

2. The second aspect of Paul's prayer concerning the Romans was *petition*. Specifically, having previously had no personal ministry at Rome, Paul continually appealed to God that he would be granted the opportunity to come to them (1:9-15). His petition is framed according to the following aspects:
  - a. The first is the ***matter of concern*** in the request, which was Paul's abiding desire to travel to Rome and engage the saints there (1:9-10). What is easily overlooked is the intimate connection in Paul's thinking between his thanksgiving and his petition to come to Rome. This connection is indicated by the inferential conjunction translated *for* that provides his transition into verse 9. In this context it provides a "hinge" for the continuation of Paul's thought along another line, but more particularly it ties together the two matters that comprised Paul's prayer concerning the Romans. That connection can be expressed as follows: *Paul's sense of awe and exultation in the fruitfulness of Christ's gospel in Rome inspired deep gratitude in him, but also moved him to long to participate in the Spirit's work there.*
  - b. The second thing to note is the ***urgency*** and ***sincerity*** of Paul's petition. Lest the Romans minimize or doubt the sincerity of his longing to come to them, Paul certified it to them with a characteristic "witness formula": "*God, whom I serve in my spirit in the gospel of His Son, is my witness...*" Calling God as his witness was a device used frequently by Paul when he was especially concerned to affirm the absolute truthfulness of something (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:23; Philippians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6, 9-12).

Thus Paul established the sincerity and fervency of his desire to come to Rome by calling upon the witness of God Himself. Moreover, he considered God to be the best witness to his longing and intention, not because of His omniscience, but because of His relationship with Paul. *God was not Paul's "called witness" because He knows all things, but because he knew Paul;* God knew better than anyone of Paul's consecration to "serve Him in his spirit in the gospel of His Son"; accordingly, He knew of Paul's sincere interest in and concern for the Roman church - how unceasingly he made mention of them in his prayers.

Paul's service was not feigned, partial, or begrudging; he gave himself to his apostolic calling with all of his being; he served *in his spirit*. He had been called to be God's bond-servant for the sake of the witness of Christ and His gospel among all the Gentiles; how, then, could he not sincerely long to minister at Rome and so petition God for the opportunity to do so? And until such time as God was pleased to grant his request, how could he fail to continually remember the Romans in his prayer? Here again Paul's perspective and heart of devotion are evident. He could not think of *himself* - let alone his *purpose* and *labors* in life - except in terms of his relation to Christ and His gospel (cf. 1:1).

c. Moreover, Paul's desire to visit Rome had a very specific *intention*: *he longed to see them in order to impart a spiritual gift to them* (1:11-12). Various interpretations of this statement have been put forward by commentators: some have held that Paul intended to impart a specific gift of the Spirit to the Romans, while others have concluded that he was simply referring to an indefinite spiritual blessing to be gained by his interaction with them. Still others believe that Paul was speaking of his desire to convey to them a spiritual insight he had been given. Four considerations help to determine his meaning:

- 1) The first is his *terminology*. The phrase, *spiritual gift*, is nowhere else used in Paul's writing. This is not to deny that he believed in Christian gifts as an endowment from the Spirit; clearly he did (cf. Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-31; 1 Timothy 4:14; etc.). But in each of these cited contexts his terminology is different than that used here in verse 1:11.

In Paul's usage the meaning of the noun *gift* is varied. Sometimes he used it in reference to specific gifts for ministry bestowed by the Spirit (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-31), and other times less definitively (Romans 11:25-29; 1 Corinthians 7:7). He even employed the term in reference to the gift of salvation in Christ (Romans 5:15-16). Despite this broad range of sense, each distinct use represents simply a subset of the noun's broader biblical meaning, namely *any endowment according to divine grace*. That endowment may take the form of divine favor, privilege, calling, equipping, etc. As well, the inherent spiritual quality of such a divine endowment is here heightened by the attachment of the adjective, *spiritual*. Whatever this gift of grace, it was to have a distinctively spiritual quality and orientation.

- 2) Secondly, Paul referred to this spiritual gift in *indefinite terms*. That is, he had no particular thing in mind; he spoke only of some sort of spiritual endowment without giving it any definition.
- 3) Third, in the present context this "spiritual gift" had as its goal the *establishing* of the saints at Rome, which is to say their being strengthened and stabilized. The matter in which they were to be so established was their *faith*, as is evident from verse 12.
- 4) The final consideration is Paul's own *commentary* given in verse 12. For there he explained to the Romans that his desire to impart to them a spiritual gift had a reciprocal import. By this gift he intended that they would be established in the faith, but that in the process he, too, would be encouraged together with them, each of them by the faith of the other.

When all of these considerations are taken together, it is evident that Paul's desire in coming to Rome was that he would be God's instrument to bring true spiritual blessing to the saints there. And not simply any blessing, but a ministry of God's grace by which they would be built up and strengthened in their faith. Equally important is the *personal* and *reciprocal* dynamic of this work as envisioned by Paul:

*The spiritual blessing of strengthening he desired to impart to the Romans was to come through his personal ministry among them, which interaction he also sought as serving toward his own edification and encouragement.*

Paul's petition to God was that he would at last be granted to come to Rome and personally minister to the saints there. He was not interested in simply a relaxing visit with like-minded people; he sought the opportunity to serve the cause of their being built up in their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's longing was both disciplined and purposeful; he longed to impart a *spiritual benefit* to them, and he realized that, as his ministry to them would strengthen and establish their faith, so their faith would encourage and edify him.

- d. The final aspect of Paul's petition is the *perspective* underlying it. Paul's continual request to God to come to Rome was framed by his compelling consciousness of his apostolic mandate to "*bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles.*" As seen previously, Paul's sense of his apostolic calling pervaded and dominated everything he said and did; he viewed himself as Christ's bondservant set apart for the testimony of His gospel and the fruitfulness of His kingdom (ref. 1:1, 5). Paul's frame of reference was redemptive-historical; *he viewed the totality of his life from the vantage point of God's grand scheme of redemption and his own place and role in the age of its fulfillment.*
  - 1) This being his perspective, Paul wanted the Romans to know that his appeal to God to grant him to visit Rome was neither *recent* nor *capricious*. He had sought for some time to come to them but had been hindered (1:13, 15:20-24). As Christ's appointed apostle to the Gentiles, Paul viewed Rome as being within his apostolic responsibility, and for that reason he had carried a long-standing burden to obtain some fruit also in the Roman community.
  - 2) Also consistent with his perspective, Paul's longing was not simply a matter of emotion or affection, but of *compulsion*. As Christ's bondservant, consecrated for the gospel, Paul was compelled in his own soul to come to Rome; he regarded himself as being "*under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish*" (1:14). There was no distinction in his mind; all alike were under the condemnation of sin and in need of saving grace.

Being driven by this sense of solemn obligation to all the Gentiles, Paul could insist with all sincerity that he was eager to preach the gospel also to those who were in Rome (1:15). In spite of its clear simplicity this statement has presented a point of difficulty for interpreters. At the heart of the difficulty is the apparent peculiarity of Paul's desire to preach the gospel to those who had already heard it and responded in faith to it. Several interpretations have been offered through the centuries in an attempt to resolve the difficulty:

- The first interpretation - and the most unlikely - is that Paul was actually speaking of his desire to preach the gospel *in Spain* on behalf of, and through the ministerial support of, the Romans. This view is said to find its support in Paul's later remark that his ultimate goal was to take the gospel to Spain, and he hoped to stop in Rome on the way (15:20-24). However, neither the language nor the context of verse 1:15 permits this conclusion.
- Another view is that Paul was referring to a *previous intention* to come and preach the gospel in Rome during the time when the church there was first emerging. Although remotely conceivable, this interpretation is unlikely. For throughout the context Paul has been speaking of his *present* intention for *future* ministry in Rome.
- A third interpretation is that Paul's intention was to come to Rome and continue the ministry of the gospel *in that city*. In other words, he wanted to preach the gospel to those in Rome who had not heard it and were yet unbelieving. This conclusion is also possible, but given the fact that the plural pronouns *you*, *your*, and *yours* in every one of the previous fifteen instances refer to the Roman Christians (ref. 1:6-13), it is much more reasonable to regard verse 15 as identifying the same individuals.

The best interpretation is to simply understand Paul's words as they are written, namely that his desire was to come and preach the gospel to the saints at Rome. This reading is only problematic when it is *presupposed* that the gospel has no reference to those who are already converted. In Paul's theology, however, nothing could be further from the truth. He viewed the gospel as being as fundamental and essential to *sanctification* as it is to justification (cf. Romans 16:25-27; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Colossians 1:15-23; 2 Timothy 2:1-9; etc.). Ironically, to begin with the former presupposition is to insure that Paul's point will be missed:

*Paul knew that if he were to impart a spiritual blessing to the Roman Christians by which they would be further strengthened and stabilized in their faith, it would come only through the preaching of the gospel, even as it alone is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."*