

Missions, Romans, and Bethel Church

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Steve DeWitt

It is great to be back with you. While I have not been in the pulpit a few weeks, it has not been one big vacation. I spoke at weekend services at Compass Church in Naperville, Northpoint Church in Des Moines, and the Cedar Falls Bible Conference in my hometown of Cedar Falls, Iowa. The elders have urged me to speak outside our church context and it seems the summers are when the majority of those invitations come.

We are all getting back from summer excursions, school is looming, and *All About Him* Sunday is in two weeks. This marks the official kickoff of our fall ministry season with so many ministries ramping up. Let's pray this is our most fruitful year yet.

I am so pleased that we are having Missions Sunday. Why? Because I have desired for quite some time for our missions focus and effort to be reinvigorated. I say reinvigorated because we support 27 missionary partners, 5 missions organizations, 10 local organizations, and continue to support 5 retired missionaries. Of our 27 active missionaries, 19 are with us today at all our campuses. All these we support in many ways including finances. Bethel has a long history of active participation in worldwide missions. However, anything over time can get dusty. I think our missions focus has gotten a bit dusty. It's there, but not with the shine or focus it deserves. Sundays like this certainly can help.

I want to thank Pastor Jared and Pastor Brad for their renewed focus and push.

Does God like Missions Sundays at churches? I think yes, and possibly no. Why not? God doesn't celebrate Missions Sundays. I remember as a boy asking my mom on Mother's Day, "When is Kids' Day?" She said, "Every day is Kids' Day."

In the heart of God, every day is Missions Day. Every day, God's heart is pulsating with Great Commission passion. Every day, God is actively at work in the world by his Holy Spirit through the gospel fulfilling the ongoing mission of Jesus to save and redeem sinful humanity. To God, every day is Missions Day.

Our current teaching series is going verse by verse through Romans. Today we step back and give Romans a missional look. Or better said, Romans steps back and gives us a missional look and asks each Christian here, *do we reflect God's passion for gospel ministry to all the world?* Let's survey Romans from this missions perspective.

God's Mission to Save Sinners is the Thesis of Romans

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16)

Here is Paul's own summary of Romans. The gospel of God is the power of God to save everyone who believes in Jesus. Paul had experienced this power in his own life, transforming him from the leading antagonist to Christianity to the leading evangelist and spokesperson. The result? Paul had no shame about the gospel. Why should he? It is the power of God at work in this world and even Imperial Rome and its worldwide empire was impotent in comparison to the gospel, the church, and God's saving purposes.

Gospel Mission was Paul's "Oblitunity" (and Ours as Well)

"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." (Romans 1:14-15)

Remember "oblitunity"? This mashup word of *obligation* and *opportunity* describes Christian duties which also are our delight; when what we have to do is what we also very much want to do. Kissing our wives. Duty or delight? Both. Caring for our children. Duty or delight? Both. Obligation and opportunity. Oblitunity.

Missions and gospel ministry was for Paul his greatest oblitunity. We see it here. *I am under obligation to preach the gospel to everyone.* The word for *obligation* comes from a Greek word that means "debtor." A debt is something you have to pay. It is something you have to do. Paul HAD to preach the gospel. Christ had commissioned Paul. God's grace deeply moved Paul to want to share. Yet the next verse shares his heart. *"I am eager to preach...to...Rome."* *Eager* means "joy, glad, happy." Paul was enthusiastic about the opportunity.

This, of course, reflects the heart of Jesus who was no begrudging Savior. Rather he came with joy to save us. *"Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* (Hebrews 12:2)

Paul was a happy apostle and Jesus was, and is, our joyous Savior. The Great Commission is rooted in this joy. Indeed, the word gospel means, "good news." So, any true-to-the-gospel church is going to be pretty excited about Missions Sunday.

Listen to the words of the great pioneer missionary to Africa, David Livingstone, who suffered so many things in his pursuit of Africa for Christ in the mid-1800s.

"People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa.... It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice."¹

What turns sacrifice into joy? Love. Joy. Gladness in God. Romans is a letter animated by joy in God's gracious mission to save sinners.

Why is Missions Urgent? The Reality of the Wrath of God

Paul begins the greatest explanation of the gospel, not with the good news, but with the bad news. *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."* (Romans 1:18) It is a hard doctrine, but the plain fact is that without a personal belief in Jesus as Savior, every single person who has ever lived will experience forever God's wrath and judgment.

The final place for this is hell. Jesus spoke of eternal punishment often describing it as:

- *A place of fire and burning* (Matthew 3:12)
- *Eternal weeping and "gnashing (grinding) of teeth."* (Matthew 13:42)

¹ David Livingstone as quoted by John Piper, "I Never Made a Sacrifice," www.desiringgod.org, March 19, 2018.

- *The gulf between heaven and hell is "fixed"* (Luke 16:26)

Every description of hell is terrible beyond anything we can even imagine. You don't want to go there for one second, much less forever.

This creates missional urgency. This prioritizes reaching our children and neighbors for Christ. This motivates pioneer missions work in places where the gospel has not been heard. The wrath of God urges on Wycliffe Bible Translators to translate the Scriptures into obscure languages. The gospel forces us to look at the people of the world through the lens of impending wrath and judgment.

Stop this week sometime and just look at the bustling people around you in the restaurant or college or on the interstate. Take a moment and consider the incredible reality that every person you see will spend eternity either in torment beyond what we can imagine or eternal bliss and joy beyond what our minds can conceive. What determines that destiny? Whether they are under God's wrath as the due punishment for their sin or under God's grace by faith in Jesus. That's the bottom line. And most of what you and I worried about this week won't matter one bit one second after we die, and these realities are unchangeably fixed forever.

Missions is motivated by the wrath and grace of God.

Why is the Gospel Good News? It is the Righteousness of God Through Faith in Jesus for All Who Believe!

The core message of Romans is, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:21–24)

There are no more glorious words ever written than these—especially if you can smell the smoldering sulfur of hell at your heels. The gospel is good news because it is God's saving offer to hell-bound sinners that if we will repent and trust in Jesus' saving death on the cross, God will declare us righteous forever (justification) and treat us as if we have always lived as righteously as Jesus. Of course, we haven't, and we won't. We are sinners by nature and by choice. Yet, the love and mercy of God and Jesus' moral payment for our sin allows God to remain completely holy AND the justifier of all those who believe in Christ. Romans pounds this wonderful truth over and over and over.

Missional Logic - How Will Sinners Hear and be Saved?

But Romans doesn't let us simply revel in God's grace to us. Romans doesn't allow a church to have their little gospel huddle while the world goes to hell. No. There is a missional logic highlighted.

"For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:13–15)

We will study this in depth when we get to chapter 10, but please see the inescapable logic. He begins in verse 13 with a quote from Joel 2, "Everyone who calls on the name of the

Lord will be saved." This he applies to Jesus as Lord and the promise of salvation for all who "call," which is another term for trust or belief in Jesus.

But wait, *if that is the case, how will people believe in Jesus if they have never heard of Jesus?* The answer is, they can't. And therefore, they cannot be saved.

This series of questions he asks are all logical outcomes of Jesus being the only Savior. He begins at salvation and works backward from *calling* on Jesus, to *hearing* about Jesus, to somebody *telling* them about Jesus, to that person being *sent* or enabled to do so. This may sound confusing, but Romans simply points out that people hear about Jesus from people who tell them about Jesus. How will they be able to tell unless they are sent?

It takes people sharing about Jesus for people to know about Jesus. If they never go, they can never share. If they never share, others never hear. If they never hear, they will never believe. If they don't believe, they will never be saved.

Notice what Romans says about anyone who shares Jesus. They have beautiful feet. "*As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news'.... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:15, 17)

He quotes Isaiah 52 which describes the joyous announcement of the return of a dispersed Israel to the Promised Land. Paul applies that to gospel preaching. *Beautiful feet.* Feet are not known for beauty, especially in the first century where sandals and dusty paths meant everyone's feet were dirty all the time. Yet what makes for beautiful feet? When they are used to take a messenger to share, not that Israel has returned, but that the Messiah Jesus has come, and salvation is provided to all who believe! Perhaps we should say to our ministry partners with us today, *you have really good-looking feet.* Indeed, they do.

Here is the more important question, *what do your feet look like?* Gospel sharing is an obliquity for all of us. Your feet can take you across the street to a neighbor or down a hallway to a colleague or toward any person in need. Those are beautiful feet. *Christian, how are your feet looking?*

These verses and many others in Romans urge us to see every day as Missions Day. How do we practically participate? **Pray.** You are going to receive a missions booklet as you leave. In it are all our partners with descriptions of their ministries. How about using that as a prayer guide? Maybe pray for one a week. Whatever. Pray for our partners. **Give.** There are many opportunities to give. My personal practice for missions giving is to give to the general fund of our church knowing that our general fund funds our missions fund. By that I know where it's going and that it has oversight and accountability attached. I also support missionaries and ministries outside our church's missions that I have a heart for. That's what I do. Pray about what God would have you do. **Go.** Would that God would raise up beautiful feet types to serve long-term in the harvest in crucial areas of need and opportunity. Would you at least consider a short-term missions trip? We have many coming up in the next year.

Mostly I am urging us as a church to fight evangelism and missions getting dusty in our hearts. Hell is real. Heaven is too. We are all going to one place or another. Romans has no complacency on this; it is all urgency.

"It is hard to imagine how Paul was able to live with such a constant load of spiritual responsibility; yet, at the same time, it is harder to grasp how many believers are able to live complacently without any sense of obligation." (Stuart Briscoe)²

The answer? Gospel oblitunity. Great obligation. Great opportunity. Joy and gladness in God, his gospel, and his salvation.

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² D. Stuart Briscoe as quoted by Northern Seminary, "The Obligation of Mission to All People – Romans 1:14-15," www.seminary.edu, March 18, 2014.