

Romans 15:23-33 - The Broken Road

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Wow. I missed worshiping here. Can't tell me how many times I've sat in a church in Africa worshiping and been strengthened and encouraged, remembering worshiping here and remembering that you were here doing the same thing across an ocean.

That song may get me through another year of being over there and remembering that. So I hope the clerical collar doesn't throw you off too much. In Africa, I actually work for the Episcopal Church of Sudan in South Sudan, and this is what we would normally wear when we're over there. And since I've been back and walking through places like Party City, I've seen that this actually is sold here as a costume. So I hope it's not too frightening for you, but I figured with heyday, it kind of serves a dual purpose.

And speaking of heyday, I'm really glad to come back for that, to be here for that kind of fellowship, that kind of candy. And also because I assume that since most of you are going, I have until 3 o'clock to preach.

[1 : 13] So it'll be just like an African service going all day. There's been a lot to happen in my life in the last year and a half since I've been over there. There's a lot to come and tell you about.

A lot to tell you about what God has been doing. I think I've boiled it down to a little less than three hours, so we'll see. But for those of you who don't know, back in March in 2014, I boarded a plane and I headed to Africa.

My plans, since signing up to be a missionary with what was at that time World Harvest and is now called Surge, were to go and to serve as a pastor in the community of Mundri, South Sudan. Seemed like a simple plan. Plans change. In fact, before I even departed for South Sudan, my plans had changed drastically. Because in December of 2013, the president of South Sudan, Salva Kir, accused his former vice president, who he had just fired, Rick Makar, of staging a coup. Now, whether this happened or not, it did send the country into a civil war. That is still going on. South Sudan has been at war for 42 of the last 60 years.

[2 : 33] It's kind of something they're used to. It was not something I was used to. But since the civil war broke out again, the team that I had signed up to join also decided to go its different ways and is now scattered in the States and in Kenya and various other places.

So the team that I wanted to join was no longer on the field, and the field that I wanted to go to was no longer safe to go to, and my plans seemed to be falling right and left. So I came up with a new plan, a lot of them.

And I asked, and they allowed me to go ahead and to move to Nairobi, Kenya, and to spend some time there waiting for the new team to get ready to come and waiting for South Sudan to get peaceful enough for me to go in.

And so I joined a team in Nairobi. I started learning about chronological Bible storytelling and teaching seminars across Kenya. I started helping out with the interns and just really getting adjusted to African life.

It was a great, great experience for those few months, helping me to ease into life there. And by the end of July, they had decided that it was peaceful enough, safe enough, for me to go ahead and move into South Sudan.

[3 : 52] And so I did. I went to Mundry to wait on my new team. I spent several weeks by myself on the compound waiting for them to come.

And by the end of September, the whole team was then on the ground, raring to go, ready to see the work happen there, to learn the language, to get involved with the community, to start

preaching, start teaching, start working with everybody there.

And we started to see our plans unfold. And then we started to see our plans fall apart. By February, my team leader and his family had to be medically evacuated.

And a few weeks later, the three of us that remained as a team were evacuated for safety. As we found out that new government forces were on their way up to town and we weren't sure just what they would do, given their past record of shooting first and asking questions never.

By the grace of God, we were evacuated within 24 hours and back to Kenya, where we had no idea what we were going to do, and thankfully God did. We found work for the three of us as our team leaders decided to stay in Nairobi and not go back permanently for the sake of their family and health.

[5 : 08] And the three of us found our way to a third team for me, the Kajabi team, working in the mountains of Kenya, where it's much colder than South Sudan, and I did not have any jackets.

We worked teaching at a missionary boarding school there. And there we were also able to start making yet another plan to get back to South Sudan. And this time we did it in a slightly roundabout way by going to Uganda first to look for a permanent backup site, working with the refugees of our tribal group there, the Moru tribe.

From there we saw that it was going to be able to easier get into South Sudan on some quick trips, and by the end of August, just a couple months ago, we took one of those trips in to take some relief to the community there that had been so devastated by the fighting.

And then we came back, and the three of us, Will and Teresa and I, returned to the States in mid-September, a lot earlier than we expected, and came home to regroup, to refresh, and to recruit, if anybody's interested in serving overseas in a war-torn area.

You can talk to me afterwards. Especially doctors and engineers. I know there's a few of those here. So we're back in the States. And yet again, going back to the drawing board, trying to find a plan for returning when we go back in January to Uganda and to South Sudan to work.

[6 : 37] And the violence since we've been home has increased and gotten worse. And much of Mundry is no longer there. And sometimes words just don't come.

And plans don't seem to be forming. My teammate, Will, was reflecting on this recently. When we make plans as a team, generally I'm the one that's sitting in the back quiet and has to be coaxed into giving the opinion right at the end.

And we kind of make Will speak first. And since we think so much alike, I tend to just say ditto and go with whatever Will says. And as Will has been back reflecting on the same things and thinking about having no words but trying to figure out plans, he wrote a blog recently.

And since he tends to speak for me anyway, I figured I'd let him do it this morning. So I want to share with you just a little bit about what he said that led me to my passage for today.

Will said, in the midst of the uncertainty and instability, God has been clear since we've been back in the USA. We're continuing to pursue life and ministry in Mundry.

[7 : 46] This is the place where I want to tell you our great plan and that it will be to guarantee success. But I don't have one. I've realized recently that God is more concerned with my obedience than my success.

I'm not saying he doesn't want me to be successful. I'm saying my willingness to be obedient in the midst of uncertainty and lack of understanding is far more important than having a guarantee of success.

Paul seems to be a great example of this. I doubt he ever got on a boat or entered a new city thinking, success will be this ship wrecking or success will only happen after I've been arrested. All Paul did was continue to say yes when God asked him to do something.

He let God define success by being open to the guidance of the Spirit and looking for opportunities to sacrificially love others. This is our aim, to continue to say yes when God asks us to do something so we've said yes.

Ditto. We'll wrap it up so perfectly of what we've been feeling, what we've been thinking in this time of waiting on the Lord, making plans but waiting for him to direct them and just being willing to say yes.

[8 : 56] And as Will and I have been looking at the Scriptures for guidance since we've been back is Paul really has been a great help to study. And that's what led me to the passage I want to share with you this morning.

Because like us, like Paul, I would bet that there's a number of you who have seen your plans change over the past years and over the extent of your life and a number of you who have been rocked by uncertainty.

So I want to look at how Scripture deals with that. How Paul made his plans despite knowing that God was likely to change them. How Paul surrounded those plans in prayer and how all of this led him and can lead us to peace.

So if you would turn with me to Romans chapter 15. Starting in verse 23, let's see what Paul has to say about making plans.

In Romans 15, Paul says, but now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions and since I've 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.

[10:12] At present, however, I'm going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints from Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it and indeed they owe it to them.

For if the Gentiles have come to share in the spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. And I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ, by the love of the Spirit to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.

May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. It's the word of the Lord. There's so much in this passage that has meant so much to me.

In the first half of it, more than just the first half of it, we see Paul making his plans. For a much more detailed description of these plans, feel free to turn to the book of Acts and just read the whole thing.

[11:36] There you'll find all that Paul planned and all that God changed in his plans, which was a whole lot of it. So here, he doesn't get so much into the details.

He gives just a bit of a rough outline to the Romans talking about what he hopes to do, what he's done, what kind of part they'll play in those plans, and then he asks for prayer.

He doesn't get into the details of the ups and downs of his journeys across Macedonia, of Greece, and Asia Minor. He only indicates that he sees his work there as being done.

The seeds have been planted. Paul was a church planter. That job was done. And he left the church there in the capable hands of others to tend to it and to help it grow.

And in fact, we can actually see some of that growth of those churches that he's planted right here as Paul speaks immediately of his plan to take aid to the poor in Jerusalem, to take relief that has been given to him by the churches that he planted.

[12:37] The fruits of their spiritual growth are manifesting in the fruits of their labors being shared with this universal church. Coming home as a missionary, it would be really easy to look at this passage and take it out of context and preach it to my benefit and talk about financial support and caring for the needy and for those going on these journeys, to preach a health and wealth gospel and tell you you'll do really well if you give all your money away to a starving missionary and Africans.

But that's not what he's saying here. It's not about just financial support. That's not why he tells the church in Rome that he's going to Jerusalem. He's not doing it to guilt them into saying, oh, look what the new churches did.

They gave to the poor. What about you, Church of Rome? You've got to have a lot of money over there. Why don't you start giving? He's not guilt-tripping the church and telling them to give more money. He's not doing it just to make himself look good and say, when I come see you, you better be ready to celebrate me because I'm the one out taking care of these people.

It's not for his own celebration. He's telling the church of Rome his plans to take aid to the poor because he needs their help on a different level.

Because he wants them to join him in this trip spiritually. He wants them to come together. You know, Paul uses phrase like they owe it to them and if we were to preach that in such a demanding way without looking at the love behind it that compels this duty and this obligation, we would make

idols of our works and set them up for our own salvation instead of Christ.

[14 : 23] Paul does stress a moral obligation here but if we fail to emphasize the love that compels this act, we miss everything. Paul doesn't leave it at simple obligation.

He points out what a spiritual joy it is for them to come together with him. He asks for them to pray for him in this, to come together in the struggle and fight in prayer and he asks for them to come together so that when he is face to face they may share in the joy of this message, the joy of hearing your prayers worked, God's word is planted in the hearts of many.

God's church is growing despite the struggles. He tells the church so that they can share in the joy of it. One of the reasons I've come home to tell you about the seeds that have been planted, to share and make that joy complete.

Paul's work is not going to be over with just one trip. the church is going to continue to grow and the church is going to continue to struggle then just as it is now.

Paul lived this way, lived out his love because he saw it as his obligation, his duty, his only way of living. Bids me come and die and find that I might truly live, we sang.

[15 : 54] that's what Paul is living here. That's what he has lived before the churches in Greece and Asia Minor that are giving because they followed Paul's example even as he follows the example of Christ just as Paul told the Corinthian church to do.

Paul lived that example of love and wants the church of Rome to live that example of love. He wants to eventually go to Spain so that he can live that example of love so that little by little more of this world can know the love of Christ who died that we might live that love.

He plans to live this way everywhere he goes. He plans and he plans and it'd be easy to focus on the contents of those plans to not look underneath to say okay well Paul is a church planter and then also takes time to see to the needs of the poor and those sound like really good things so let's go back to our church and what we should do is we should start a Pauline program and that program is going to be really good we'll church plant and we'll take money to the poor and that'll be good everybody will like us.

If we only focused on the content if we only focused on the programs and didn't dig deeper and deeper into the heart that was behind Paul didn't dig into the love that compelled him to live then we miss everything in these plans.

See Paul has learned not only to live a life of love but to make those plans founded completely on faith. He lives in a bit of a paradox.

[17 : 40] He lives being certain and uncertain about everything at the same time. Paul has seen so many of his plans change. He knows these new ones are bound to plan to change as well.

He opens his letter to the Romans in chapter 1 talking about these same things saying that he hopes by the will of God that he will at last finally be able to come and see the church of Rome. He's got many friends there but he's never been able to see it. But he says by God's will at last. If you look deeper at it you see how he is unsure that he'll even make it.

When you look at the prayer later in our passage you see how unsure he is and he's right to be unsure of this. There are people in Jerusalem people across the world where he's been ministering that want to kill him that are out to take his life.

And if it weren't just people looking out to kill him he's got to travel all over the world in not terribly safe conditions. He's not sure that he'll make it to Jerusalem let alone all the way back to Rome again.

[18 : 57] But he plans on it anyway. He plans on it because the foundation of his plan is the phrase thy will be done Lord. He's unsure about what will happen but he's sure absolutely sure that whatever happens he's got to follow God in it.

And when he does God will be there. What a way to make a plan. I can't say that all the plans that I've made in the last two years have been made this way but I can definitely tell you I have seen God's will triumph in all of them.

And that has helped greatly in knowing that whatever is about to happen as I try to return to Africa in January God's will will triumph still. It wasn't my plan to go to Nairobi.

When they first recruited me they told me about Nairobi and I kind of pushed it away not thinking I would be really interested in chronological Bible storytelling. And when I got there I was amazed by what a great tool it is for preaching the gospel.

And that method would go on to help me greatly as I took those stories and had my my tutor translate some into Arabic so that I could start ministering in the community both in South Sudan and again with refugees in Uganda.

[20 : 20] And if I hadn't gone to Kenya and learned that method I never would have been prepared to preach in that way. More than just that I met a team that surrounded me with community and helped me to adjust to Africa that loved me and that would be there and be familiar in loving me when I had to evacuate a year later.

I didn't think I'd ever return to Kenya and Nairobi when I left them. Certainly didn't plan to evacuate. I didn't plan to go into South Sudan and live on the compound for a little over a month by myself. I was excited that Serge is so adamant about having teams and community and loving one another and building one another up. And then I went to the community by myself.

But being there by myself that community surrounded me with love and instantly came to take care of me. I'd have the boys coming up to the compound every day or every other day not simply to eat my food but also just to check on me not sure that this new guy would even be able to tie his own shoes if they didn't come and help.

And I was brought into the community instantly seeing their love for me and building such a deep love for them quickly. And then my new team came.

[21 : 50] Certainly didn't plan for my team leaders to have to be evacuated for medical reasons or for the rest of the three of us to have to evacuate at all. But God had plans even there.

Had the whole team been on the ground when we needed to evacuate space on the plane would have been a little tough for getting all of us out at the same time. But because our team leaders went first they were in Nairobi able to help us make plans when we couldn't.

And the three of us got out. Not only that the three of us would become the whole team and those weeks together that evacuation together was a great bonding experience.

A foundational peace in what's building up our team. When we came to Kajabi we definitely didn't see ourselves as coming to Africa to teach missionaries kids.

We had no idea what would happen since we couldn't go back in the country but God did. It wasn't just that three jobs opened up at Rift Valley Academy it was that three jobs perfectly opened up at the last minute the week before the term was supposed to start we moved up to teach because three teachers had emergencies a kindergarten teacher a PE teacher and an AP English teacher and Teresa just happens to be a primary educator Will is far better shape and much more patient with small kids to teach PE to elementary students and I was an AP English teacher in the states.

[23 : 24] How could we deny that God's hand was in preparing for us even in Kajabi? More than that Kajabi was the home to our area director and to former teammates from South Sudan who would be able to come and see us face to face to help us get through this and to make plans for our next steps.

Plans that haven't exactly worked out but they were there. When we went to Uganda we never expected to meet a missionary community that would take us in provide us a home provide us a way into Moondry that was safer and faster.

I never planned to come home this early but God knew that the three of us would need to come home and be refreshed after this year and a half. That we would need the body of Christ again around us in a familiar place to love us to strengthen us so that we could go back and do it again. So here I am back in the States back making plans again waiting on the Lord to direct them. We tend to want to wait on the Lord and think that that phrase means that we should be inactive that we get frustrated seeing so many of our plans fail and we start to think that I'll just wait on Him He'll do all the work I'll just sit back and wait.

Being stagnant is not waiting. Stagnant waters breed disease they breed death. We need living moving waters. We want instead to learn as Paul has learned here to be actively waiting on the Lord.

[25 : 05] Well think about it this way and for those of you who know me way too well try not to laugh too much at this illustration. Think about a guy who's finally got the nerve up to ask a girl on a date and she says yes. What if he prepared for that date the whole week by sitting on his couch and being stagnant?

He just says alright she said yes good I'll go home and wait for the day to come and he sits on his couch he dreams of all the great things that could happen on the date he worries over every bad

thing that could happen on the date but he doesn't actually get ready he does nothing but sit there. Doesn't even take a shower and get dressed up or ready for the date or make any plans just knows the date's coming so something will happen that day. I'd imagine that date doesn't go very well and doesn't go very long especially after she starts to smell him.

But what if instead he was active in his waiting? What if she said yes and for that whole week leading up to it he used that joy to actively wake to make plans?

He started thinking about well what would her favorite activity be or what would her favorite music be and he decides to set up a picnic in the park or decides to find dinner and a concert at her favorite music.

[26 : 20] There's no thing he can do no one thing that makes that day come any faster. There's no one thing he can do that will ensure that all of his plans actually work.

Sometimes things just go wrong. But when he gets to that day and when they go out on that picnic if it rains so what?

And if he forgets the tickets to the concert and they end up taking a walk in the park instead and talking all night so what? She can see that these plans were made that he prepared himself out of that puppy dog love he got ready because that was what he was looking forward to.

It drove him to wait on that day. How much more does God look down on us with joy as we're making these plans when we say Lord my plan is to serve you now here's how I'm going to do it and he stops listening after the Lord I'm going to serve you and kicks in with his own plans but what joy he takes.

It's like the father whose son at five wants to come in and sees his dad shaving and wants to come in and imitate his father so the father and son stand side by side in front of the bathroom mirror and the son gets all lathered up dad gives him the little bladeless razor and they slowly mimic each other's moves and his dad slowly scrapes down one side his son scrapes knocks off the shaving cream and it's not really doing any good his son doesn't need to shave but he wants to be like his dad and doing it showing him how to be like his father is helping him to grow up that way it's helping in the long run whether he can see it now or not what delight our father takes in us as he looks down at his child and says that's my boy imitate me follow my example our plans don't have to work out because his do and because he takes great delight in the love that drives us to make those plans and to serve him no matter what happens it's that kind of love that imitating life that Paul wants for himself and that Paul wants the church to act out here in Rome and everywhere he goes to act out a life of love to have faith enough to realize that we may plan our course but the Lord determines our steps and that's really good to that end

[29 : 11] Paul doesn't just make plans he makes sure that they're bathed in prayer Paul knows that his path is difficult instead of living in fear he fights in faith look at verse 30 he appeals to the church in Rome to pray for him he says strive with me struggle wrestle with me fight with me in prayer this prayer he's living it's not your standard southern blessing of a meal of good bread good meat good God let's eat this is this is a prayer of a passionate heart-wrenching broken man going down a broken road knowing the detours and the pitfalls are well worth the home with his savior that lies at the end so he beseeches the church to fight with them in prayer he knows that his life is under threat that there are those where he has been and preached that want to kill him for what he has preached and he prays that his work be made acceptable to the saints there he's not trying to please the saints with acceptable works he's trying to see that life of love break down the wall between the Jews in Jerusalem and the Gentiles sending them support he's trying to make sure that pray that when these Gentiles who have now learned the gospel send their love to this church that this church responds and says they really are part of the body of Christ and that love in those gifts breaks down the walls that are keeping the church apart between Jew and Gentile he wants the church in Jerusalem not only to have their needs taken care of but to have their hearts realize that the body of Christ is a beautiful thing strikes me the most though is perhaps that his greatest desire in this is that the church share in his joy and be refreshed by one another missions is a huge part of this but it's not just missions it's fellowship that he wants to focus on he focuses on mutually encouraging each other as iron sharpens iron so one man builds another up but it's not just about preparing for the fight it's softening the blows in the fight it's taking care and binding up the wounds after the fight it's standing together as one body

Paul plans he prays he does all of this so that joy may be complete that joy of the Lord be his strength and he does it all by the God's will saying that would be a scary thought for all of us if we

didn't know who God was the one who loves us beyond measure who gave his son up for us that by his grace we might be refreshed and see peace that passes all understanding and that's what all of this leads to a life of peace at heart looking at this and finding that peace one commentator stood out to me this week as I was studying that I want to bring to you he says grace brings peace the latter is both a state that of reconciliation with God and a condition the inner conviction that consequently all is well it's the great blessing which Christ by his atoning sacrifice bestowed upon the church it surpasses all understanding it's not the reflection of an unclouded sky and tranquil waters of a picturesque lake rather it's the cleft of the rock in which the Lord hides his children when the storm is raging it's the hiding place under the wings to which the hen gathers her broods that the little chicks are safe while the storm bursts loose in all its fury upon herself we're reconciled to God we're at peace with him have you ever been in a pickup game of soccer and your team is doing so miserably poor and you have nothing added and the other team is just trouncing you and all of a sudden they decide to stop and be merciful and switch one player out and all of a sudden you end up on the winning team despite having done nothing

God's reconciling us to him after being at war with him and broken by sin is even greater nothing of our own and yet he trades places and puts us on the winning side he makes us at peace with him and being at peace with him gives us a peace within it's such a rich word to Paul and to the Romans and to the church itself the very greeting of the Jews at the day peace be with you and it's because of it that we're able to come before him to live for him I pray for peace in Moondry every day I pray for peace of my own heart especially on those days when I get angry at the evils that are being done there and yet things are getting worse Moondry's in ashes burned to the ground my friends have fled so how can I say that I'm at peace

I can't every day am I nothing more than the duck on water who looks calm at top but is kicking furiously underneath or truly what does it take to be able to say whatever my lot God has taught me to say it is well it is well with my soul it's my friends in Moondry who have really taught that to me because every time I call them despite how bad things are they tell me two things first they say don't stop praying for us and second they say God is greater and because they know who he is they have a peace within despite never having peace without and we can have that too if we know who he is and stand together for it I don't know what your story is for the last two years or for your lives I don't know what plans you've had that have changed

I do know that you have a God who is there for you no matter what I know that all those friends who have been spread across the world and spread across South Sudan and scattered like seeds are still in the hands of the one who can cause them to grow wherever they are whether they're in an IDP camp or a refugee settlement God will spread the gospel even in this that he will cause it to grow if we are willing to say yes to serve yes to pray for one another to build one another up and to trust in him and be at peace so let me reassure you by joining my voice to Paul because a lot of these stories from South Sudan can be pretty heavy if you don't remember the joy of the Lord being the one controlling them all I've come home that we might be mutually encouraged be refreshed by the fellowship of this body and the joy of his spirit dwelling in you and me crying out to rejoice and be glad knowing that he is a good God that he will guide you in the path of righteousness for his name's sake so may the God of peace be with you all amen will you pray with me

[36 : 55] Father almighty what a great gift it is to know that you are a good God that you are a father who cares about his child that lets us come to you and in your name ask whatever in it be given we ask that Lord you bring peace to Moondry that you bring peace to our hearts that you help us to remember that you are a good God to live by faith and to live your love that this world might know you and not ourselves that they may know your son and he be glorified we ask in your son's precious name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org we ask you