



Romans 15:18-33, Part 2

Last Sunday I told you about Nate Saint, one of the five missionaries speared to death in the Ecuadorian jungle. We learned the day before he was supposed to join the Air Force to become a pilot, an old injury prevented him from signing up. God said no to him because He had a different plan in mind.

We probably should not be surprised that a eerily similar event happened to fellow missionary, Ed McCully. I didn't know this detail, but Ed actually completed two years of law school at Marquette University in Milwaukee. Here again is Elisabeth Elliot telling Ed's story.

At the beginning of his second year there he took a job as hotel clerk at night, intending to spend the time studying. But God, who ordains men of His own choosing and moves in them to the accomplishment of His eternal purposes, had other plans. Ed told his Wheaton classmate Jim about it in a letter dated September 22, 1950:

Jim, I couldn't get away from it. The Lord was dealing with me. On the way home yesterday morning I took a long walk and came to a decision which I know is of the Lord. In all honesty before the Lord I say that no one or nothing beyond Himself and the Word has any bearing upon what I've decided to do. I have one desire now— to live a life of reckless abandon for the Lord, putting all my energy and strength into it. Maybe He'll send me someplace where the name of Jesus Christ is unknown. Jim, I'm taking the Lord at His word, and I'm trusting Him to prove His Word. It's kind of like putting all your eggs in one basket, but we've already put our trust in Him for salvation, so why not do it as far as our life is concerned? If there's nothing to this business of eternal life we might as well lose everything in one crack and throw our present life away with our life hereafter. But if there is something to it, then everything else the Lord says must hold true likewise. Pray for me, Jim.

So the Lord was moving Ed in a completely different direction—away from Law School and toward the mission field. But the timing of it is just shocking. “Man, to think **the Lord got hold of me just one day before I was to register for school!** I’ve got my money put away and was all set to go.”¹

Just like with Nate Saint, God changed the direction of Ed’s life the day before he was about to make a different decision. But unlike Nate Saint, Ed McCully did not have to deal with personal disappointment. The change in his direction seemed to have a more positive spin on it.



But do you think all of Ed McCully’s prayers received a YES answer? Here is a picture of Ed holding a bucket of objects given to them by the Auca Indians, with whom they were making contact. Nate Saint developed an ingenious way to lower a bucket on a long rope and as he made tight circles in the plane, the bucket would hover in the same location on the beach of the river. By this means, they gave and received gifts between the Auca Indians.

Do you think McCully and Saint prayed for safety? Of course they did. Did God say yes to this prayer?

Here again are Paul’s three prayers from Romans 15.

Safety—that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea,

Effectiveness—and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints,

Fellowship—so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company

God said NO to two of these three prayers. He wasn’t rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and he didn’t go to Rome on his way to Spain to fulfill his ambition. Paul asked. God said no. But this is what I want to show this morning. Many of you are old enough to remember these iconic words. ([Paul Harvey—“the rest of the story”](#)) I want to tell you the rest of the story this morning. Paul prayed bold prayers, two of which received no answers from God, but there is so much more to the rest of this story. In order to see all of it, we need to move out of Romans for today and look behind the scene in the book of Acts.

First, let’s review Paul’s plans.

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 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.

1. Paul had always wanted to visit the believers in Rome, but his great ambition of preaching the gospel where Christ had not been named had prevented him.
2. Now that Paul had preached the all throughout Asia it was time to move further west. He planned to go to Spain to preach and was going to take the opportunity to stop at Rome along the way.
3. First, he had to go to Jerusalem to deliver the financial gift to the struggling Jewish believers there.



Paul would have written this when he was in either Macedonia area or Asia. His plan was to travel to Jerusalem to deliver the gift, then sail to Rome to visit the believers there and finally sail on to Spain to preach the gospel where Christ had not been named. And all the while he was asking the church in Rome to pray for his Safety, his Effectiveness and his Fellowship.

That was Paul's plan but we all know what Proverbs 16:9 says. *The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.* The heart and mind of Paul had a plan but God had a different idea in mind. That brings us to Acts 21. Paul has just arrived at Jerusalem and found some believers. *And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem* (Acts 21:4).

OK, here's the first warning. Fellow Christians said to Paul, "Don't go." His friends were worried about him. They gave this advice "through the Spirit." So it might seem that Paul was disobeying the Holy Spirit by not taking their advice.

However, one chapter before, he said this.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me (Acts 20:22-23).

So the Holy Spirit had already "constrained" Paul to go to Jerusalem. He was going to go regardless of the kind warning from his friends.

Haven't you had similar feelings before in your life where you just had a bad feeling? Most of the time, that turns out to be unnecessary worry and fear. But I do know that sometimes it's real.

Some of you have been suddenly prompted to pray for someone and later you learned that prayer was needed for that person at that exact time.

Something similar happened to the Kniprath family with the birth of Ricky. Nine days before he was born, Sarah had a horrible dream where the cord was wrapped around her baby's neck and was stillborn. You can imagine the horror such a dream would cause to any expectant mother. Scott and Sarah talked and prayed about it and Sarah went for a check-up the next day. Everything seemed OK but they were still more alert than they otherwise would have been. Normally Sarah waits until contractions are really close together before she goes to the hospital but this time they went much earlier just to be safe. When the baby was being born, the midwife discovered that the cord was wrapped around Ricky's neck three times! The typical birth instantly turned into an emergency situation. The skill and quick action of the midwife saved his life. Had it not been for the extra caution as a result of the dream, it is quite likely that Ricky would not be with us today.

So did God give Sarah this dream as a warning? Scott and Sarah are not the kind of people who put much stock in dreams or mysterious signs as some Christians do. As a general practice, this can be a very dangerous habit. But in this case, it seems almost certain that God gave her a horrible dream in order to save Ricky's life. This is not the typical way that God works, but he does work this way sometimes. So the horrible dream turned out to be a gift.

So getting back to Paul, his friends warned him not to go to Jerusalem. They felt it was too dangerous. If you recall, this is the same advice that William Carey gave to Adinoram Judson. "Don't go to Burma. It's too dangerous." But just as Judson did not listen to the well-meaning Carey, so Paul did not listen to his friends who wanted to protect him from harm.

Next Paul sailed 100 miles down the coast to Caesarea.

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " 12 *When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."* (Acts 21:10-14)

Now this is a fascinating part of Paul's story. Not only were his friends warning him not to go, but now a prophet predicted that he would be arrested in Jerusalem. But Paul proceeded to disobey this prophet. He did not do what the prophet said.

In the Old Testament the Israelites were commanded to obey the prophets because they spoke directly from the Lord. And they had a test to know whether or not a prophet was a true prophet or a false prophet. And it was a very simple test.

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true,

that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed (Deut 18:21-22).

If what the prophet said came true, the he was a true prophet. But there was a severe penalty for false prophets. *But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death” (Dt 18.20).* Today, some of the most popular so-called prophets claim that most prophets in the church today only have a 65% accuracy.² I do believe that the gift of prophecy is still active today but the problem is that most people who believe in or practice prophecy are the ones who follow the false prophets. No matter how you slice it, if you prophecies have a 65% accuracy rate, you are a false prophet.

But in this case, the prophet Agabus did not tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem. The Lord did not tell Paul to stay away from Jerusalem. The Lord could have told Paul to send the gift to Jerusalem with any number of reliable disciples. The Holy Spirit could have told Paul to hurry up and get on a ship and sail to Rome to avoid imminent arrest. The Holy Spirit often led Paul in this way. But there was no word from the Lord.

The only thing that Agabus did was to make a prediction that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. And that did indeed happen. Paul was arrested. We'll get to that in a moment. Therefore, Agabus was a true prophet because what he said came true. The only people advising Paul not to go to Jerusalem were Paul's friends. *When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.* Do you know who the “we” is in this verse? Who wrote the book of Acts? Luke did, so every time you see “we” in Acts, you know that Luke was with Paul and if there is no “we” then Luke was not with Paul at that time. This is something interesting to note as you read through the book of Acts.

But the point is that Paul knew he was going to be arrested, but he went anyway. *13Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”* Hang on. I want to make sure you catch all of this. What did Paul ask the Romans to pray for? Here it is again: *that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea.* So if Paul was asking for safety and now he has a word from the Lord stating that he will be arrested in Jerusalem, why would Paul go directly against his own prayer? He asked for prayer for his own safety but the he decided, against the wishes of friends in multiple places, to walk into a certain trap. Why? It's almost as if he wanted a no answer from this prayer.

The answer lies before us. *14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.”* Ahh, there is it. Do you see the importance of these few words? *“Let the will of the Lord be done.”* Christian, this is the key to all of your praying. Pray boldly and pray often but always pray with your will bent to the sovereign will of God. This is the only way to pray.

Of course we all know Jesus famous words in the garden just hours before his betrayal and arrest. *And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be*

done” (Luke 22:41-42). The Lord Jesus is God. Jesus is fully God, fully equal to the Father in every way, yet even he bent his will to his Father’s sovereign will. *Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*”

James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, said the exact same thing.

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil (James 4:13-16).

James tells us that praying without bending your will to the Lord’s sovereign will is arrogant boasting. All of our prayers must have this attitude: *“Let the will of the Lord be done.”*



This is why I left the movie, *The War Room*, just a little bit troubled. Don’t get me wrong—it’s a great movie. Our family agreed that it was the best movie produced by the Kendrick brothers yet. The acting was better, the cinematography was better and the message was excellent. Despite my comments to follow, you *need* to see this movie.

However, like all of their movies, and like most movies in general, everything turns out perfectly in the end. And you know this is going to happen before it happens. You quickly learn about the main characters and their struggle. Early on, prayer is defined as the answer to these troubles so all that is left to do is to pray in faith and believe that everything will work out on the end. And it does! And we feel great when it does happen.

But that’s simply not the way life works much of the time. Marriages don’t always come back together when you pray, no matter how hard and how faithful and how many people are praying. Families don’t always stay together. People are not always healed from sickness and death. Cancer wins, despite our prayers. Husbands and wives hold onto their pride and stubbornness and sin, even if we pray daily for them. Children walk away from the Lord although we prayed for them since the day they were born. For once I’d like to see a Christian movie where there was not always a happy ending. I like happy endings. We all like happy endings but it’s not reflective of real life.

Paul prayed for safety but was arrested. But notice that even in his arrest, God was protecting him.

27 When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” 29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30 Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran

together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. 31 And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. (Acts 21:27-32)

Later they tried to kill Paul once again.

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy (Acts 23:12-13).

But the Roman centurions were again the means of his deliverance.

Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." (Acts 23:23-24)

So even though he was arrested and facing trial, God continued to deliver him from the unbelievers in Judea. So this, then, is the rest of the story. His three prayers may not have been answered in the way he was expecting, but in the end, all three were answered. This is what happened at the end of the book of Acts

Safety—*He lived there two whole years at his own expense;*

Also, the Roman soldiers spared his life multiple times

Fellowship—*and welcomed all who came to him*

Paul was under house arrest but he had tons of fellowship with the believers in Rome.

Effectiveness—*proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

Paul also proclaimed the gospel to two Roman governors—Felix and Festus.

So it turned out that all three of Paul's prayers were answered, but not in quite the way he had expected. This is another reason why we don't see answers to our prayers—because we are looking in all the wrong places. God is often saying yes but we just don't have the eyes to see it. Paul was delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, but God's deliverance came when he was arrested. He had all all-expense paid trip to Rome paid for by the Roman government!

In closing, let me revisit something Ed McCully said in his letter to Jim Elliot.

Jim, I'm taking the Lord at His word, and I'm trusting Him to prove His Word. It's kind of like putting all your eggs in one basket, but we've already put our trust in Him for salvation, so why not do it as far as our life is concerned? If there's nothing to this business of eternal life we might as well lose everything in one crack and throw our present life away with our life hereafter.

In other words, eat, drink and be merry. If this life is all there is, then do whatever you want. You are in charge. You make your own purpose and your own destiny and can grab all the pleasures your heart desires. But then McCully added this final line. *But if there is something to it, then everything else the Lord says must hold true likewise.* If God is sovereign, if his Word is true, then my will must be bent to his sovereign will. If he asks me to fly into the jungle of Ecuador

and be speared to death, then so be it. If the Lord sometimes says no when I pray to him, then so be it. *“Let the will of the Lord be done.”*

Paul prayed this way. James prayed this way. And Jesus prayed this way.

Rich Maurer
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¹ Elliot, Elisabeth (2002-07-08). Through Gates of Splendor (Kindle Locations 501-502). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

² <http://www.letusreason.org/latrain23.htm>