

Plans for the Gospel

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[0 : 00] Well, I have a friend who used to be fond of asking me, what is your personal 10-year plan? By which he meant, where do you see yourself in 10 years?

And what are you doing now to get there? Well, I have to say to him, I don't really think like that. I hope to be 10 years older, is what I used to say.

Of course, if he asked me now, I would probably have some vague idea where I'd like to be, perhaps slowing down at work, riding my bike more, or should I say my e-bike, and researching good projects for pensioners to take up, perhaps.

But to then deliberately work out now how to get there, well, I don't think I'll make decisions that far out, I'm afraid. I mean, would I even be alive?

But of course, there's wisdom in my friend's question, isn't there? Because our decisions today are often made with a vague idea of where we'd like to be. It may not be each and every choice, but it does guide what we say yes or no to.

[1 : 15] Or if, for example, we've got goals that have a long lead time, like becoming a pastor, then we need to work backwards, don't we?

And plan, let's say, to go to Ridley to train years ahead of time. And most people, I think, have those sort of plans, even if it's all not nutted out in detail.

Some might call them dreams and ambitions. And sometimes they might not even be conscious of them. But in the back of their mind, they have some thought of where they'd like to be, and that guides their choices in a profound way.

Well, in our passage tonight, as Paul nears the end of his letter, he shares what his own long-term plans are. What we discover, of course, is that his plans are very much God's plans for him.

Well, what are they? We see it in verses 14 to 16 that, firstly, he has a special mission to the Gentiles. He's a minister of Christ to them.

[2 : 21] He says, He says, Paul's tone here reflects the fact that he didn't establish the church in Rome.

We already know from chapter 1 of the letter that Paul hadn't visited them at all. He may have met some of them elsewhere or learned much from others, but unlike other churches in Greece or Asia Minor, Paul wasn't their founding apostle.

So he needs to take care not to be presumptuous of his authority over them. Or to appear to teach them what they already know. Hence, he affirms their goodness, their knowledge and competence.

And yet, Paul reminds them of his own calling to the Gentiles. Yes, it's all by God's grace, but he has been given the role of minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.

And so he speaks in the next line of his priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

[3 : 55] And so, for Paul, this means he has a duty to them, the Roman Christians as well. And that duty is to, as I put it out in my outline, disciple them, even though he may not have converted them.

That's what the words minister and priestly duty imply. If you remember Romans 12, verse 1, where Paul urges them, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices to God, by teaching them to obey God as Christ's disciples, he's fulfilling this priestly duty, offering them as pleasing and acceptable living sacrifices to God.

Now, notice that Paul says that they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, which means it's not Paul's work, it's God's Spirit working in them. But his priestly function, then, is not so much then to atone for their sins or to make them holy, but his priestly function is to prepare them, present them, as it were, to disciple them, teach them, pray for them.

In other words, to proclaim and apply the gospel of God to their lives. And again, if you remember all the way back in Romans 1, verse 5, that was his original mission that he spoke of, didn't he?

He said, through him, that is Christ, we, Paul and his co-workers, receive grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

[5 : 30] Discipleship, then, is the obedience that comes from faith in Jesus. And while the Roman Christians aren't converts of Paul, he's still obliged to them as an apostle to the Gentiles, since they are predominantly a Gentile church.

It compels him, therefore, to stick his neck out, as it were, to write this letter, even though he's not their pastor. And thank God he did, didn't he? And we have the benefits of the letter to the Romans.

But by it, we see God's place within God's big gospel plan, that he's an apostle to the Gentiles, sent not just to convert Gentiles, but to disciple them as well.

And so, likewise, here at Holy Trinity, not all are converts from the ministry here. We thank God that we've been blessed with people that have joined us as Christians from elsewhere.

And yet, just because we didn't happen to baptize you, it doesn't mean that we have a lesser responsibility to disciple you. No, we have a responsibility to teach you the Bible so that you're equipped for discipleship, to train you to obey God wholeheartedly.

[6 : 46] And that's not a job simply of the pastors, mind you, but all of us do that to each other, isn't it, mutually, encouraging each other to be discipled and to be disciples of Jesus.

So, discipleship was then a big part of Paul's plan. But so was evangelism, as we continue with Paul's letter. So, verse 17, So, from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

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. Rather, as is written, those who are not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. Now, before we get into what Paul writes, let's go first to that quote, which is from Isaiah.

And you saw from that Old Testament reading tonight, and those of you who are familiar with Isaiah 52 and 53, that this is the famous song of the suffering servant. And in it, it's a prophecy which Jesus fulfilled by his death on the cross.

[8 : 16] And Paul quotes that part of the prophecy which foresaw that the message would go to nations and kings that haven't heard, that the suffering servant would be known by them.

But more than that, that these kings and nations would understand and therefore believe. And it's often an aspect of the song that's overlooked, isn't it? The part that talks about the mission.

But we see that right in the midst of it, isn't it? A prophecy about the global mission that would result from Christ's work, which, of course, shapes Paul's preaching of the gospel.

And so we've seen over the last two weeks how Paul has pointed out, as he preaches the gospel, the insults falling on Jesus, who was the suffering servant. He emphasizes how Christ's triumph comes not from the use of his strength to defeat others, but to suffer on the cross for our sake, so that salvation might come from his death.

And this motif, if you like, shapes Paul's work as an apostle as well. He speaks of himself too, does he not, if you read verse 17, as a servant to God.

[9 : 33] That glory he speaks of is manifested in suffering and endurance. All that he accomplishes is by Christ as a result of God's grace, not in his own strength.

And even the signs and wonders are evidence not of his own power, but that of God's Spirit. And yet Paul himself works tirelessly, driven by God's plan for him.

And so he says, from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, Paul here casts a wide ark, which is his missionary footprint. And you can see that on the slide.

Illyricum is west of Greece, just short of Italy or Rome. And all along the way, he's been focused not simply on Gentiles, but in going to places where Christ was not known.

In other words, he's not just interested in ethnicity, that is going to the Gentiles, but geography as well. He wants to reach as far and wide as he can, just as the prophecy of Isaiah indicates.

[10 : 39] And while there was still work to be done in that area, Paul says he's been prevented from coming to Rome. And so Paul's plans involve evangelizing and converting new people groups, and also planting churches as a result.

And that's the kind of work that our gospel partners do, don't they? For example, that's what CMS does. And so it's worthy of our support, because it's very much part of God's gospel plan.

But it also happens right here in Melbourne. This week, Andrew and I attended a Zoom meeting where people in our diocese were sharing about church planting, or repotting in some cases, as we are doing, happening all around Melbourne.

And things are happening, particularly in some of the grove corridors in our city. Along the M1, down the outer east, to Barrick and Cranbourne and beyond. Out in the north and west, along the Hume and in Melton, and even down in the grove corridors of Geelong.

There's a lot of churches being planted, or planned to be planted. And there's also church planting around migrant groups, like the Arabic and the Farsi-speaking churches.

[11 : 56] Things are happening, even in our midst. And that's God's vision for His church, isn't it? Not static, but growing. Not just with English-speaking, or Caucasian, or even ABC, but all Gentiles, every people group, and the Jews as well.

And so, Paul's actual desire to go to Rome is actually, if you read closely, not an end in itself, is it? Since there's already a church in Rome. So he doesn't want to plant on somebody else's foundation, but he wants us to use Rome as a launching point to Spain, further on.

And that's where, it's a green field, where Paul can evangelize, and plant churches where there are none. But as he does, what he's doing right now is invite the Roman Christians to join him as gospel partners.

And just as the Gentile Christians in Greece had already been doing, he wants the Romans to be part of the work as well. And so, let's keep going with verses 23 to 33.

And he says, But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I've been longing for many years to visit you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I've enjoyed your company for a while.

[13:20] Now, however, I'm on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there, for Macedonia and Archea were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. 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. So after I've completed this task and I've made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. And so here Paul takes the opportunity again to remind the Gentiles the importance of the Jews and how much they owe them.

After all, as an apostle of the Gentiles, if this were not the case, he could have easily just concentrated on the Gentiles, right? Not worry about the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

That's somebody else's business. No, he reminds the Gentiles, though, that they share in the spiritual blessings of the Jews. And just as we saw last week, Christ came to serve the Jews first to restore God's blessing to them.

[14:32] And then these same blessings are made available to the Gentiles. And so Paul says, in return, the Gentiles ought to share their material blessings with the Jews.

In other words, this is a partnership. The word there in verse 26 is contribution. But actually, on the next slide, the Greek is koinonia, and some of you know that to mean fellowship, or more accurately, partnership.

You see, the Christians in Jerusalem were having a hard time. If I recall, there's a famine there. And so even though Paul himself was a Jew, as an apostle representing the Gentiles, he went around Greece in Macedonia and Archaea to gather a collection to take it to Jerusalem.

And this was not a charitable donation he was collecting, but a partnership contribution, a sharing between the Jewish and Gentile Christians as they work together for the gospel.

And that's what a partnership is, isn't it? Often we think in the West, in the church in the West, that, for example, that when we give money to mission, that we are the ones with the better Bible teachers, so we send the missionary, that it's sort of like charity work, isn't it?

[15:53] We're just giving. Well, we are giving and we are providing resources to Afghanistan or China or other places like that.

But actually, it's a partnership. It's not all give and no take, is it? Because, I don't know whether you realize it, but when we hear of the work that is going on, we are blessed, aren't we, as well?

For example, when we witness their courage in persecution, it strengthens our own faith, doesn't it? If they can stand up for Christ under all their difficulty and keep meeting even under such trials, then it spurs us on, does it not, to do the same, not to give up, not to grumble, even in our circumstances, but to be thankful and to be faithful.

So Paul, having told them about the Christians in Greece, now invites the Romans to do the same, to join in. And he intimates, does he not, when he writes that when he finally catches up with them in Rome, he hopes that they can assist him on his way to Spain.

Now, maybe all he needs is food and lodging while in Rome, or maybe it's financial support that he needs because when he gets to Spain, for example, there are no churches there to welcome him. But either way, here was the Romans' chance to share in the partnership and then also the blessings that flow from it.

[17:24] Be part of his plan, Paul was saying, and thereby be part of God's mission. But in the meantime, Paul requests that they pray with him. He uses the word to share in his struggles through prayer.

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

Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there so that I may come to you with joy by God's will and in your company be refreshed.

The God of peace be with you all. Amen. And if you read the book of Acts, you can see what dangers awaited Paul in Jerusalem. So to say struggle is actually not an exaggeration.

And to ask that they pray with him was not a futile exercise. Now, prayer, I don't know, can sometimes feel like that, can't it?

[18:30] After all, what can our words to God do? It's almost, sometimes we feel a cry of helplessness when there's nothing else that can be done. I mean, wouldn't it be better if the Romans had sent a group of men with Paul to help him and protect him?

But no, that's not right, is it? Because when we turn to God in helplessness and we may be helpless, we're actually turning to the one who's stronger than an army of thousands, who's wiser and who's more in control of this world than anyone else.

And so amazingly, we have this truth that the Roman Christians on one end of the empire could join in with Paul and support his struggles through prayer.

Even though they're not physically together, yet they are working with him in their prayers. And so friends, we may look, can't we, on our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan and China and elsewhere and feel helpless.

we grieve to think the kind of struggles they go through and yes, to the extent we can, we should, we should be sending our koinonia contribution to them.

[19:46] But I'm sure that if you ask them, they too would have the same request that Paul had of the Romans. Join with us in our struggles by praying to God for us, is what they would say, I think.

And so let me encourage you to do this individually or in your growth groups. I know that at the start of the year, some of the Trinity Young Adult growth groups have adopted a gospel partner and you've been praying for them regularly.

Great, keep going. But why not pray also for our persecuted brothers and sisters? I know that in lockdown, sometimes our prayer lives can get a little dry.

You know, we're sort of praying for the same old things for ourselves, isn't it? That we'll stay motivated in lockdown and disciplined to read our Bible and pray and all that. And these aren't bad things to do, pray for, but why not cast your net wider and include God's big gospel plan for the world?

And so pray for God's people around the world, in Afghanistan, in China, in other countries, because this is the real gospel work that God is achieving even right now.

[21:02] And this is the real gospel work that we can be part of. Even when we're locked down in our own houses, locked down in our own rooms, we can still be doing gospel work that has an impact across the world.

Well, the application for today's passage is pretty obvious, isn't it? We've been challenged by Paul in the way he made his plans so that they align with God's gospel plan for him. Now, of course, not many of us have the same clarity as Paul, no vision, no big mission that says that we are the apostle to the Gentiles.

In fact, I know that many of you would dearly love to know what God would want of you. I know your desire is to serve God and if only he would show you his exact plans for you.

Well, I say to begin with, it's probably the same things that Paul has been tasked with, discipleship and evangelism. I know personally that that's my task.

But for each of us, it may look a little different, that's true. How much of it do we do ourselves? How much of it is in support of others like Paul? How much of it is in terms of struggling in prayer?

[22:17] It will be different for different people. And even for each individual, it may be different at different times of your life. So, for example, if you're a mother with two young children, then you may be called at this stage just to support and pray and to raise up your two children.

Don't feel too guilty about that. You may be able to do more, that's true, but if that's all you can do for now, then care for your two young children and raise them in the Lord. Because who knows, you may be nurturing future missionaries, aren't you?

That may be God's 30-year plan for them. And you're part of it, if that's God's plan. Likewise, you may be single and working in a company where there are no Christians at all.

And you may be wondering, what am I doing here? Well, isn't that a place where Christ is not known? And so, maybe you're the mini Paul for that company. It may be limited what you can do at all, but if you're offering your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, then God can use that, can't He?

In how you work, in what you say, in your testimony, to open doors for the gospel. You see, I may not know what my 10-year plan is, and you may think as a pastor I should, but I don't.

[23:40] But I know what God's 1,000-year plan for the world is, the gospel plan. It may not be 1,000 years, maybe less. Paul has already described it, has he not, in these last few chapters.

And so that shapes my plan for this week, for this month. I know that my tasks are to focus on discipleship and evangelism for myself and for others, to grow myself, but also to encourage others to grow in obedience to God.

And for the time being, that's going to be here at HTD and down at St. John's. For the rest of my life, that's going to be as a husband, or as a father, or as a son.

The rest of the details, I can trust God to fill in when the time comes. And he will. But as it is, there's already a lot that we can be getting on with, isn't there?

As I look out, I know that there's a lot I could be getting on here at church, with each of you. And it's been a joy, most of the time, to disciple and to train each of you for gospel work.

[24:52] And so, you can do that too, can't you? Because you're part of God's people here. Wherever God has planted you, that's where you can do discipleship and evangelism.

Supporting, praying, whatever it might be. You can get on board with God's plan, along with everyone else that's part of the church, so that together we work to grow our obedience that comes by faith in Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your gospel plan to save both Jews and Gentiles, and to bring us obedience that comes through faith in Jesus.

Thank you for giving us the task, just like Paul, but in our own much smaller way, to be your servant in this plan. help us to do this work, to support others that do, and together to pray in our struggle for the kingdom, both here and with our brothers and sisters across the world.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.