

“Promises, Promises”

Psalms 113; Romans 1:1-7

September 18, 2022

Last week we began a study on Romans that I'm quite excited about. It was both fun and a great challenge to preach the parables over the summer but now I'm finding it equally exhilarating to be in the Letters of Paul right now. Paul writes a good portion of our New Testament, by the way. No less than 13 of our books in the New Testament bear his authorship. Further, we know the imprint Paul has on the development of the church of Jesus Christ. It is hard to imagine the church today being as large and as universal as it is without the efforts of Paul in the first century AD.

As we spoke about last week, Paul was born Saul and, until his Damascus Road experience, Paul would've very much been a faithful Jew. His description of himself from Philippians that I read last week indicates his status among the Jews. As Saul, Paul would've seen the world in an entirely different manner than he does as Paul. To begin with Saul very much thought that the Christian movement underway after the resurrection of Jesus Christ was heretical. Heretical and worthy of punishment, honestly. And that's what Saul, with the support of the Sanhedrin, the governing Jewish body, would've been doing. We know that he was persecuting Christians because he's there when Stephen, the first deacon, is stoned in Acts. Yes, Saul would've seen the Christians as doing irreparable harm to Judaism and, for that reason, needed to be stomped out. But, things change, as is said and we know that Paul believes that he was called into the gospel.

What does he mean by called? Well, Saul becomes Paul in a very distinct way. *Acts 9: “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.”*

So that's how Saul is called into the Gospel. How were you called? Now that may seem like a strange question to some of us. Some of us were raised in the church and can no sooner imagine a Sunday morning without church than a shake without whipped cream. But that doesn't mean you weren't called, just like Paul was. At a certain point, you took the Gospel message and made it part of your life. Now, this would've been the work of the Holy Spirit but it sure would've felt like your work. And then, just like Paul, you became part of the church of Jesus Christ. You, just like Paul, were called. To what were you called though. Well, according to Romans, you were called and set apart for the Gospel. But what is the Gospel? Broadly speaking, the Gospel is the Bible. More narrowly, the Gospel is simple good news. That's what the word means in the Greek. Evangelion means good news. And that's exactly what it is. The Gospel specifically is the Good News concerning Jesus Christ. That God, in the fullness of time, has taken flesh through the Son and atoned for the sin of all humankind. Through His death and resurrection, the power of evil has been broken and believers are promised eternity in the Kingdom of God.

That's the Good News. That's the Gospel. Do we think of it as such? Do we wake up every day and thank God for the Gospel? Probably not, to be honest about it, but we should. There isn't a single one of us here that isn't indebted just as much as Paul was. And remember what Paul called himself – doulos, slave. That's what Paul considered himself. So that Gospel is the good news of what Jesus Christ has done but that isn't all Paul tells us, is it? This Gospel that we celebrate this morning, it was announced. The “gospel of God” was promised beforehand. That means something. It means it was prepared. The Gospel isn't some bailout plan God created when sin appeared there in the Garden. One can rightly extrapolate that Jesus was the plan, even before the fall. And we know that for a particular reason and it's an important one – Jesus was promised beforehand in the Old Testament, or, as Paul writes, in the prophets.

Scholars believe that there are over 55 prophecies about Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. These prophecies relate to His birth, His ministry, His death and resurrection and Jesus' role in the church. These prophecies,

many of which were written hundreds and hundreds of years before the birth of our Lord, show us the plans God had from the very beginning for His humanity. And don't miss that. That our God had a plan. Sometimes, life can feel, well, rather disconnected. As if there isn't a whole lot of meaning to it. Well, Jesus brings us back to the awareness that our stories are all part of a much bigger narrative. That we are all a part of the Greatest Story ever being told – the redemption of all humanity by a magnificently good and wonderful God. There is a plan for your life just as there is a plan for all of our lives and it is found in Jesus Christ and the good news that He brings.

It also means that the Old Testament matters. Ever since a man by the name of Maricon, the Old Testament has been under attack. Maricon, way back in the first century, was a Christian who had a very unorthodox belief about the Bible. He thought we should abandon the Old Testament. And ever since that day, there's always been someone suggesting that it'd be a whole lot easier for us Christians if we were suddenly free of this strange document, we call the Old Testament. After all, there are “embarrassing” things in there is often what's cited. Most recently, Andy Stanley, a mega-church pastor, suggested that we “unhitch” ourselves from the Old Testament. Now, what he meant by “unhitch” had come into some dispute but, suffice it to say, he means to leave portions of the Old Testament behind. But, as we know, in the Old Testament, we have what God promised beforehand about Jesus Christ. For that reason alone, the Old Testament should be highly valued. But it also means that the Old Testament should be read through the lens of Jesus Christ. Jesus suggests as much to us in the Sermon on the Mount where He tells us *“for you have heard it said an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth BUT I TELL YOU...”* This is just a not-so-subtle reminder that we can't read our Old Testaments now without a robust appreciation for what Jesus Christ has done for us and for our salvation.

The Old Testament matters but it is often one of the least read documents in the faith. Most of our scant Scripture readings come from the New Testament on average and for understandable reason. But, as Paul reminds us here in Romans, the Old Testament has value as well as it all points us to Jesus Christ. It reminds us that God has a way and a purpose and He is working things out in history for the benefit of His people. As we read the Old Testament, we get stories of God's grace and providence that will take our breaths away. And best of all, there over 55 times in our Old Testaments are reminders that Jesus is coming and that Christ will come again in glory at the end of the age. That's the good news Paul wants to talk about. That's the evangelion that has claimed Paul's life such that he considers himself a slave to the Gospel.

This Jesus Christ, Paul tells us, is descended from David according to the flesh. This is an important term that Paul is going to use quite a bit as Romans develops. According to the flesh is according to our human, sinful nature. It is in opposition to according to the Spirit which is what Paul determines true believers are doing. What Paul is telling us here is that God is moving His history, using people, places and things to show out the glory of the Son Jesus Christ. According to the flesh means that God used sinful human flesh to bring about the greatest of miracles. Jesus Christ, born according to the flesh, was able to maintain perfect adherence to God, that is, He lived without sin, making atonement for yours and my own sin. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And this Jesus Christ was declared to be the Son of God in power by the resurrection of the dead. Now this is an important point. It makes the resurrection the means by which we know that Jesus is the Son of God. The resurrection is the central mystery of our religion. I don't mean mystery as something mysterious, rather I mean mystery as something that's been revealed. The mystery of what God is doing in history has been revealed through the resurrection of the Son, Jesus Christ. In our knowing Him, in our experiencing Him risen from the grave, we know that God is acting powerful in history.

And it is through this Jesus Christ was have received two things. First, GRACE. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, right? I can scarcely believe how easy the terms our Lord has set for us with this Gospel. According to Paul in Romans, *“if you believe in your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, you will be saved.”* How simple is that. Amazing grace as I've said. And we could go on and on about Grace and I'm sure I will in the course of this sermon series but we've also received something else, something we quite frequently miss. Apostleship. We're to be messengers of the Gospel. That means in a real and easily discernable way, my life somehow ought to show forth the Gospel which saves me from eternal damnation. And that Grace is to bring about the obedience of faith for the nations. That means in all ways we are to be evangelical. One of the great problems with the Christian faith is that we've all but given up being evangelists. We don't strive to share the good news as though it were the wind beneath our wings, so to speak.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.