



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Plans and Providence

October 18, 2020

Romans 15:22-29

Clint Pressley

²² This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ 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, ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 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. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

(Pastor prays)

I think most people sitting in this room today would gladly agree that 2020 has not gone the way that you planned. Many of you never thought you would be home-schoolers. But then it turned out to be that you were home-schooled and that was no fun. Then you got the graduation and it was cancelled or moved or adjusted in some way. Summertime and many trips were cancelled. Connie and I were going to lead a trip to England to do a Christian history tour in England, but that was cancelled. The Southern Baptist Convention, cancelled; sports are played in a weird and strange way now, without any real spectators. I was a student at Wofford College and played football there. I got a postcard in the mail the other day asking me to purchase a *cardboard* person to put it in the stands. I will *not* do that. 2020 is ruining the plans of a lot of things. It messes up the way you do ministry. It's difficult to conduct a funeral in a

way that is good for the family and honoring to the dead. How do you perform a wedding ceremony? How do you visit people in the hospital? How do you conduct, rightly, a Sunday School class or a get-together? How do you manage your careers? Some of you have actually lost your career.

2020 has not gone the way we planned. But not just 2020. You can open it up just a little bit, you can look back, and would you ever have thought that you would be in the situation that you were in even 10 years ago, five years ago? Last year did you think you'd be sitting here, feeling some of the things? You can look back on the year, maybe the last two years, and feel what health falling apart does to your mind. In the last couple of weeks I've had several friends talk about heart issues. I don't mean heart by way of soul, I mean heart by the way of the muscle and having heart surgery and heart procedures, and even one had a heart attack, and what that does for your plans down the road.

Many of you started out the last couple of years with something really good and you've had some sort of tragedy that has hit in such way that absolutely knocked you on the ground. Robert Burns, you know the poem that he wrote "To a Mouse"? You probably actually don't know the poem but you might know one line: The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray. The rest of that line is, they often go astray and there's nothing but grief and pain.

It's what happens in life. Plans go awry. You know about that. We felt it. I felt it. You felt it. The Apostle Paul certainly felt it. When you read this passage you find out all of these plans that Paul has made are bubbling up to the surface. Paul had plans to go to Spain, but to do that he had plans to go to Rome. But before he could do that, he had plans to go to Jerusalem. All of these plans. And if you read his biography, you find out that almost none of them worked out the way he wanted. So what do we do? What do you do when you've made the plan, you've written it down? You've got it lined up and it doesn't work out, maybe even tragically so. It doesn't work out the way you thought it would.

It's a good time for us to step back and take this passage and read it and meditate on what it means to have plans and realize that...

Our Plans Always Take a Backseat to God's Providence

Now if you are a guest here with us today, this is what we do. We just read the text of scripture and then we just make some application. Here's the first point. I want you to see in verse 22 that

Roadblocks are useful.

They don't feel useful, they don't seem like they'd be useful. When you run up on one or one gets dropped on you, it doesn't seem like that's a useful thing, to knock me off my plan. But remember, our plans take a backseat to God's providence. Let me show it to you right there in verse 22. There's a word I want you to see, that word "hindered." This is the reason, what's the reason? Everything he had said up to this point in chapter 15, *this* is the reason why I have so often been hindered. Roadblock. So often been hindered from coming to you.

What are those roadblocks in Paul's life? Well they looked like his regular ministry. From Jerusalem on to the first missionary journey, and then the second missionary journey, he will finally take a third missionary journey. And every one of those things kept him from actually getting to see the people in Rome. Sometimes it's just regular life ministry that offers up a roadblock.

Sometimes in Paul's writing, he wrote to the church at Thessalonica, you know the letter as 1st Thessalonians. He said in the letter that it wasn't ministry that was hindering him; Paul outright said it was Satan. Luke wrote the story of Paul's life and ministry in Acts and Luke tells us "let's have a bigger view." Luke says, "it was the spirit that hindered us." It was the spirit of Jesus that hindered us, it was God. Luke gives us God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit that kept Paul from doing ministry.

Sometimes it is just a direct act of God that keeps you from doing what you think you want to do. Sometimes it's not any of those. Here in this passage. Tom Schreiner, the great New Testament theologian, says this passage right here gives us a "divine passive." Paul was passively a part of this, God was actively, divinely hindering him from getting over to Rome. Now you might ask how is that any good? How is it any good that the roadblock has stopped you from doing what you want to do? Well, for Paul it didn't feel like it was any good. But for us, if Paul had made it to Rome, we would have never had the Book of Romans. We would have never had the rich theology that nourishes our soul. We wouldn't have the great doctrine that

we can stand on. We wouldn't have this means of reconciliation. The whole world is wondering how we are going to get black people and white people together. We go to Romans and we find there's the answer. That *God* has brought us together. He says, in Ephesians, as *one new man*. In fact, he's gonna talk about Jews and gentiles and gentiles giving to Jews because they are together. If Paul hadn't been hindered, then some of you who have come up on a roadblock and wonder, "what do I do with it here" because you can't see. Paul couldn't see, he wasn't aware. Nobody told him, "Hey Paul, look, you're gonna write a letter and it's going to change the lives of millions of people over thousands of years." He wouldn't have known that. We can only know that by seeing God's Providence, looking back. I'm just saying that you who are in the middle of the roadblock, what we do? I would like to suggest couple of things.

One thing you can do is you just take your calendar, maybe it's in your phone, take your plans and you just submit them to God. You just take them to the Lord. You could look down the road, maybe being in college next year or hoping to have a different job the following year. Or maybe you'll be married by next Christmas or business picks up maybe this Christmas. You've got a plan. I would just say to submit that plan to the Lord.

I would not only say that. There are some of you here who have talked about your plans being altered this year. They've been altered in such a way that they hurt you so deep. You had a tragedy so bad that you don't know what you're going to do next. And I would just say to you, you don't need a plan, you just need to take the next step.

I talked about Elizabeth Elliot last week, "do the next thing." I would just say just take the next step. Or maybe God has you here and you can't see the way forward. All you can see is the fog. Let's not forget you have a God that you can trust. And I'm asking you this morning to trust Him.

So how am I going to trust Him? Let's just walk through the logic of being Christian. If you are Christian, here's what that means. That means that you believe that God is good and holy and you in your natural state are a sinner, separated from God with no hope. You heard the Gospel that says that Jesus Christ lived perfectly and then died on the cross in the place of sinners, taking the full wrath of God, so that, at the cross, all the sins of every sinner that will ever be saved, were paid for there. That means that if you will believe that this is what Christianity is, it is the Gospel. It is you putting your faith, you look to Jesus, Him dying on the cross. God raised

him from the dead and if you will turn from your sin and believe that you are saved. Now most of you here, you have done that. If you can trust God with your eternal soul, you can trust Him with the next day. You can trust Him that he has you in His hand and the roadblock in front of you, although an unpleasant one, it will be useful for you to trust God completely.

Let me give you something else to consider. You want to trust God, but the truth is we complain, we like to complain. Sometimes it feels good to complain. I can feel the complaint coming up from my inmost being all the way up my throat and I am glad for it to get out. I'll just go ahead and say it. Sometimes I'll say it with enthusiasm, but that is not honoring to the Lord. I have felt the need to complain. I haven't done much of it but it's been in there, this week. I would just say to you that when there is a temptation, when you feel the need to complain, why don't you find a way to turn that toward a thanksgiving? Turn that into gratitude before it ever comes out of your mouth. And you wonder, what do I have to be thankful for? You have the grace of God that saved you at the cross. We have God's provision. You have at least enough health to be here this morning or to actually be walking or to be watching. That is something to be thankful for. I would just invite you, when you feel like you want to complain, let's turn that towards thanksgiving. And then when you deal with this roadblock, the reason that you're so frustrated, for some people the reason that we're so worried, coming up on the election, is that we have a too *small* a view of God. I'm not saying the election is not important. I'm saying our God is so much *bigger* than anything we're facing that you now need to develop a bigger view of God. You might say to me, "preacher, how big does my view of God need to be?" I would just say to you, "bigger than what you have right now." Whatever that is, when you develop a big view of God, you realize that this roadblock, what you're facing, will be used for your good.

There is just one more thing. I think this is helpful, for not only young marrieds and those that are single, both men and women. I think this is helpful for people as we head into a middle age. Now if you're 50 and you're calling yourself middle-aged, you gotta live to 100 to get that. You know that, right? You are past middle age. I'm talking to myself, by the way. When you feel these roadblocks, one of the things that is good for you to develop, is if you can be content in Christ. If you can learn to be content with what God has given you, you can have your soul fed on the bounty that is Christ. When you get enough of that, you are not tempted by the junk of

this world. When you are content in Christ, you're able to walk through some pretty difficult spots and yet realize that "this is for my good."

Let me show you something else in the text. There's something else I want you to see. It will take you to verse 23 and 24. That is that...

Good plans often change unexpectedly

Some of you had some really good plans for 2020 . They were excellent plans; they were the benefit of your family; maybe even you. Sometimes they change unexpectedly. Let me show it to you in verse 23 and part of verse 24. ²³ *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,* ²⁴ *I hope to see you in passing.* "But now," that is to say, "here comes the change." In verse 22, Paul says, I've been hindered, I've been hindered. I've been hindered, But now, change of plans. Why? Since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and the second reason, since I have longed for many years to come to you."

So why did these plans change? Why is he not hindered anymore? You find it right there in verse 23b, because the work is done. Here's the Apostle Paul, the most famous Christian there was. He was a pioneer missionary. He told us in chapter 15, "here's what I feel like my ambition is. I want to go into the regions of the world where nobody has heard the Gospel. I wanted to go there and preach the Gospel to people who have never heard the name of Jesus. That's my calling." Now, in verse 23, what he's saying is, "I've done that." And he's not saying everybody's been saved; what he's saying is churches have been planted. They will finish the work; the pioneer work is done. Sometimes those changes just come upon you and you just realize, OK I've given my life to something, I've given my life to an endeavor. And now although it doesn't feel like it's all completed, Paul says "there's no more room for me here. I've got to find something else to do." Sometimes the work is done. Sometimes, is that second reason down in verse 23; sometimes it's not just that the work is done, sometimes this desire you had over the years intensifies to such a degree that it is no longer deniable. It is right there in verse 23. "But now, since I no longer have any room to work in these regions and since I have longed for many years to come to you." This is not something new. This is an ache in my soul that I've had ever since I met Jesus. For many years. In fact, in Romans chapter 1, where he just mentioned, "I am longing to be there. I want to fellowship with you, I want to meet you. I want you to pour into

my heart, I want to pour into your heart.” Now, Paul says finally, “I can't deny it anymore.” Sometimes God puts a movement in your soul. I know that I'm kind of walking over into this area of subjectivity. But if the Holy Spirit is in you, you are walking with the Lord, and some of the work is done — it feels like it is here —sometimes an affection moves. And then when it does, there's this opportunity that opens up. In verse 24, Paul already has a plan. ²⁴ *I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain.* I've got my eyes on another field of endeavor.

Spain. It would have been called Iberia. But when the Roman Empire expanded and hit on the continent of Europe, on the very outer edges of Rome's empire was Spain. Paul says, “I have a vision of a new opportunity. I want to go there, and what is going to get me there,” Paul says it there in verse 24, “is coming by to see you in Rome.” Now let's just pause there and look in verse 24. Look what he says at the end of that verse. ²⁴ *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.*

I think about Paul as just a great Christian hero— kind of a Christian Iron Man that did all things, was great at it all, felt almost indestructible. It's good to hear him say right there, “I just want to sit down with some friends. I just want to be with Christian people.” Don't ever underestimate the power of an encouraging word from you to a brother or sister. Don't ever underestimate what it feels like actually *being with* the church. Paul is talking about people he never even met. “I can't wait to be there. I just want to sit down and talk.” But that reminds me of this third point.

Staying connected to the church is vital

It is certainly vital for missionaries. We are talking about Paul as the pioneer missionary. He would come and see the church, be there a little bit, and then go back out in the field. Maybe you are not professionally or vocationally going to be a missionary. But you, by virtue of being Christian, live missionally. You live your life *on* mission. Christianity isn't just coming here on Sunday morning and worshipping God. It is coming here, and from our worship, will emanate the entire thrust of our ministry, and that is *you*. This week we will focus with Operation Charlotte, but it's just another display of what we *ought* to be doing all the time. And to do that you've got to be *connected* to the church.

Now let's turn our attention to the missionary endeavor. This is the passage I use to talk about why missions is tied to the church. In verse 24, Paul says, "I hope to see you in passing." He is not coming to stay for a long time; he's just coming through. Paul says here, "I'm just coming through. I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain. That's my vision, I've got a new endeavor, and I need to be helped on my journey by you." I want you to pay very close attention to that word "help."

That's not a general word. That is an actual theological missional word. In Greek you could say *propempo*. Help. What does that help look like? Help looks like finances, giving. Paul says, "I'm coming to the church in Rome. I need some help. I need you to invest in the ministry that I'm going to do in Spain. I can't do it out there unless you will support it." Not only that, that means logistical help. "I need to know how to get from Rome to Spain and to do it in a way that is going to be most efficient and most effective." It's not only that. "I'm going to need provision. I'm coming there looking for help from that church. I need to make sure that you guys are going to hold the ropes for me. I'll drop down in the well, but you've got to pick me back out of it when we're done giving. I need provision."... and not only that.

Paul's coming to the church in Rome, and it might be that he's going to recruit some young men or young women to go with him to this dangerous area to reach people for Christ. That's what that word "help" means. This is why a church must always be in strong partnership with any missionary who is reaching unreached people. This is where it comes from. The greatest missionary-sending agency is the local church. When I came to Hickory Grove about 10 years ago, I did take a mission trip and was able to meet with some of the missionaries in the field trying to reach unreached people groups. And the major complaint was sometimes they feel "divorced" from the church. You and I must make sure that there is a strong connection to the church. You and your mission field here in Charlotte need a strong connection to the church. You staying connected to the church is vital for how God is going to use you. Now before you start looking over to how you're going to be a part of reaching unreached people, let me give you this fourth point.

Ordinary responsibilities still need completing

When you read Paul's biography here, his grand plans, he was going to leave Corinth, go to Rome, and then get to Spain and do the work he's called to do. But before he can do that,

verses 25 and 26 say “I have some pretty ordinary things I have got to take care of first.” ²⁵ *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.* ²⁶ *For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.* Then he says it again, in verse 27, 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.*

So get the picture here. Paul wants to get to Spain through Rome, but before he can do any of that, he's got to take a 2000-mile detour. Now that's a long trip on a plane much less to walk across the continent or get on some rickety boat that carries him all around the coast. And yet, this mundane thing has to be done because it's poor folks in Jerusalem. They're the ones that had the Gospel first. They shared the Gospel with us and there are churches all around where Paul has taken his missionary journeys that are so excited to give. Paul says two times they were pleased to give. You read about how ecstatic those people were to give to the mission. Why? Well, it's not just because the poor folks in Jerusalem have been run over so many times that all the Christians there don't have anything. Paul even says in Galatians, “That's what I want to do, I want to help the poor, I want to give everything to the poor.” It's not a glamorous ministry but it is what the church does. Now why are they giving specifically to those in Jerusalem? Paul says they have a spiritual indebtedness. These gentiles are giving to the Jews because it was the Jews who introduced the Gospel. It is right, Paul says. They owe it and they are glad to do it. It's right that they understand that *spiritual* is much more important than *material*. Paul says, they've had *spiritual* blessings so it is right for them to give *materially*.

You know the Christian impulse. The Christian impulse is to give. We give every Sunday. It's who we are. We give out of gratitude. We're spiritually motivated. We give because it reminds us that we are dependent on God, and we give because we believe in the mission going forward and we want to support the mission. We give because it gives us an opportunity to express ourselves. We've worked all week. For some of us, all we have to show for it would be a paycheck. It is a symbol of what we've given our life to and how good it is actually to give a part of that. Paul says, “they were excited to give” and it is right for us to do so. This is why our church does the things we do. We show mercy, the regular ministry of the church helping the poor. Why do we do that? Because we're reminded that not only were we poor, we were absolutely without hope. And we are products of grace.

God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love which he loved us; even when we were dead. That's what He gave us when He awakened our hearts to believe the Gospel. And so the Christian impulse is to give. Paul says, "before I can go do some of that that I want to do, I've got some ordinary business. It's a long detour, it's going to take me some time. But I have some business that I've got to take care of." Let me just tack one or two more things on to the end of this sermon. For those of you that are looking toward retirement...

Some dreams never actually die

You see it there in verse 28. Paul's talked about his whole life from Jerusalem to Illyricum. All of his ministry has been hindered with roadblocks. Then he says, "I'm going to go to Jerusalem and once I get done with that, then I'm going off to do something I've always wanted to do. I'm going to Rome so I can get to Spain, to the outermost ends of the earth."

Some of you who are approaching retirement age, I would invite you to read the book. **Don't Waste Your Life** by John Piper. It's the idea of what are you going to present to God at the end of your life? Now we just say if you're healthy, you have means, you've always thought about doing something, now would be a good time to do it.

Last week a good friend of mine was here, his name is Coye Still. He was the pastor of University Hills Baptist Church for a long time. But before that, he and his wonderful wife were missionaries in India. Through a series of events they had to come off the mission field and be here in Charlotte. He pastored a church while their kids were growing up. They felt like this was what God wanted them to do. Coye is a brilliant man with a PhD in theology. Once those kids got grown, he and his wife went back to the dream of missions. Some dreams, God has put them in your life to get your eyes off of the ease of retirement and back into missions.

I'll give you one last point. It is down in verse 29. It's a principle to hold onto.

Jesus is Lord over all

Notice what Paul says in verse 29. *I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.* That is a strange phrase, "I'll come in the fullness of the blessings of Christ." What could that be other than "I'll come with the power of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus"? What is the fullness of the blessings of Christ other than Jesus Christ

died on the cross in the place of sinners so that any sinner that believes that will be saved from his or her sins and redeemed?

That's the Gospel story. That Gospel story sets us on a life of planning out our lives and trying to honor God. But that's where we realize that our plans always take a backseat to God's providence. He uses those roadblocks and those roadblocks can be useful. That helps us realize that your good plans might change unexpectedly. That's why it's important we are connected. Being connected to the church is vital, and that connection to the church keeps us in the ordinary ministry.

We've got to do the ordinary responsibilities while realizing that, when you look over the horizon, there are some of those dreams that won't die. We trust that Jesus Christ is Lord over all. I want you to see that, when you walk into the next week and you make plans, don't forget that your plans will be in the back seat of God's providence.

(Pastor Prays)