been working in to give, including Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:26). The churches of Macedonia and Achaia included Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth.



We know from the book of Acts that Paul made it to Jerusalem and brought the gift (Acts 24:17). This gift is also mentioned in 1&2 Corinthians. In 1Corinthians Paul asks (rather tells!) the church to put something aside each week for the saints in Jerusalem (1Corinthians 16:1-4). But the Corinthians

church procrastinated, so in 2Corinthians Paul exhorted them a second time to *complete among you this act of grace* (2Corinthians 8:6). In fact he devotes two whole chapters (8&9) to the subject of giving, including a lot of teaching on the subject.

The importance of giving to the poor is a principle firmly rooted in Scripture. There are many examples that could be cited. One is found in Deuteronomy 15:7-8, *If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.* We should bear in mind that the context of this passage is the Sabbatical year, when all debts were to be cancelled (at least that was the theory.) So to lend to a poor person, especially near to the Sabbatical year was in effect to lend in the expectation of not getting it back. So, in Deuteronomy 15:10 we read, *You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.*

I'm sure Jesus had Scriptures like this in mind when he taught about giving to the poor (Matthew 6:2-3, 'not 'if' but 'when' *you give to the poor*); and Luke 6:38, *Give and it shall be given unto you.* In 2Corinthians 9:6-10 Paul uses the farming analogy of sowing and reaping. It seems he has Deuteronomy 15:10 in mind when he speaks of not giving *grudgingly*.

The Bible encourages generous giving because God is a generous God. In fact His generosity is overflowing, able to meet all our needs. He richly rewards all those who give to the poor. This does not mean we give £10 with the expectation of getting £100 in return. It is up to the Lord how he will bless you. The blessing may be a spiritual blessing. Or, who knows, He may decide to withhold the blessing until the world to come.

The fact is that people, whether through their own fault or not, sometimes fall on hard times, and are in need of help. In this country we are blessed with a welfare system, but as we know, even then some people fall through the net.

There is a balance in the Bible. On the one hand the Law (Torah) teaches that it is the responsibility of the whole of society to help the poor, through godly laws (such as a welfare system) and personal giving and generosity. Anyone who finds themselves in need of help shouldn't feel embarrassed or too proud to accept help. On the other hand there is an expectation in the Bible that people will want to get up back on their own feet and earn their living (e.g. 2Thessalonians 3:10). Laziness is not a virtue! There is always the danger, as Lord Carey said in 2012, that a welfare system simply *rewards fecklessness and irresponsibility*.

You could say it is a balance in the Bible between socialism and capitalism! One thing is for sure, whatever political persuasion you may be, there is trouble when we leave God on the outside. The Labour party was founded on Christian principles and prayer meetings; however it has now well and truly left God out, and has been overtaken by Marxist ideology. But when capitalism becomes removed from its biblical roots, as has largely happened in the Western World, it becomes driven by greed and desire for profit, and lacks human compassion.

God has compassion for the poor, and Paul was always eager to meet the needs of the poor where he could (Galatians 2:10). Now the church in Jerusalem had fallen on hard times, quite possibly

because of persecution, Paul was eager to help. But there was another reason why this gift of aid mattered so much to Paul, which explains why he was prepared to make a 2000 mile detour, and which gets to the heart of his ministry as Apostle to the Gentiles.

**Romans 15:27** *For 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.*

The heartbeat of Paul's ministry was that Jew and Gentile might together with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:6). Paul wanted to actively encourage fellowship between the natural branches and those wild branches which made up most of Paul's congregations. He wanted the Gentiles to remember where their blessings had come from (Ephesians 1:3). We also need to remember where our blessings, including our Bible, came from and give honour where honour is due: it came from the Jews. We should remember God's word to Abraham, which applies today,

**Genesis 12:3** *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

Historically this is something the church forgot. But it is important to recognise that Israel is still central to God's plan of redemption for the world. Indeed Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4). The present day Middle East problem is still essentially a Jew-Gentile problem, which will only find a solution in Jesus Christ, ultimately when He returns. But Paul had this vision of Jew and Gentile glorifying God with one voice, as one new man in Christ (Ephesians 2:15), 2000 years ago, and was actively working to promote it.

So Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, and the Roman believers were going to have to wait a bit longer for their visit! (Romans 15:28).