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## DREAMING BIG FOR GOD

Romans 15:22-29

By

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## Dreaming Big for God Romans 15:22-29

In *Don't Waste Your Life* ([Crossway], pp. 45-46), which you all should read, John Piper contrasts two stories. The first story is about two women, one over eighty, the other in her late seventies, who had given their lives to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached people of Cameroon. In April, 2000, their brakes failed, their car went over a cliff, and they were both killed instantly. Piper asks, "Was that a tragedy?" He answers, "No, that is not a tragedy. That is a glory. These lives were not wasted. And these lives were not lost. 'Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it' (Mark 8:35)."

The second story shows how to waste your life. The February, 1998, *Reader's Digest*, told of a couple who took early retirement when he was 59 and she was 51. They moved to Florida where they cruise on their boat, play softball, and collect shells. At first Piper thought that the story was a spoof on the American Dream, but then he realized that *this is the dream*: "Come to the end of your life—your one and only precious, God-given life—and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells." "*That*," says Piper, "is a tragedy."

It's especially tragic when Christians waste their lives in light of eternity. Far too many Christians have been sucked into the American dream: to retire as young as possible and then devote your final years to living for yourself. The justification is, "I've worked hard for many years, so now it's my turn to indulge myself for a while."

I agree that we need to provide adequate financial resources for the time when we're no longer able to work. I also understand the need for more leisure time as we get older, especially for spending more time with grandkids before they're grown. But it seems to me that as those who are commanded by our Lord Jesus to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33), we ought to think and even dream about how God might use our few remain-

ing years on earth for His purposes. If you no longer have to work 40-60 hours a week to earn a living, shouldn't you give some thought to how you could use at least 20-30 hours a week to help fulfill the Great Commission?

If anyone deserved a retirement condo near the golf course or seashore, it was the apostle Paul. The man had endured threats on his life, beatings, imprisonment, being stoned, three shipwrecks, and numerous other dangers and hardships for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-28). "Slow down, Paul! At least take a little vacation time! You're not getting any younger!" But, here he is telling the Roman Christians that he wants to visit them, but he won't be staying long. He wants to go to Spain to preach the gospel there. His driving ambition was to keep preaching the gospel where Christ was not yet known (15:20). As he looked toward the final years of his life, he was still dreaming big for God. Following Paul's example here ...

Dream big and plan for how God might use you,  
but submit to God's will and seek His blessing  
in the outworking of your plans.

If God has left you on this planet, He has a purpose for you to fulfill. Perhaps due to bodily weakness, all you can do is pray. Then pray! Perhaps you can give to the cause of missions. Then give! But you may be able to do much more. Then do it! I just read in a missionary newsletter of a woman who recently retired to Green Valley, Arizona. While still in the Chicago area, she had been asking God how she could honor Him in her retirement, and she kept hearing the words, "Green Valley Mall." She didn't know what that meant until she met this missionary and a co-worker with the Scriptures in Use mission. She asked them if they needed a volunteer in their office. She didn't know it at the time, but the office is located in the Green Valley Mall, where she now serves with Scriptures in Use. There are three lessons that we can draw out of Paul's future plans and dreams:

1. Dream big and make plans for how God might use you (15:22-24).

Romans 15:22-24: "For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; 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 whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while—”

Paul wanted to see Rome (Acts 19:21) and spend a little while with the saints there, but he didn't want to stay for very long. He wanted to use Rome as a base to reach further west into Spain, at the edge of the Roman Empire. Did Paul ever get there? We don't know for sure. Some scholars doubt it, but others think that he did. About 96 A.D., Clement of Rome wrote to the church of Corinth and mentioned that Paul had reached “the limit of the west” before he died. For someone who lived in Rome, “the limit of the west” arguably could have referred to Spain. Another work dating from the late second century, the Muratorian fragment, takes Paul's Spanish journey for granted (F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Eerdmans], pp. 447-449). So it's possible but not certain that after his first Roman imprisonment, Paul was released and went to Spain before returning to Rome, where he was arrested again and finally executed.

We can draw four applications from these verses:

(1) Dream big for God!

Have a holy ambition to see God use you in ways beyond what you can ask or think. We spend time thinking about how we can enjoy our retirement years. We plan and talk and dream about where we can go and what we can do. But why not spend time thinking about how God could use your retirement years to advance His kingdom?

William Carey was a self-educated shoe cobbler in England who had a vision of taking the gospel to India. When he shared that idea with some ministers, one seasoned pastor called him a “miserable enthusiast” and told him that God would reach the heathen in His own way without human aid (*William Carey* [Zondervan], Mary Drewery, p. 31). But Carey persisted and overcame setback after setback. He eventually got to India, learned and translated the Bible into almost 40 languages, founded a university that still exists, and saw God make a substantial impact on the Indian subcontinent (see *The Legacy of William Carey* [Crossway],

Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi). Carey's motto was, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God" (Drewery, p. 39).

Maybe you're thinking, "But I don't have those kinds of talents. I can barely speak English, let alone learn another language! I don't have much to offer in terms of advancing God's kingdom." But remember, in Jesus' parable of the talents, the slave who received five talents and the one who received two talents both invested those funds on behalf of their master. The slave who only received one talent buried it and felt the wrath of his master (Matt. 25:14-30). Surely one lesson to take away from that story is that if you think that you don't have much that you can do for the Master, you're the one most in danger of doing nothing. And remember the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 from a boy's meager lunch of five loaves and two fishes: Little becomes much when you yield it to the Lord Jesus.

So where should you begin? First, consider the local church. Talk to one of the pastors or our children's coordinator about how you could use your gifts in ministry here. Become a mentor to younger men or women. Think about what you could do to reach others in your neighborhood for Christ. Volunteer to help tutor kids who need help in school or teach reading through the library literacy program and tell your students about Jesus. Help out at Sunshine Rescue Mission or Hope Cottage. Also, there are several local mission organizations that could probably use some help. If you can use a computer, there are ministries that will feed you contacts of those who want to know more about the faith. Use your creativity and your interests and ask God to use you to make an impact for His kingdom.

(2) Don't let good things crowd out God's best for you.

Paul wanted to get to Rome and that was a good desire. But something better had kept him from getting there, namely, preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum. And while Paul wanted to visit Rome, there was something better that meant that he could not stay long, namely, going to Spain.

It's difficult to understand Paul's comment (15:23), "with no further place for me in these regions." Surely Paul could find much to do in those regions! But as Everett Harrison explains (*The Expos-*

*itor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 10:157), we can only understand his comment in light of Paul's "restless pioneer spirit." There were plenty of good things that Paul could have done in those regions. But in light of his gifts and calling, the best thing that he could do was to press on to areas where Christ had not yet been named, such as Spain.

So ask yourself, "What is the unique contribution that I can make to the cause of Christ in light of my gifts and resources? Where can I best be used of God?" Don't let good things crowd out the best way that God can use you.

- (3) Work out a plan for God's will for you in line with your desires.

Paul had a desire and plan to go to Jerusalem with the Gentile gift for the poor Jewish believers, then to visit the saints in Rome, and then to move on to Spain. As we know, things didn't work out exactly as Paul had envisioned, in that he got arrested in Jerusalem, spent several years in custody, and finally went to Rome as a prisoner. But he wasn't wrong to lay out a plan in line with the desires that God had put into his heart.

Sometimes Christians have the mistaken notion that if you hate the thought of going to the jungle to a primitive tribe as a missionary, then that's what God will have you do. Maybe the idea is that it is more spiritual to do something that grates against your will! While it's true that God wants you to be yielded to whatever His will for your life may be, He's not a sadist who delights to make you miserable! He's a loving Father who wants to see His children happy and fulfilled. He gives us the desires and personality bents that we have. If He calls you to go to a primitive jungle tribe, He will give you the grace to live there. I'm not saying that it will be easy, but at least you'll be able to shrug off the inconveniences and hardship and love what you're doing. When we were in Central Asia for a month this summer, there were things about the culture that grated on us. But the missionaries who have been called to serve there just shrugged these things off with a laugh.

So God works through our desires or gives us the grace to endure hardship cheerfully. Work out a plan for how He might use you in line with your desires and abilities.

- (4) Serve God in relationship with other likeminded believers.

Paul always worked in conjunction with others. We'll see this in 16:21-23, where he sends greetings to Rome from eight men who were with him, along with greetings from the whole church. Part of Paul's strategy in stopping for a while at Rome was to get them on board as his western base to reach out to Spain. He may have hoped to recruit one or more brothers from Rome to accompany him to Spain.

When Paul says (15:24), "to be helped on my way there by you," many commentators think that at least in part he is asking for financial help. But I respectfully disagree. In my seminary master's thesis (which the faculty accepted!), I argued that Paul had a fixed policy of not asking for personal support or making his own financial needs known to potential donors. When he ran out of funds, he went to work making tents. When support came in, he devoted himself more fully to the ministry (Acts 18:3, 5; Phil. 4:10-18).

But what about this phrase, "to be helped on my way there by you"? This (or a similar phrase) occurs eight other times (Acts 15:3; 20:38; 21:5; 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; 2 Cor. 1:16; Titus 3:13; 2 John 6). In 2 Corinthians 1:16, Paul tells the church there that perhaps they can help him on his way to Judea. But he is not suggesting that they provide him with financial support, because he resolutely states later that he will not accept such support from them (2 Cor. 11:9, 12; 12:14). William Sanday & Arthur Headlam (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T & T Clark, fifth ed.], p. 411) say that this phrase "need not mean more than to be sent forward on a journey with prayers and good wishes." It was the custom for people to escort a respected guest for a short distance on his journey.

But here in Romans the phrase could be Paul's asking the church there to partner with him in prayer (at the least) and perhaps for someone in Rome to go with him to Spain. Paul always worked with a team. So should we. Look for a local church or a mission agency that you can partner with.

So the first lesson from Paul's future plans is, "Dream big and make plans for how God might use you in serving Him."

2. In your planning, consider what will have maximum impact for Christ's church (15:25-28).

Romans 15:25-28: "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. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain."

When you read Paul's letters, you realize that this gift from the mostly Gentile churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem was a really big deal to Paul. He spends two chapters in 2 Corinthians (8 & 9) urging them to be generous in this effort. He spent several months that ended up (when he got arrested) being several years diverting his efforts from his normal priority of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles in order to administer this gift and make sure it got to Jerusalem safely. He could have delegated this to a trusted associate, but he felt that it was important enough to go personally. He even went against two warnings from believers that Luke says came from the Holy Spirit (Acts 21:4, 10-14) not to set foot in Jerusalem. Although most commentators would not agree with me, I think that Paul was so intent on going to Jerusalem that he wrongly ignored God's direct warnings not to go. So you have to ask, "Why was this so important to Paul?"

My answer is that he thought that taking the gift to Jerusalem would have maximum impact for Christ's church. In 15:25 he puts it, "serving the saints." He saw it as putting his seal on this fruit of the Gentile churches (15:28). I think he means that this gift confirmed the bond of unity between the Gentile and Jewish factions of the church. Paul insisted that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile (Gal. 3:28). The gift also authenticated the reality of the conversion of the Gentiles to the Jewish believers in Israel, who tended to be skeptical of Paul's Gentile mission. It showed the power of the gospel to bring these former pagans to obedience to Christ and it authenticated Paul's gospel. Also, it fulfilled the commitment that Paul had made to James, Peter, and John to remember the poor as he went to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:10). And, perhaps Paul saw it, at

least in part, as fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that the Gentiles would bring their wealth to Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; 45:14; 60:5-17; 61:6; from Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 776).

There are several helpful principles of giving in these verses that I do not have time to develop. Note briefly that giving is both a duty and a delight. It is a duty to share in material things with those who have shared with you in spiritual things (15:27). And yet Paul mentions twice (15:26, 27) that the Gentiles were *pleased* to do it—it was a delight. The idea that the Gentiles are indebted spiritually to the Jews is the major theme of Romans 11. Also, note that giving is a form of fellowship. The Greek word translated “contribution” (15:26) is *koinonia*, “fellowship,” or sharing together. Giving to missionaries or to needy saints builds a bond of fellowship between you.

But the overall principle is, as you dream and plan for how God might use you, consider what will have maximum impact for Christ’s church. Finally,

3. Submit to the Lord’s will and seek His blessing for all your plans (15:29).

Romans 15:29: “I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.”

Paul is probably referring both to the spiritual blessings that he hoped to impart to the Romans and to the blessings that they would impart to him (see 1:11-12, 15). But in Paul’s case, it didn’t happen in quite the pleasant way that he envisioned! His trip to Rome was as a prisoner via a shipwreck. After he got there, some mean-spirited believers in Rome preached Christ out of envy and strife, thinking to cause Paul distress in his imprisonment (Phil. 1:15, 17). The point is that while Paul sought for and expected God’s blessing, he had to submit to God’s sovereign will in the outworking of what those blessings actually entailed. As Proverbs 16:9 says, “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” Or as the saying goes, “Man proposes; God disposes.”

So we should seek God’s blessing in all that we dream and plan for how He might use us, but we have to submit to how all of that actually works out. It may not go according to our plans, but if we walk with God and submit to Him, He will use us for His glory.

## Conclusion

To take action on these verses, first ask God to show you how to spend your life (both now and in the future) in light of eternity. *Don't waste your life!* With Moses (Ps. 90:12), pray, "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." He concludes that psalm with the repeated plea (90:17), "And confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands." Give some thought to what abilities and desires He has given you to use for His purpose. If you're married, talk about it with your mate. Think ahead to when you'll be 75 or 80 and dream about how you would like for God to have used you by that time. Life is short—don't waste it!

Then educate yourself about the needs of the world in light of the gospel. How can you strategically use your gifts and desires to have maximum impact for Christ's kingdom? Work out some plans that will take you in that direction. Perhaps it will be to pray for and support missionaries or national believers to reach the unreached. But for some of you, it may be to go to the unreached with the good news of the Savior who has come. Whatever you do, dream big for God and use what He has entrusted to you for His kingdom and glory!

## Application Questions

1. If we "dream big" for God, there is the inherent danger of pride, of thinking that we are indispensable to God. How can we avoid this trap?
2. What are some good things that might crowd out God's best for you? What is God's best for you?
3. Many Christians rightly have plans for financial security. Why don't we all have plans for how we can best be used by God?
4. How can you determine what your spiritual gifts and abilities are? Then how do you figure out how to use those gifts for maximum impact in Christ's kingdom?

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