

Great Expectations

Holy Obsession – Part IV

Romans 15:20-29

Introduction

For several decades, Dr. Charles McCoy pastored a church in Oyster Bay, New York. While pastoring, as a single man, he had time to continue his education. He eventually earned seven graduate and post-graduate degrees. When he turned seventy-two, his Baptist denomination required that he retire from ministry. Reluctantly, he stepped away from the pulpit and the people he had faithfully pastored for decades.

In reality, he was not quite sure what to do with himself. He wrote, “I keep thinking that my life’s over, and I haven’t really done anything yet. I’ve pastored this church for so many years . . . I’ve spent a lot of time working for degrees, but I haven’t won very many people to the Lord.”

One week after his retirement party, he met a missionary who invited him to come to India to preach. Dr. McCoy deferred, citing his age. Besides, he had never been overseas, had never traveled across America, or for that matter, flown in a plane. He could not imagine traveling to India. Not the least of his concerns was the fact that he did not have that kind of money.

The thought of going, however, nagged at him. Finally, seventy-two year old, white haired Dr. Charles McCoy announced he would indeed go to India. He sold his car and a few possessions to buy a one-way ticket to Bombay.

His friends were horrified. They asked, “What if you fall ill? What if you should die in India?”

He replied with new-found faith and courage, “It’s just as close to heaven from there as it is from here.”

Dr. McCoy arrived in Bombay with his billfold, his passport, a satchel of clothes and his Bible – all of which were taken in a matter of minutes by some very clever pickpockets. He was left with only the clothes on his back and the address of the missionaries.

The man who had originally invited him to come and preach had decided to stay in America, so when he showed up on the missionaries’ doorstep, they were not sure what to do with him. They invited him in and gave him a small guest room.

Dr. McCoy was anxious to do something for Christ. After two days of getting acclimated, he announced to the missionaries that he was going to visit the mayor of Bombay.

“Don’t waste your time,” his new friends advised. After several years of trying, they had never been able to see the mayor.

However, Dr. McCoy had prayed about it and went anyway, without an appointment. He presented his business card to the receptionist, who looked at it carefully and then, disappeared through a door. Returning, she told him to come back at 3 o’clock.

Dr. McCoy returned that afternoon to find a reception in his honor attended by some of the most important civic leaders in Bombay. It seems the city fathers had been greatly impressed by McCoy’s tall frame (he was 6’4”), his distinguished white hair, and all the degrees after his name. “He is a very important

person,” they thought, “perhaps even a representative of the President of the United States.”

Dr. McCoy was able to speak for a half hour, giving his testimony and speaking to them about Jesus Christ. At the end, he was politely applauded by the assembled crowd. Afterward, he was approached by a man in an impressive military uniform. The man invited him to speak to the students of his military school, which – as it turned out – was India’s equivalent to West Point. After his first address, McCoy was invited back repeatedly.

Invitations soon poured in from all over India, so he began an itinerant ministry of preaching the gospel. In Calcutta, he started a church for Chinese believers. He was asked to do the same in Hong Kong, where he was invited to come and live. He was then invited to Egypt and the Middle East, traveling everywhere with an energy that he had seldom before felt.

He traveled and preached, planting churches, teaching in schools, discipling believers, speaking before government leaders and dignitaries in several countries. His international ministry would last for sixteen years. He died at the age of eighty-eight, in Calcutta, India, just before he was to preach at a special rally to men downtown.

Dr. Charles McCoy never once came back to America.

Can you imagine the challenges and changes in his life? As a forty or fifty or even a seventy year old man, he had no idea what God had in mind. Had God informed him what He had up His divine sleeve for Dr. McCoy when he was in his seventy-second year, he probably would have fainted dead away.

This is like Daniel of old, whose life had a dramatic reversal and who entered the lion’s den in his eighty’s, although some think he was in his ninety’s. What a way to go! But God had still more surprises in store.

In truth, we all have our list of expectations. Whether we have written them down or not, we have a mental list that looks something like:

- these are three things I expect God to do with my life;
- these are four things I do not expect to ever go through;
- these are two things that I expect God to do with my career by the time I turn thirty or forty;

- this is where I will live and this is what I want to be doing by the time I am fifty or sixty;
- these are two things I expect God to do while I am in school;
- these are the things I expect God to provide for my children;
- these are three things I expect God will do with my finances.

We all have our own original volume written in our hearts, entitled “Great Expectations”. And they might be great things indeed.

However, what if these expectations do not come true? What if God has something entirely different in mind for you?

This is exactly what happened in the life of the apostle Paul.

Paul’s Obsession

In Romans 15, Paul has been sharing his heart; his passion; his obsessions. In the latter part of the paragraph, beginning with verse 20, Paul provides for us an inside look at his great expectations; his plans.

It is as if Paul opens up his first century Day-Timer to show us where he has penciled in certain plans. Some of it is not in pencil – it is in water resistant, permanent, magic marker.

However, before he reveals his plans, Paul reveals his passion. Look at Romans 15:20.

And thus I aspired to preach the gospel . . .

The word “aspired” does not quite carry the same punch as the original compound word Paul used. “Philotimeomai (φιλοτιμωμαι),” means, “to love and to honor (τιμη)”¹

Paul is saying that this is the honorable love of his heart; this is his passion; his ambition; his obsession – as it could be translated.

Not only was Paul obsessed with godly living and the grace of God and the glory of God, which we have already discovered in this series, but he also had a holy obsession for the global advancement of Christ’s gospel. He was literally obsessed with the great commission.

Ask someone what they are passionate about; what they obsess over and you will discover a great deal about that person.

Paul would say, “I am obsessed with the declaration of the gospel of Christ.”

He quotes in Romans 15:21, from Isaiah, broadly applying the prophet's words to the process of evangelism that began in Paul's day and will continue throughout church history until Christ returns.ⁱⁱ

Paul says, "I plan to be in the thick of it!"

He was like a more recent missionary to Africa named David Livingstone, who was once asked, "Where do you want to go?"

He responded, "Anywhere, as long as it is forward."ⁱⁱⁱ

Livingstone was passionate about reaching Africa with the gospel of Christ.

Paul was likewise obsessed with reaching his world for Christ.

Edward Gibbon, in his famous work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, quotes a church leader named Tertullian, who explained the rapid expansion of the gospel in the first century. Tertullian wrote, "We are but of yesterday, but we have filled every place among you – cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace and your senate – we have left nothing [alone] but the temples of your gods."

Harnack, the German church historian, wrote that the great mission of Christianity was accomplished by means of informal missionaries.^{iv}

This is a wonderful description. These are neither vocational missionaries nor formally trained missionaries, but the work for Christ is accomplished by means of these informal missionaries.

We dedicated several teams of informal missionaries today. I trust we have a church filled with them today – having this same obsession to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This was Paul's obsession. He now reveals his objectives to travel to three places.

Paul's Objectives

Paul gives us three personal goals in Romans 15. I recommend underlining these, which include:

1. The first goal is in verse 23,
... [I am] longing to come to you
2. The second goal is in verse 25,
... I am going to Jerusalem ...
3. The third goal is in verse 28,
I will go on by way of you to Spain.
Look back at verse 24,

whenever I go to Spain . . .

Paul had these three major ministry plans:

- a short term goal to go to the believers in Rome (verse 23);
- an immediate goal to go to Jerusalem (verse 25);
- a long range goal to go to Spain (verses 24 and 28).

Paul's short term goal to go to Rome

I need to inform you that none of Paul's objectives; none of his plans turned out like he thought they would.

Notice the way Paul admits to this in Romans 15:22,

For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you;

In other words, "I had to mark it off my calendar time and time again."

The word translated "prevented" or "hindered" is a word that means, "to cut in". It described warfare in Paul's day, when armies often cut deep gullies into the road so that the enemy army would have to stop and fill in the ditch before they could drive their wagons across.

We talk about hitting "a bump in the road" or "an obstacle in our path," which convey the same idea.

Paul is picturing himself on a wagon, driving at full speed toward Rome, but he has to stop again and again because the road is not passable. Other things come up. Other ministries demand his attention. Other believers need help. Not to mention the beatings and hardships and shipwrecks he experiences along the way.

How long has Paul been hindered from going to Rome? He gives us a clue in Romans 15:23.

but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you

Did you catch this? Paul says, "I have been longing to come to you for many years!"

Paul would go forward in his calendar a few months and write in bold letters, "Going to Rome." Then, it would not happen. So, he would go forward another month or two and with great longing, write, "Going to Rome now." Paul did this, in effect, for years.

Maybe you have longed for something good and godly for six months or for a year or for several years. Paul will long for most of his Christian life to go to Rome. Then, when he finally gets to Rome, it will be nothing like he imagined.

He will not arrive in Rome as a pioneer, he will arrive as a prisoner.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- If you happen to believe that a Christian has been vaccinated against misfortune, you are going to be disappointed at the first sign of sickness.
- If you are under the impressions that the closer a person walks with God, the more likely his plans will pan out, you are in for a big surprise.
- If you believe that obeying the Lord guarantees a life without interruption and disruption, you had better buckle up because you are in for the ride of your life.

You may never have so much trouble; you may never be in so much trouble; you may never create so much trouble as you will when you live with an obsession to advance the name and glory and gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul longed to go to Rome. Why?

- For one thing, it was the capital city of the Roman Empire.

Tomorrow afternoon, I have the privilege of going to the Capitol Building in Raleigh to preach to an assembly of pastors and political leaders on the topic of the importance of preaching the word of God in bringing about social reformation. As thrilled as I am about this opportunity to speak, along with three other Christian leaders, I cannot imagine how Paul must have longed to preach the gospel in the palace of Caesar; to deliver the word to the Roman senators and philosophers – to the movers and shakers of his world.

- Even more, Paul wanted to help the Roman believers grow.

He already said this in Romans chapter 1, remember? I cannot imagine that you might forget this – it has only been six years since we studied it! Paul wrote in Romans 1:13,

I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you . . .

In other words, “I want to be a part of your spiritual growth. I want the joy of growing with you.”

- So Paul wants to go to Rome because of its influence in the empire; because of his influence on the believers, and thirdly, because of their potential influence in him.

Notice Romans 15:24.

whenever I go to Spain – for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, . . .

The words “helped on my way” are from the verb “propempw (προπεμπω),” which refers to helping someone on their journey by providing food and money, even companions to travel along if they can, perhaps even providing the means of travel.^v

Paul is openly asking for food and money. This is, in a very real sense, a missionary support letter.

Those who have gone on short term missions trips know what this is all about. You get out your family phone directory and write to all your aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews; you write to your former church, your teachers, and every friend you think you have, and even some you have not been friendly with for years. As you write, you pray. As you put the letters in the mailbox, you pray. As you wait to hear back, you pray.

Paul is writing to the Romans, “I need your financial support.” He was no doubt, praying for years for the support he would need to make it to Spain.

Paul was adopting the same strategy that you have probably seen with missionaries and ministries and have perhaps, adopted yourselves as you raised money for your own missions trips.

This is the strategy that I remember reading about years ago, written very succinctly by Adoniram Judson. This great missionary to Burma in the mid 1800s said, “When it comes to the matter of raising funds for the work of the ministry, I ask God . . . and I tell the people of God.”

What great advice. You tell the people, but you are ultimately, depending upon God.

Paul’s short term goal is to get to Rome.

Paul’s immediate goal to go to Jerusalem

Now Paul talks about his immediate goal and that is, to go to Jerusalem. Notice Romans 15:25-27.

but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have

been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, the church in Jerusalem was suffering not only great persecution, but great poverty. There was a famine throughout Palestine and, because of persecution by unbelieving Jews, many Christians had lost their jobs and many others had been put in prison, which made bad conditions even worse for their families.

In addition, many foreign Jews who were visiting Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost were converted to Christ and decided to remain in the city and become a part of the Jerusalem church. They became house guests of believers who lived there, adding to the overall state of emergency.^{vi}

Details of this special collection are recorded in I Corinthians 16 and II Corinthians chapter 8.

I love Paul's inspired choice of words in Romans 15 when he refers to this contribution (verse 26). He uses the Greek word "koinonia," which is often translated "fellowship". This is a great choice of words because this offering really was more than money; more than nickels and dimes. It was a relationship; it was fellowship; it was the sharing of life.

One of the reasons Paul was so passionate about taking this offering to the Jews was that it had been given by Gentiles. In this era of prejudice, when the race issue of Jew and Gentile was yet to be overcome, this offering was incredibly significant. The Gentile believers were clearly saying, "We are related to you. This is an expression of our communion and fellowship with you."

It was a magnificent testimony to the equality of the Christians.

It was also a magnificent testimony to the unity of the church.

Paul wanted to make sure everyone got the message that we are not just members of isolated congregations – we are members of the church worldwide.^{vii}

For those who are preparing to travel on a missions trip – you will discover that no matter where you go in the world, when you meet other believers in other states or on different continents, there will be

an immediate kinship; there will be the basis for an immediate fellowship.

Paul continues in Romans 15:28, to write,
Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs . . .

The word for seal indicates a sealing for the sake of integrity. A papyrus fragment from Paul's day, speaks of "sealing sacks of grain in order to guarantee their contents."^{viii}

Paul is basically saying, "I want to make sure all the money arrives safely to the Jerusalem church."

Paul's short term goal is to go to Rome and his immediate goal is to go to Jerusalem, but he also has a long term goal.

Paul's long term goal to go to Spain

Paul's long term goal is to go to Spain. Notice Romans 15:28b,

. . . I will go on by way of you to Spain.

Look back at Romans 15:24a,

whenever I go to Spain . . .

If you could have interviewed Paul, you might have asked, "Paul, what do you believe God wants you to do in the next five years?"

He would have said, "Take this offering to Jerusalem, spend time in Rome building up the believers, and then, pioneer the gospel in Spain."

Why did Paul want to pioneer the gospel in Spain? Because Spain was producing the great minds of his generation. Seneca, the prime minister of the empire of Rome, was a Spaniard; Quintilian, the master of Roman oratory, was from Spain; Lucan, the poet, was a Spaniard. Perhaps Paul was thinking that he wanted to influence the leaders of the next generation.

More than likely, Paul wanted to go to Spain because Spain was considered to be the end of the civilized world. Paul wanted to take the gospel, as Christ commanded, to the ends of the earth.

Paul said, "I'm going to Spain!"

This was the region Jonah had tried to escape to centuries earlier. Spain included the city of Tarshish. Jonah never made it to Spain either. He was given a free ride to Nineveh and a fish story people still cannot believe.

This was the region from which Solomon brought shipments of gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks (I Kings 10:22).

These are Paul's plans, but he will never make it to Spain.

He will make it to Jerusalem. The book of Acts records Paul's journey in which he delivers the money to the needy community of believers.

- Acts 21 records the shocking development that a week after arriving, Jews from Asia stir up the crowds in Jerusalem against Paul. Roman soldiers intervene and prevent him from being murdered, but place him under arrest.
- Acts 22 reveals that on the next day, Paul stands trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin – the Jewish Supreme Court – and is condemned to death. The Roman soldiers again intervene and rescue him from being killed, but keep him in custody.
- Acts 23 through 26 informs us that Paul is transferred to Caesarea where he remains in prison for two years. He appeals to give his testimony to Nero and is granted his appeal.
- Acts 27 informs us that Paul, under guard, finally sets sail for Rome and – wouldn't you know it – his ship is torn apart at sea by a fierce storm and they are shipwrecked on the island of Malta. They end up spending the winter on Malta.
- Acts 28 tells us they finally make it to Rome where Paul is placed under house arrest. He is able to meet with Roman Christians – all who would come to his apartment. After two years, it seems that he was released for a time being, but then, arrested again and ultimately, martyred by the Roman emperor Nero.^{ix}

Paul never made it to Spain. His long term goal was never realized.

As for his short term goal, he made it to Rome, but Paul will not be able to personally build the church, for he will come bound in chains.

Paul will not experience the life of a missionary, he will experience the death of a martyr.

The truth is, at the time when Paul writes Romans chapter 15, he did not know this yet. We do.

Paul's great expectations were not fulfilled. His prayers in this regard were not answered like he had hoped; his longings were never fulfilled like he had expected.

Application

Perhaps some of your longings have not been fulfilled. Let me make three very simple observations about life in general.

Three observations about great expectations

1. Your life may seem to be held up or slowed down during times you expected it to take off.

God does not choose to explain the reason for this until after it is over!

Why are there delays? Why is the road torn up so you cannot drive your wagon across and keep on going?

“Let's go, Lord! Let's get to Rome.”

God never fully explained it to Paul, until after he arrived home.

Someone once wrote, “The Lord orders the steps of a good man and He orders his stops as well.”

When we say we believe God is sovereign, we are saying that we believe God does not owe us an explanation for the steps or the stops.

2. Your life may involve experiences and challenges you never expected to face.

Who would have expected a riot, a trial, a shipwreck, a house arrest? Perhaps Paul was tempted to think, “Lord, how does this make any sense? How am I to endure years of house arrest and hindrances to the full expression of my heart's desire to preach to the ends of the earth?”

As with Paul, God will often not clarify what we can endure it, until we are in the middle of it!

Sustaining grace is never measured out ahead of time. It is measured out day by day, for His mercies are new every morning.

Once Paul was in the middle of it, his outlook had dramatically changed from that of Romans 15.

Paul would write to Timothy, while under house arrest,

. . . do not be ashamed . . . of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God . . . I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (II Timothy 1:8 & 12)

3. Your life may turn in a direction you never expected to journey.

Often, God did not reveal when, until the last minute.

By the way, one thing that Paul thought would happen to him, did happen. Notice Romans 15:29.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

This came true.

Do not ever believe that the fullness of Christ's blessing means you are without chains or difficulties or challenges. Do not make the mistake of believing that God's blessing is always smooth sailing; always without ruts in the road.

The exact opposite could be true!

When Paul came to Rome, he was in the fullness of Christ's blessing.

Three observations about God's dealing in lives

Now let me make three observations about God's dealing in Paul's life and ours.

1. God does not always defend His decisions (if at all), but He asks that we surrender to Him anyway.
2. God does not always provide answers for life's interruptions, but He asks that we trust Him in spite of them.

3. God does not always explain His unexpected plans, but He asks that we rely upon Him as we go through them.

Our problem is that we most often say to God, "Oh Lord, I don't understand. These aren't the plans I've made for You. I know the plans I have for You!"

God says, "I know the plans I have for you. I have plans for you and they will ultimately, give you a future and a hope."

Ladies and gentlemen, when our great expectations are not met, He remains great! We must learn that *He* is our greatest expectation.

Did you know that Christ Himself became the great expectation of Paul? It was no longer traveling to Spain or preaching in Rome.

Paul would write to Timothy, near the end of his life,

. . . until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time – He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light . . . To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen. (I Timothy 6:15-16)

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ⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 382.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 337.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, Romans (Westminster Press, 1955), p. 203.

^{iv} James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4, (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1875.

^v Rienecker and Rogers, p. 383.

^{vi} MacArthur, p. 346.

^{vii} Barclay, p. 205.

^{viii} Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Zondervan, 2002), p. 90.

^{ix} Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, Holman New Testament Commentary: Romans (Holman, 2000), p. 455.